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THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND  
MUSIC CULTURE OF JAPAN

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Japan's distinctive music culture includes traditional Japanese instruments used in *noh*, *kabuki*, and other traditional performing arts, instruments specific to each region, and unique performance styles. Its genres range from traditional music played at the imperial court for more than 1,000 years to music combining Japanese instruments with instruments from around the world. In this issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, we feature an interview with HOSOKAWA Shuhei, a musicology researcher, exploring the history and characteristics of Japan's unique music culture. We also introduce various aspects of Japanese musical instruments and music culture, including instruments used in traditional performing arts and festivals, regional traditional instruments, and a music ensemble that uses traditional Japanese instruments in their performances.



Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji  
Photography cooperation: National Theatre

On the cover:  
The *shibyoshi* rhythm.  
From front left,  
clockwise: *fue* (Japanese  
flutes), *kotsuzumi* (small  
hand drum), *otsuzumi*  
(large hand drum), and  
*shime-daiko* (small barrel  
drum).

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## FEATURES

# The Musical Instruments and Music Culture of Japan



Above left: Compared to conventional wind instruments, which are vulnerable to environmental changes such as direct sunlight, the Venova is easier to handle and highly durable, allowing for casual play even outdoors. (The Venova™)

Above right: A joint concert themed *ONE ASIA*, featuring traditional instrument performers from ASEAN countries, held in 2013 at Angkor Wat, Cambodia.

Below left: HAYASHI established a performance style in which the performer faces away from the audience, showcasing the movement of the arms and back.

Below right: *Sanshin*—A three-stringed instrument with an ebony neck and a snakeskin-covered body. With a timbre that blends well with songs and dances, it has long supported traditional Okinawan performing arts.

**J**apan's distinctive music culture includes traditional Japanese instruments used in *noh*, *kabuki*, and other traditional performing arts, instruments specific to each region, and unique performance styles. Its genres range from traditional music played at the imperial court for more than 1,000 years to music combining Japanese instruments with instruments from around the world. In this issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, we feature an interview with HOSOKAWA Shuhei, a musicology researcher, exploring the history and characteristics of Japan's unique music culture. We also introduce various aspects of Japanese musical instruments and music culture, including instruments used in traditional performing arts and festivals, regional traditional instruments, and a music ensemble that uses traditional Japanese instruments in their performances.



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# Sounds Alive in Traditional Performing Arts: Japan's Musical Culture, Past and Present

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In Japanese traditional performing arts, a variety of *wagakki* (traditional Japanese instruments) are used, with distinctive instruments and playing styles found in different regions. We spoke with musicologist HOSOKAWA Shuhei, who has conducted extensive research over many years on the history and characteristics of Japan's unique musical culture.

## What types of traditional music are found in Japan, and what makes them so captivating?

In general, traditional music refers to music that predates the introduction of Western music to Japan in the 19th century. Among the oldest forms is *gagaku*,<sup>1</sup> the music of the imperial court that has been performed for over a thousand years. It is characterized by extremely slow, flowing melodies. Instruments used in *gagaku* include wind instruments called the *sho*<sup>2</sup> (a type of mouth organ), string instruments such as the *biwa*<sup>3</sup> (a type of lute) and *koto*<sup>4</sup> (a type of zither), as well as percussion instruments like *taiko* (Japanese drums) and *shoko*<sup>5</sup> (a small gong).

Another example is *Noh*,<sup>6</sup> which developed between the 14th and 15th centuries and is a classical performing art accompanied by chant and instrumental music. Performers speak their lines while moving with restrained elegance, and the story unfolds with musical accompaniment from instruments such as the *fue* (Japanese flutes), *kotsuzumi*<sup>7</sup> (small hand drum), *otsuzumi*<sup>8</sup> (large hand drum), and *taiko*.

Later, the string instrument known as the *shamisen*<sup>9</sup> was developed. Originating from the *sanshin*,<sup>10</sup> which was introduced from the Ryukyu region (present-day Okinawa Prefecture) to the Osaka area in the mid-16th century, the *shamisen* emerged after being adapted to



**HOSOKAWA Shuhei**

Director of the Research Institute for Japanese Traditional Music and Professor Emeritus at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies. His specialties include musicology, Japanese-Brazilian cultural history, and the evolution of Japanese musical culture. He has taught and lectured on Japanese culture at universities overseas, and his research takes a multifaceted approach to Japanese music, including the encounters and fusion between Japanese and Western musical traditions.

better suit Japanese players. It went on to become widely popular—not only as a familiar instrument for everyday enjoyment but also as an essential element of traditional performing arts.

