The sky is lit up with glowing orange bulbs when Yuzawa Jinja, the shrine located next to Kenmeiji temple, holds its annual lantern festival on September 8th and 9th. For locals, who believe the event’s origins date to the mid- or late-Edo period (1603–1868), this is one of the most eagerly awaited religious occasions of the year.

It can, however, be a little baffling for the uninitiated. The huge two-day event is conducted only by 42-year-old men, whose age (along with 25) is considered unlucky. While a committee—which consists only of men residing in Nozawa Onsen aged between 40 and 42—collectively called *sanyako*—takes charge of all the preparations, the spiritual dances, such as the Sarutahiko (Shinto god) Dance, the Lion Dance and the Dance of the thirty-six *kasen* (great poets), are conducted by an association of Yuzawa Shrine, which handles the preservation of *bugaku*, imperial court music and dance.