The Nou Hakusan Shrine Spring Grand Festival (Nou Festival) is held every April 24th at Nou Hakusan Shrine in Itoigawa City’s Nou Region. It began in the 15th century and centers around 11 bugaku, a type of ceremonial Japanese court dance.

The festival starts with the Shishimai or Lion’s Dance. Two men dressed as a mythological lion dance about in front of the festival procession as it makes its way into and around the shrine grounds.

Starting around noon, the festival explodes with energy as the Running of the Shrines begins. Three mikoshi portable shrines are carried on the backs of teams of young men who run them in circles around the shrine grounds to ceremonial music.

As the atmosphere calms following the Running of the Shrines, the first bugaku dancers take the stage. 11 different bugaku court dances are performed by adults and children, some as young as 4! These dances culminate in the dramatic Ryō’ō Dance performed in the light of the setting sun.

Nestled at the base of Mt. Oyama (87 m), Nou Hakusan Shrine is said to have been founded during the reign of Emperor Sujin, which would make the shrine over 2000 years old. Located behind the worship hall, the current honden or main sanctuary was built in 1515 following a fire. The building is registered as a Nationally Important Cultural Property. The Shrine Forest seen behind the shrine is a Nationally Designated Natural Monument.

It is enshrines local goddess Princess Nunakawa, her husband Ōnamuchi-Mikoto (also known as Ōkuninushi-no-Mikoto) and the primordial god Izanagi-no-Mikoto who according to legend created the Japanese Islands and fathered many of Shinto’s gods and goddesses.

Despite being a Shinto Shrine, Nou Hakusan Shrine also houses many Buddhist icons and treasures, remnants of a time when the lines between these two religious traditions were blurred.

The festival may be canceled or rescheduled for inclement weather or unforeseen circumstances.
**Shishimai (Lion Dance) - 2 Adults**
These two dancers dress as a *shishi*, a mythological lion-like creature. They dance in front of the procession to purify the ground. The *shishimai* is not considered one of the *bugaku* dances.

**1. Enbu (Waving Spears) - 2 Children**
In the first dance of the *bugaku* performance, 2 children dance with spears to purify the stage and dispel evil spirits.

**2. Sōrai (Worship Dance) - 4 Children**
This quiet, elegant dance is performed in white silk crepe garments and flower-adorned crowns.

**3. Dōrari - 1 Child**
Only 5 min long, this is a very short dance and the only child’s dance which uses a mask. The movements are simple and comical. Watch for the part where the dancer pretends to fall.

**4. Chikyuu - 4 Children**
Thought to have arrived in Japan from China in the 8th century, the true origins of this dance remain a mystery. Four children dance gracefully in beautiful crowns adorned with flowers.

**5. Noh Batō - 1 Adult**
A wild-looking man returns from the mountains celebrating victory over the beast that had killed his father. The baton in his hand represents the weapon used to slay the beast.

**6. Taiheiraku (Song of Great Peace) - 4 Children**
In red and gold robes like those once worn by warriors into battle, they dance holding swords and spears. This dance celebrates the suppression of chaos and a return to righteous order.

**7. Nasori (Dragon Dance) - 2 Adults**
Also called the Dance of the Two Dragons, this dance represents two frolicking dragons. The dancers wear frightening masks and hold ceremonial batons.

**8. Kyūhōraku (Archery Dance) - 4 Children**
Four children in nobleman’s crowns dance with bows and arrows. They each shoot arrows around the stage, shooting another just before leaving.

**9. Chigo Batō - 1 Child**
Wearing a celestial crown of flowers and purple robes and holding a ceremonial fan, a single child dances quietly and elegantly.

**10. Ringa (Flower Song) - 4 Children**
In purple silk crepe robes and flower crowns, these children dance with flowers in this final dance of solemn elegance before the finale.

**11. Ryō-ō (Prince of Lanling) - 1 Adult**
One proposed origin for this dance is the legend of a Chinese King who rose from the grave to aid his son in battle. The sunset was an omen of the prince’s defeat, so the king made it rise. As the sun sets over the Sea of Japan, this dance beckons the sun to rise again.