The *shamisen* became especially popular as a central instrument in theatrical music, closely associated with *kabuki*<sup>11</sup> and *ningyo joruri*<sup>12</sup> (puppet theater). Around the same period, the *biwa* also emerged. Originally a noble string instrument derived from *gagaku*, it was named for its resemblance to Lake Biwa, Japan's largest freshwater lake located in Shiga Prefecture (see: Shiga Prefecture Booth Showcasing the Charms of Lake Biwa, Japan's Largest Freshwater Lake | JULY 2025 | Highlighting Japan).

The *biwa* became linked to blind monks who traveled the highways reciting the *Heike Monogatari*<sup>13</sup> (The Tale of the Heike). They developed a unique expressive style characterized by powerful storytelling combined with vigorous use of the *bachi* plectrum). Although there are few successors today, recordings, videos, and live performances of this tradition are well worth experiencing.

Tracing the roots of traditional Japanese music and instruments reveals that they were not originally created independently within Japan but were introduced from the Chinese mainland and the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, once they arrived in the Japanese archipelago, both the songs and instruments underwent unique transformations. Japan's distinctive beliefs and language played a major role in this process, with the foundations of Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and the Japanese language itself already established by the 6th to 7th centuries. From that time onward, songs and instruments unique to the archipelago were enjoyed in everyday life. Original gestures and footwork in dances and performances developed



Left: An example of gagaku featuring the sho.  
Right: Examples of gagaku instruments: koto (foreground) and shoko (background).



Left: A Noh stage on Sado Island, Niigata Prefecture, where the culture of Noh has long been established.  
Right: An example of the kotsuzumi used in Noh performances.



Left: Playing the shamisen.  
Right: An example of a shakuhachi.

alongside love songs and narrative storytelling that continue to touch people today.

**What are the main attractions of the shamisen, one of Japan's representative traditional instruments, and the music performed on it?**

The shamisen—invented between the late 16th and early 17th centuries—holds its greatest appeal as an accompaniment that plays a crucial role in advancing narratives on stage. Particularly in traditional

performing arts such as kabuki and ningyo joruri, it helps heighten the drama and highlight the emotions of the characters. The distinctive tone of the shamisen and the dynamic, skillful control of tempo and intensity enable it to tell the story through sound, making its expressive power especially captivating. It is also indispensable as accompaniment for brief, light zashiki uta<sup>14</sup> (parlor songs), which might be considered a forerunner to today's pop music.

Additionally, the shamisen is performed in an

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ensemble style called *sankyoku*, which was established from the 19th century onward. *Sankyoku* consists of three instruments: the *shamisen*, the *koto*, and the *shakuhachi*<sup>15</sup> (a bamboo vertical flute). Comparable to a chamber music trio of piano, violin, and cello in Western music, this ensemble form is uniquely Japanese. In *sankyoku*, the *shamisen* takes on a different role from its powerful theatrical accompaniment; instead, it delicately interacts with the *koto* and *shakuhachi*, carrying the melody and providing overall expression and flow. The ability to vary its tonal expression according to the scene highlights the depth and versatility of the *shamisen*.

### Could you tell us about region-specific music and instruments within traditional Japanese music?

One example of region-specific music is the *Tsugaru shamisen*.<sup>16</sup> This *shamisen* music, which is primarily found in western Aomori Prefecture, is a source of pride for the local people. Many enthusiasts actively perform it, and concerts are held throughout the prefecture. The *Tsugaru shamisen* features a thicker neck compared to other *shamisen* styles and differs from the smooth, expressive *shamisen* heard in theatrical settings such as *kabuki*. It is characterized by vigorous *bachi* techniques and a rich, powerful sound, often used in folk songs and festival music. Its strong, dynamic tone creates an atmosphere of excitement and joy, which is

a key part of its appeal. I highly recommend listening to performances at player recitals or on video-sharing platforms to experience it firsthand.

### Where can people experience and enjoy traditional Japanese music today?

One of the primary ways to enjoy traditional Japanese music is by attending performances at specialized theaters. For example, *ningyo joruri* is regularly performed at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture. *Kabuki* performances are held continuously at theaters such as Kabukiza Theatre<sup>17</sup> in Chuo City, Tokyo, as well as venues in Osaka and Kyoto Prefectures. Additionally, if you wish to experience region-specific music, visiting Okinawa Prefecture is highly recommended. The gentle sound of the *sanshin*, a symbol of Okinawan culture, can be enjoyed in local cafes and folk music taverns, making it accessible in everyday dining and social settings.

