

Modern Ballroom



Dancing despite COVID-19 in Japan
Registered teacher Atsuki Inoue gives his perspective on the Japanese ballroom dance industry during the pandemic.



The vitality of ballroom dance is so strong. This is my honest impression. As an ISTD dance teacher, I would like to illustrate how Japanese ballroom dance has survived the unprecedented turmoil of COVID-19 that has lasted for over a year. Following the spread of the new infection from the beginning of the year, on 13 March 2020, the Japanese government enacted a special measures law. This meant that the Prime Minister issued a state of emergency, specifying the period and areas that should take urgent measures due to a risk that the rapid nationwide spread would have a significant impact on people's lives and the economy. So far, three 'state of emergency' declarations have been issued (7 April to 25 May 2020, 8 January to 21 March

Above Atsuki Inoue (right) with Hiromi Kaneko



Left Dancers wearing the Dance Maskman, a transparent mask developed in Japan by Modern Publish Inc

2021, 25 April to 20 June 2021), and the activities of the people have been severely restricted. The dance industry was also greatly affected by this, forcing us to shorten our business hours and cancel various scheduled events.

As far as I can see and hear, some teachers said about 80% of the students have already returned compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. Many dance teachers and students are beginning to get used to dancing with masks and undertaking thorough disinfection. Vaccinations for the elderly have begun and many teachers and students should be asking for returning to dance without masks and gloves as soon as possible.

From the first half of 2020, the ballroom dance world decided to cancel big annual competitions and dance events. After that, branches in various places have proceeded through trial and error, including online competitions.

In May last year, the Hokkaido branch of the Japan Ballroom Dance Federation (JBDF) and Hokkaido Pro Dance Instructors Association (HPDIA) decided to exempt the membership fee for the year and pay 20,000 yen per person as a consolation. This encouraged many dance teachers. After that, both associations held competitions on 20 September and 11 October, observing government policies. Neither could be held in a core city, but in a local city, Otaru in Hokkaido.

The event was held after taking various measures, including temperature measurements and interviews covering eight items for all officers and competitors. It was mandatory to wear masks and mouth shields, switching from posting examination results up on the wall to calling them out, social distancing, thorough disinfection, regular ventilation

and a significant increase in break time.

The most important point was that all non-participants were required to leave the venue, and for the multiple heat sections, participants sat in the chairs prepared in the venue and waited. Also, in consideration of keeping competitors away from each other, we set the floor to be twice as wide as usual so that a maximum of six couples could dance per heat.

On 25 April 2021, the largest competition was held in this way. At the venue, we rented a large gymnasium owned by the city. A total of 210 players participated, and the number of management staff exceeded 60. The audience was close to 400 people.

The management staff prepared on the afternoon of the previous day, then gathered from 7am on the day itself and cleaned up after the competition until 9pm. In addition to transporting many chairs and tables and posting information about the venue, we called on spectators and competitors to refrain from conversation and keep their distance. Despite small reward, all the staff worked devotedly on the operation.

In addition to masks and mouth shields (clear masks with chin rests), some competitors wore the newly developed transparent mask 'Dance Maskman' for competition, a transparent mask developed by Modern Publish Inc (publishers of *Danceview* magazine since 1988) to make it easier to breathe during competitions and to make facial expressions visible. In between the rounds, 'walking lessons' (these are done by a walking instructor and not limited to ballroom dance) and 'dance time' (where an amateur band performs and participants can dance) were set up to entertain the spectators.

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In this way, various events have been held based on possible measures. Some issues need to be improved, such as the inflated working hours due to the increased break time and the fact that the management staff had to work from early morning to late at night with small reward, but the Japanese dance world is certainly in the process of building an event model against COVID-19.

The President of the Hokkaido Pro Dance Instructors Association (HPDIA) said: "We dance teachers have devoted ourselves to creating a 'densely crowded' situation. The more people gathered and the more lively, the better we teachers were able to perform. Unfortunately, the spread of the new Coronavirus denies this head-on and poses the greatest challenge to us. However, despite this situation, it is a great encouragement for us teachers that many dance lovers enjoy dancing while wearing masks. Let's be closer to the students who are attending the classroom now than ever before. And let's cherish the connection of the heart more and convey the fun and splendor of ballroom dance." (2021 New Year speech by Hirofumi Shimizu).

The HPDIA and JBDF have decided to continue the free trial lesson initiative, 'Let's Try Dancing', that started in the spring of 2018. In addition, they have decided to work with 179 educational institutions in Hokkaido to develop activities to popularise ballroom dance in elementary, junior high, and high schools.

This is a story about the region of Hokkaido in Japan, but similar efforts are being made all over Japan. For ballroom dance to find a more secure place in Japanese society, teachers' associations need to convey the appeal of dance to society more than ever.