


Local Music Traditions: Japanese Koto



In the first century a new instrument arrived in Japan from neighboring China and now, 2,000 years later, Japanese musicians are still playing this instrument in Japan and around the world. This celebrated music is even present in the Hudson Valley. The instrument that inspired this tradition is the *koto*.

The *koto* consists of a long wooden sound box with strings stretched across it horizontally and supported by movable bridges. To play the instrument, the musician plucks the strings to the right of the bridges with her right hand. At the same time, she uses her left hand on the other side of the bridges to change the sound of the notes by pressing down on a string before it is plucked to raise the pitch or after it is plucked to create a bending of the note.

One early form of *koto* music in Japan is the tradition known as *gakuso*, or courtly music. This formal, stately style of music was practiced only by highly trained members of the elite. Now the most commonly practiced tradition is *zokuso*, or popular music. It was first developed by a guild of blind male musicians, known as *Todo*, with distinct schools exploring different aspects of the tradition such as *Ikuta* and *Yamada*, described below. *Zokuso* began to incorporate amateur musicians who wanted to learn some of the music without dedicating their whole lives to studying *koto*. Notable among these were many young women of the *samurai* class who hoped this musical knowledge would make them more suitable marriage candidates. Since then, the closure of the *Todo* and other changes in the structure of *koto* instruction have reduced Japanese musicians' association of this instrument with its historically limited classes of practitioners, such as the court and aristocracy musicians or the blind male musicians, enabling a wider range of people to study the *koto*.

Two Popular Traditions	Notation	Featured Artist
<p>The most commonly practiced <i>koto</i> traditions today under <i>zokuso</i> are called <i>Ikuta-ryu</i> and <i>Yamada-ryu</i>. Both developed in the 18th century, combining the formal <i>koto</i> tradition with the more popular repertoire of another instrument, the lute-like <i>shamisen</i>. Each tradition has a distinct way of integrating these</p>	<p>For many years, compositions for <i>koto</i> were carefully guarded knowledge. Songs were passed from teacher to student through repetition and memorization. On a special occasion, a master musician might teach a little-known song to another <i>koto</i> player as a gift. Amateur musicians usually only took lessons once a</p>	

influences.

The *Ikuta-ryu* tradition is focused primarily on incorporating the exclusively instrumental aspects of *shamisen* music into the repertoire of music played on *koto*.

Compositions focus on lyrical forms and musicians use square-shaped plectrum, or finger picks, that more closely imitate the edges of the *shamisen* plectrum.

The *Yamada* tradition draws mainly on *shamisen* music that combines instrument and voice. This vocal orientation means the music has more of a narrative style. *Koto* players in the *Yamada* tradition use rounded plectrum, like the ones Hisako Sasaki is wearing in the picture below.

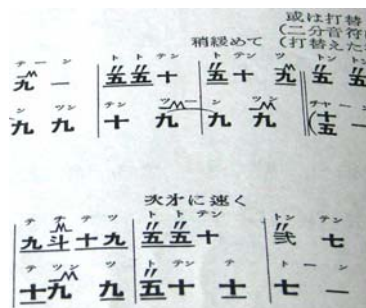


Koto scholar Henry Johnson describes the importance of particular schools of study, writing, “To know one’s place in a tradition, whatever the level, vis-à-vis

week and didn’t have time to commit the entire repertoire to memory. It was partly due to this new need that written notation systems developed for *koto* music. Over time Japanese musicians experimented with different ways of writing music and now there are two types that are common among amateur musicians.



The vertical style of notation, depicted in the image above, is the more widespread of the two. It is read in columns top to bottom starting on the right in the same way a Japanese person would read a book or newspaper. It is generally associated with the *Ikuta* tradition, though it has been used for *Yamada* music as well. Japanese characters specifying string and type of ornamentation are organized in a grid, where each box represents a beat.



Because *koto* instruction continues to adhere to a fairly rigid hierarchical structure, students of *koto* typically feel a strong relationship to their school of study and to their particular instructor. Hisako Sasaki, a Hudson Valley practitioner of the *koto* tradition, had the opportunity to experience both schools of music during her studies.

She recalls her initial desire to play, saying, “I was a junior in high school, the music teacher played the *koto* [for the celebration] for New Years. I’m so impressed. I was born in a farm. We didn’t have any money. Then after I started to work, the first bonus, right away I got the *koto*. Then I just start to learn.”

She began taking weekly lessons from a nearby instructor who taught in the *Ikuta-ryu* tradition. Later, though, she remembers, “I moved out to different place, I couldn’t find the same teacher. Then I changed to different teacher that was *Yamada-ryu*.” This change in location enabled Hisako Sasaki to learn both traditions of *koto* playing

Recently, she has performed for the Mid-Hudson Japanese Community Association in events commemorating traditional holidays, including

<p>other performance traditions, as well as one's social position in that group, is not only essential in this area of Japanese culture, but also important in understanding classification and organization in other spheres of Japanese society." The <i>Ikuta</i> and <i>Yamada</i> traditions are just one example of this broader trend.</p>	<p>This photograph shows an example of horizontal notation for <i>koto</i>, which is more common in the <i>Yamada</i> tradition. Although this music uses the same characters as the vertical notation, it is read in rows from left to right.</p>	<p><i>shogatsu</i>, the New Years celebration, and <i>sakura</i>, the cherry blossom festival.</p>
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Suggested resources for additional information:

"Japan: Instruments and Instrumental Genres" in *Grove Music Online* by Willem Adriaansz
(<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>)

The Koto: A Traditional Instrument in Contemporary Japan by Henry Johnson (Hotei Publishing, 2004)

The Kumiuta and Danmono Traditions of Japanese Koto Music by Willem Adriaansz
(University of California Press, 1973)

Music in Japan: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture by Bonnie C. Wade (Oxford University Press, 2005)

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