Another great way to enjoy traditional Japanese instruments and music is through the festivals<sup>18</sup> held across the country. Originally performed as part of Shinto shrine ceremonies, *hayashi*—lively ensemble music featuring *fue* and *taiko*—has evolved with unique regional characteristics. Today, people throughout Japan joyfully perform and showcase these vibrant musical traditions during local festivals.

Percussion instruments like *taiko* are especially

notable for their loud, echoing sound that carries outdoors, traditionally serving as a signal to announce the start of festivals, even from a distance. Similar examples can be found in African and South American music, where drum sounds have long played a role in gathering people together. Where I live in Kyoto, during the Gion Festival<sup>19</sup> season, the sounds of *taiko* and *fue* practice can be heard throughout the town, signaling that the festival is approaching. There is a popular belief that the sound of *taiko* echoes the heartbeat, stirring the emotions. Indeed, their simple yet powerful rhythms seem to vibrate



Photo: PIXTA

*Taiko* drums performing the *Bofuri Hayashi* (stick-beating festival music) during the Gion Festival in Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture.

directly through both body and mind.

**Besides representative genres like *shamisen* and *gagaku*, are there any traditional music styles that you have personally become familiar with or find particularly captivating?**

I really enjoy *ningyo joruri*. I often visit the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka, and no matter how many times I watch it, I am always captivated by the seamless combination of the narrator, or *tayū*, the *shamisen*'s interplay, and the skillful movements of the puppets. I also enjoy listening to *Shinnai-bushi*,<sup>20</sup> a narrative musical style that uses the *shamisen*. Established during the Edo period (early 17th to mid late-19th century), it is known for its emotionally rich melodies and was traditionally performed by traveling musicians called *nagashi* who played while walking through the streets.

Another musical style that particularly fascinates me is the *Chindon-ya* music. Emerging in the early 20th century, *Chindon-ya* are street bands that combine traditional instruments like the *shamisen* and *chindon taiko*<sup>21</sup> with Western instruments such as the clarinet and guitar, performing a wide repertoire ranging from folk songs to popular tunes.

I am deeply moved by music connected with storytelling and mobility. Several cultural preservation groups actively keep the *chindon-ya* tradition alive, so

I encourage you to experience their performances if you have the opportunity.

**What are the challenges in preserving and developing traditional Japanese music?**

Traditional Japanese music today faces challenges due to the strong influence of Western music. Because of this, I hope to see more cross-genre efforts where young people blend traditional instruments with pop and other contemporary styles. Speaking from my own experience, about 30 years ago, I was deeply impressed when I encountered the music of a group called Shang Shang Typhoon<sup>22</sup>. Their sound, which incorporated *shamisen* and *taiko*, felt to me like a new kind of rock music using traditional instruments.

To carry traditional sounds into the future, it is important not only to have professionals but also to increase the number of performers, including amateurs, and expand opportunities for performance and presentation. Creating more chances for young people to casually engage with traditional instruments through club activities in junior high schools, high schools, and universities would also be effective. Just as what was once popular music eventually came to be called "traditional music" over time, I believe the first step toward passing it on to the next generation is to encourage people to listen without feeling that it is difficult. ㊦



Activity aimed at preserving the art of *Chindon-ya*.

1. A fusion of music and dance introduced from continental Asia around the 5th century with native Japanese court rituals and aristocratic traditions. The current form of *gagaku* was established around the 10th century.
2. A wind instrument consisting of 17 bamboo pipes of varying lengths attached to a cup-shaped mouthpiece.
3. A string instrument with a rounded body, originally from China, also used for vocal-accompaniment performances.
4. A wooden zither with 13 strings stretched over a long body. Movable bridges (*kotoji*) are placed under each string to adjust the scale, and it is played using picks worn on the fingers of the right hand.
5. A percussion instrument consisting of a metal bowl suspended within a circular or flame-shaped frame. It is played by striking the inside of the bowl with a mallet.
6. A classical form of musical drama that developed in the 14th century. Performers wear masks and advance the narrative through dance, chanting, and musical accompaniment. Registered by UNESCO in 2008 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.
7. A drum with a wooden hourglass-shaped body, held in the left hand and placed on the right shoulder, played with the right hand.
8. The companion to the *kotsuzumi* (small hand drum), this drum is placed on the left knee and played with the right hand.
9. A three-stringed instrument played with a fan-shaped plectrum called a *bachi*. The vibration of the strings echoes inside a drum-like body to produce a distinctive sound.
10. See: The Sanshin, Okinawa's Traditional Instrument, and the Classical Performing Art, Kumiodori: Resonating to Create Sound Culture | September 2025 | HIGHLIGHTING Japan
11. A popular form of comprehensive theatre combining song, dance, and acting. Since its beginnings in the 17th century, it has remained one of Japan's most representative traditional performing arts. (See: The World of Sound That Brings Power to the Kabuki Stage | September 2025 | HIGHLIGHTING Japan)
12. A classical performing art presented by a storyteller called a *tayū*, a *shamisen* player, and a puppeteer.
13. A literary work from the early 13th century that depicts the rise and fall of the Taira clan in a military epic.
14. Songs traditionally sung by *geisha*, professional entertainers who perform for guests at banquets.
15. A type of vertical bamboo flute introduced from China over a thousand years ago.
16. *Shamisen* music that developed in western Aomori Prefecture. Today, it often refers to solo performances. It is characterized by techniques in which the *bachi* (plectrum) strikes the strings and by fast-tempo pieces.
17. A theatre in Chuo City, Tokyo, dedicated exclusively to *kabuki*.
18. See: Traditional Instruments Help Set the Mood at Japanese Matsuri | September 2025 | HIGHLIGHTING Japan
19. A festival held annually from July 1 for one month at Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture.
20. A style of musical drama narrated to *shamisen* accompaniment, established in mid-18th century Edo (present-day Tokyo). It developed into a street performance in which artists walked while playing.
21. A percussion instrument combining a gong and a *taiko*, carried on the performer's back for solo playing. Performing it while promoting shops is known as *chindon-ya*.
22. A six-member band consisting of two vocalists, *sangen*, drums, keyboard, and bass. Active since the 1980s, they are known for their borderless music blending sounds from countries around the world, especially Asia.

# The World of Sound That Brings Power to the Kabuki Stage



Photo: National Theatre

On the stage of *kabuki*, a traditional Japanese theatrical art, shifts in emotion, changes in scene, and even the presence of nature are conveyed through live singing and instrumental music. We spoke with a member of the Japan Arts Council, which operates the National Theatre,<sup>1</sup> where *kabuki* is staged, about the roles of essential instruments and performers and how sound shapes the performance.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

A scene from the *kabuki* dance *Renjishi*, in which a parent and child lion shake their long manes. Performance includes *nagauta* singing accompanied by *narimono* instruments on stage.

**K**abuki is one of Japan's foremost traditional performing arts, with a history spanning more than 400 years. It is a comprehensive art form that integrates music, dance, and acting. In 2008, it was inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

A member of the Japan Arts Council, which operates the National Theatre, explained: “*Kabuki* traces its origins to a performing art called *kabuki odori*, founded by a woman named Izumo no Okuni. Actors who perform female roles are called *onnagata*, while those who perform male roles are called *tachiyaku*. Over time, *kabuki* developed into a form of theater in which men perform all roles. Its distinctive features include striking poses held in stillness that capture the audience's attention called *mie*, the unique makeup style called *kumadori*,<sup>2</sup> and rapid costume changes known as *hayagawari*. On stage, not only the actors' movements,

gestures, and expressive techniques but also the music and sound produced by the performers play an essential role.”

*Kabuki* music can be broadly divided into *utamono* (song-based pieces) and *katarimono* (narrative pieces, also known as *joruri*). Song-based pieces feature music called *nagauta*, performed with singing and the *shamisen*.<sup>5</sup> This is often accompanied by the *narimono*, the instruments of the *hayashi* ensemble—mainly the *shibyoshi* (four rhythms), made up of *kotsuzumi* (small hand drum), *otsuzumi* (large hand drum), *taiko* (Japanese drums), and *fue* (Japanese flutes)—which help convey the characters' emotions and the atmosphere of each scene. Narrative pieces tell the story with *shamisen* accompaniment. A representative example is the *takemoto*,<sup>3</sup> who provide musical support for the storytelling across many different *kabuki* performances.



Photo: National Theatre

A scene from the *kabuki* play *Kanadehon Chushingura*. *Takemoto*<sup>3</sup> performers are visible at *kamite*<sup>4</sup> (stage right from the audience's perspective).



Photo: National Theatre

Left: Interior of the *kuromisu* at stage left.  
Right: *Takemoto*: the narrator (*ayu*, left) and *shamisen* player (right), responsible for the storytelling.

Creating the sound of waves by shaking a basket filled with adzuki beans.



Photo: National Theatre



Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji  
Photography cooperation: National Theatre

The *shibyoshi* rhythm. From front left, clockwise: *fue* (Japanese flutes), *kotsuzumi* (small hand drum), *otsuzumi* (large hand drum), and *shime-daiko* (small barrel drum).



Photo: National Theatre

Examples of sound-effect tools, including bamboo flutes.

These pieces are not just background music; they also support the storytelling and the progression of the dance. The performance style varies depending on the play and the scene. In the case of *nagauta* music and *narimono* instruments, the music is performed from a small room behind a bamboo screen called the *kuromisu*<sup>6</sup> at *shimote* (stage left from the audience's perspective). In dances, musicians sometimes perform *debayashi*, appearing visibly on stage while playing.

In the case of *takemoto*, the narrator and *shamisen* player appear together on stage, usually on a slightly raised platform called the *yuka* at stage right, to perform the narration.

Beyond the *shibyoshi* rhythm, the *narimono* includes dozens of instruments, such as *odaiko* (large Japanese drums), which are used not only to depict natural elements—rain, wind, thunder, and waves—but also to provide sound effects, such as the tolling of a bell to mark the passage of time.


“In addition, for sound effects, theater staff use various tools to enhance the performance—for example, scraping the surface of a seashell to mimic a frog’s croak, or shaking a bamboo basket filled with adzuki beans to create the sound of waves.”

If you listen closely to the performers and the sounds that perfectly align with the acting, you can

feel that this music is not mere background—it plays a vital role in depicting the story’s worldview.

*Kabuki* is regularly performed at theaters in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and other locations, and can also be seen at performances hosted by the National Theatre in Tokyo.

“Even if you don’t understand the words, the music can convey meaning. When people from overseas watch *kabuki*, they often share a variety of impressions: being moved by the actors’ unique, emotional performances or the themes of the story, marveling at the costumes and makeup, or enjoying the live music. The live sound brings power and immediacy to the atmosphere. We hope audiences can experience and enjoy *kabuki* through its music and sounds as well.

“For international visitors, there is a website explaining *kabuki* in eight languages, and most performances offer English audio guides for rent. These viewing aids are highly recommended.” 



A historical painting depicting actors and musicians in rehearsal, *Sanyagura Keiko no Oyose* (Rehearsal by Performers from the Three Kabuki Theaters).

Collector: National Theatre

1. A national theater responsible for preserving and promoting traditional performing arts, which is currently closed for renovation. Even during the closure, the theater continues to host performances at venues around the Tokyo area. In September 2025, the masterpiece *Kanadehon Chushingura* is being staged at the New National Theatre, Tokyo in Shibuya.  
2. A distinctive *kabuki* makeup technique used to symbolically represent a character’s personality, emotions, or role. The actor’s entire face is first painted or masked in a single color, then vivid colors are applied on top to create the final design.  
3. In *kabuki*, *takemoto* refers to the musicians responsible for the musical accompaniment of narrative pieces, typically consisting of a narrator and the *shamisen* players.  
4. Stage terminology: from the audience’s perspective, the right side of the stage is called

*kamite* (上手) and the left side is called *shimote* (下手).  
5. A traditional Japanese three-stringed instrument played with a *bachi* (plectrum). It is classified as *hosozao* (thin neck), *chuzao* (medium neck), or *futozao* (thick neck) depending on the thickness of its neck. (See “A Traditional Japanese Instrument Ensemble Pioneering the Future of Sound,” in *HIGHLIGHTING Japan* September 2025 issue)  
6. A small black room at *shimote* (stage left from the audience’s perspective), covered with a screen made of thin bamboo or wooden slats woven with thread. The interior is hard to see from the outside, but performers inside can clearly view the stage and play music in sync with the performance.

# Traditional Instruments Help Set the Mood at Japanese Matsuri

At festivals held throughout Japan, the sounds of *taiko* (Japanese drums) and *fue* (Japanese flutes) add color to the venues and liven up the atmosphere. The sounds of these instruments echoing amid the hustle and bustle are an essential piece of the Japanese *matsuri*, or festival.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

Various festivals are held across Japan, varying by region and season. Centered on local shrines and temples, these traditional events are held to give thanks for the harvest, honor ancestors, and pray for safety. Among their many highlights of Japanese *matsuri*, such as processions, dances, and decorations, music plays an indispensable role in setting the mood. NIGATA Hideo, a member of the Nippon Matsuri Network, a nonprofit organization that conducts ongoing research and disseminates information about Japanese *matsuri*, is an expert who has attended more than 600 festivals all over Japan.

“Japanese *matsuri* embody various sentiments, including gratitude for a bountiful harvest, commemoration of ancestors, and the wish to avoid disaster. Since ancient times, Japanese people have believed in *yaoyorozu no kami*<sup>1</sup> — a great number of gods, who reside in all things. This belief is the reason why festivals vary greatly in form from region to region. At *matsuri*, the traditional musical performances called *ohayashi*<sup>2</sup> are held. The music for *ohayashi* is mainly comprised of *taiko*, *fue*, and *kane* (bells or gongs),<sup>3</sup> and includes dancing in some regions.”

In *ohayashi*, the performed sounds themselves are



Taiko (Japanese drums) played at a festival

Photo: PIXTA



Photo: Nippon Matsuri Network



Photo: PIXTA



Photo: Nippon Matsuri Network

Left: Large *taiko* installed on a *dashi* (float) at the Hanamaki Festival in Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

Center: One type of *fue* used in festivals

Right: *Surigane* played on a *dashi* at the Kumagaya Uchiwa Festival in Kumagaya City, Saitama Prefecture

considered offerings to the gods, and they play a role in connecting this world with the world beyond. The sounds of the *taiko*, *fue*, and *kane* add color to the rituals and processions.

*Taiko*, *fue*, and *kane* are three types of instruments that add color to the *matsuri* with their sounds. Each have their own unique roles and characteristics.

*Taiko* are percussion instruments that have been used since ancient times. Two types are typically used in festival music: the *odaiko*, a large drum which produces mainly low tones; and the *shimedaiko*, a smaller drum that produces high, piercing tones.

“Depending on the festival, the typical beats and ways of striking the *taiko* vary greatly. Often, *taiko* are placed on *dashi*<sup>4</sup> and paraded through the streets,” says NIGATA.

*Fue* includes the horizontally held *shinobue*,<sup>5</sup> the vertically blown *fue*, and, sometimes used in the worship hall of a shrine, the *sho*,<sup>6</sup> an instrument consisting of multiple pipes bundled together. *Fue* plays the melody, adding lightness to the music.

“Japanese people often liken the sound of *fue* in festival music to ‘*pee-hyara*’ (a high whistling sound), but they add light melodies that fit with the *taiko* rhythms.”

*Kane* is a metal percussion instrument that marks the rhythm with high-pitched metallic sounds. “Its role is to enhance the rhythm by adding high-pitched metallic sounds to the low-pitched rhythms of the *taiko* and the melodies of the *fue*.”

According to NIGATA, these three instruments are commonly used as basic components of festival music, but the types of instruments and playing styles vary by region.

“The combination of instruments varies depending

on the festival. For example, festivals in Okinawa Prefecture use a small drum called the *paranku*<sup>7</sup> that can be struck while dancing, as well as the *sanshin*,<sup>8</sup> while festivals in Toyama Prefecture add the *kokyū* (Chinese violin).<sup>9</sup>”

NIGATA highlights Japanese festivals, which are attracting increased interest from overseas, and the sounds of the instruments that are essential to them.

“People from overseas seem to find Japanese festivals somewhat mysterious. Recently, I’ve often seen overseas visitors not only at urban festivals, but also at those held in small rural communities, such as mountain villages. When Japanese people hear the sounds of the *fue* and *taiko*, it brings back childhood memories and images of their hometowns, with a feeling of nostalgia. The festivals are cherished events replete with memories of sounds that remain in the hearts of Japanese people. I hope that people from overseas will experience the moods and sounds of these festivals firsthand.”



Photo: Nippon Matsuri Network

*Taiko* drummers at a Heishikiya Eisa Okinawan folk dance in Uruma City, Okinawa Prefecture. They dance while playing a small drum called a *paranku*. This is said to be the origin of Eisa.



Photo: Nippon Matsuri Network

The Etchu Yatsuo Owaru Kaze no Bon festival in Toyama City, Toyama Prefecture. People march around while playing the *kokyū* (Chinese violin).

1. The belief that gods reside in all things  
 2. The music and sounds of traditional Japanese performing arts and festivals, or the performers themselves  
 3. A flat, round, lid-shaped metal percussion instrument  
 4. A decorated pull-cart used in festivals  
 5. One kind of Japanese transverse flute made of thin bamboo. It has a mouthpiece and finger holes.  
 6. An instrument that consists of 17 thin bamboo pipes bundled into a circle, and a bowl-shaped base that supports it.  
 7. A thin drum with a diameter of about 20 cm. The player holds it in one hand while using the other

hand to play it with a stick.  
 8. A stringed instrument that is widely used, mainly in the Okinawa region. It has three strings and a body covered with genuine leather (usually snake skin). An indispensable presence for festivals and folk songs. (See “The Sanshin, Okinawa’s Traditional Instrument, and the Classical Performing Art, Kumiodori: Resonating to Create Sound Culture,” in *HIGHLIGHTING JAPAN* September 2025 issue)  
 9. A traditional Japanese instrument that produces sound when its strings are bowed. It has three or four strings.

# A Pioneer of Modern Taiko Drumming Discusses Performance Attire

Although *wadaiko*<sup>1</sup> (traditional Japanese drums) is often regarded as a traditional performing art, its current form was actually newly created from a modern perspective. In this article, we hear from HAYASHI Eitetsu, a pioneer who developed and popularized these techniques and elevated *taiko* to a globally acclaimed performing art, as he discusses the origins of today's performance style and attire. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

**H**AYASHI Eitetsu joined a newly founded *taiko* ensemble in 1971, taking part in its creation as well as in composition, stage direction, and lead performances for 11 years before becoming independent. Since 1982, he has performed worldwide as a soloist in orchestral works and his own stage productions. He transformed the simple *taiko* style, long cherished as festival accompaniment, into a starring art form, elevating both ensemble and solo performances into a new genre of stage and musical expression.

The composition of muscular performers striking large drums in perfect synchronization, as well as the performance of standing directly in front of a massive 1.15-meter-diameter drum while facing away from the audience, were devised by HAYASHI. He also personally designed the performance attire worn by the drummers.

“Traditionally, at Japanese *matsuri*, or festivals, and similar events, *taiko* is often played wearing clothing such as a *happi* coat,<sup>2</sup> *haragake*,<sup>3</sup> *momohiki*,<sup>4</sup> and *tabi*.<sup>5</sup> This originates from the fact that a type of carpenter,<sup>6</sup> construction worker,<sup>7</sup> and other craftsmen were the ones who originally played *taiko*, and their work clothes became the basis for the attire. The style of stage costumes worn by modern ensemble *wadaiko* groups is largely based on the performance method I devised in the 1980s, which many people have since used as a reference,” HAYASHI explains.



Photo © Julia Lebedeva



Photo © PAKTA



Photo: HAL

Above: HAYASHI Eitetsu, *taiko* drummer.

Below left: *Taiko* performers in *happi* coats,<sup>2</sup> commonly seen at Japanese *matsuri*, or festivals.

Below right: Costume featuring a *kataginu*,<sup>8</sup> *haragake*,<sup>3</sup> and *tattsuke-hakama*,<sup>9</sup> designed by HAYASHI.

“Although they may appear to be traditional attire for *taiko* performers at first glance, there was no such precedent in *taiko* performance attire. I combined a *kataginu*,<sup>8</sup> *haragake*, and *tattsuke-hakama*,<sup>9</sup> designed for ease of putting on and taking off, with mobility in mind. This costume has come to be recognized as the standard attire for *taiko* performers, and today many people follow this style.”



Photo: Hega Library

Above: Example of the costume worn by *taiko* performers in the Izaku Taiko Dance, Kagoshima Prefecture.

Below: HAYASHI established a performance style in which the performer faces away from the audience, showcasing the movement of the arms and back.



Photo: OGUUMA Saitee

In traditional Japanese *matsuri*, *taiko* drums are used in various ways, and HAYASHI explains the accompanying attire as follows: “In traditional festival *taiko* performances, besides *happi* coats, performers often wear *yukata*<sup>10</sup> or formal kimono such as *montsuki* (kimono with family crests). While patterns and how they are worn may vary, there are generally no major differences between regions. However, in the *furyu*<sup>11</sup> style of *taiko* dances,

where dancers parade in groups while playing flutes and *taiko*, different costumes can be seen depending on the region.”

As HAYASHI has performed around the world, his stage costumes have also drawn international attention. Originally designed for ease of movement, the outfits also show off the performers’ strong, dynamic bodies, impressing audiences with their power and grace, leading many amazed at the unexpected beauty of Japanese *taiko* performance. Why not experience the world of *taiko* music, crafted for the stage and still evolving today, alongside its distinctive, visually striking costumes. **U**

1. A general term for traditional Japanese drums. These percussion instruments have a wooden body or wooden tub with animal hide stretched over it and are played by striking with *bachi* (drumsticks).  
 2. A short, open-front jacket with tubular sleeves, worn by craftsmen as formal clothing.  
 3. Work clothing for craftsmen, worn as a chest apron. It has various pockets for tools and is shaped like a short apron.  
 4. Traditionally also worn as underwear, these pants come in a full-length style that fits closely from the waist to the heels, or in a shorter pants style. The waist is tied with a cord.  
 5. Sock-like footwear designed with a separate section for the big toe and the other four toes.  
 6. Craftsmen who build or repair wooden structures.

## CALLS AND SHOUTS DURING TAIKO PERFORMANCES



Photo: Mirai Taiko Dojo

During a performance, shouts are called out between drum strikes.

During *taiko* performances, you can hear many different calls and shouts. KOBAYASHI Masataka, who leads the *wadaiko* group Bonten, explains their types and roles.

**Taiko calls in traditional performing arts (used to confirm progress, signal timing, cue performance, and add expression)**

lyo~  
 Ha!  
 O~ and others

In traditional performing arts such as *taiko*, *noh*, and *kabuki*, the musicians known as *hayashikata* follow specific calls. There are also various calls that have been passed down through local folk arts and festivals. These calls serve multiple purposes: communicating between performers and confirming timing, signaling other performers on stage, and conveying rhythm and tempo by varying volume and tone to energize the performance.

**Calls in folk performance arts (used in festivals and local celebrations)**

Essa  
 li~ya  
 Soiya and others

In contrast to the calls used in traditional arts and festivals, calls in stage performances can serve as part of the music itself, signal changes in the piece, or mark the conclusion of a solo performance.

**Calls used in stage taiko performances**

Yo!  
 Ha!  
 Sore!  
 Eisa~ and others

The calls add another layer of beauty to the drums themselves—like works of art—and enhance the sense of refined Japanese aesthetics conveyed through the performance, while also conveying energy and passion. Listen closely to the calls and experience the thrilling power of *wadaiko* performances that move both heart and soul.



Photo: Mirai Taiko Dojo

KOBAYASHI performing on stage.

7. Skilled workers specializing in high-altitude construction tasks.  
 8. A sleeveless jacket worn over a kimono. In the medieval period, samurai wore it with *hakama* (traditional Japanese pleated trousers) as a type of formal attire.  
 9. A type of *hakama* with a tapered lower section for ease of movement. It was worn by samurai and commoners as travel or work clothing.  
 10. A type of kimono made from cotton *yukata* fabric, consisting of a single-layered long robe.  
 11. A performing art or festival practice in which participants play *fue* (Japanese flutes) and *taiko* (Japanese drums), sing and dance, and parade in elaborate costumes. It was popular in the medieval period.

# Passing Down Tradition: Niigata's Unique Musical Instrument, the Tarukinuta



Photo: Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai

The *tarukinuta* creates a lively rhythm using a wooden barrel as a percussion instrument.

Across Japan, local festivals are filled with the distinct sounds of traditional instruments rooted in their communities. One such instrument is the *tarukinuta*, used in summer festivals in Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture. This unique percussion instrument, fashioned from a wooden barrel,<sup>1</sup> has been passed down for over 300 years. Its rhythmic sound continues to convey the folk culture born in this historic port town.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

The *tarukinuta* is a unique traditional instrument, part of the local performing arts passed down in Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture. It uses a wooden barrel called an *ittodaru*,<sup>2</sup> measuring about 40 cm in diameter and height, as a percussion instrument. In the past, these barrels—originally everyday items used to store miso and soy sauce—were repurposed for musical performance.

The *tarukinuta* originated in the 18th century, during a time when Niigata was developing as a maritime gateway delivering goods from western Japan to Edo (now Tokyo), the nation's capital. It is said that sailors would tap the sides of their ships to pray to Ryujin, the dragon god believed to protect the seas. This custom spread to the port town, where locals began striking barrels to enliven festivals, giving rise to the *tarukinuta*. The instrument's rhythms became closely associated with *bon odori*,<sup>3</sup> which also grew in popularity alongside it.

During World War II, festivals and similar events were banned, causing the *tarukinuta* tradition to temporarily disappear. The revival of this tradition is credited to EIJIMA Kozan (1928–2017), the founder of Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai. For nearly

80 years, EIJIMA studied the *tarukinuta* across various regions and passed its techniques on to the modern era. Today, the tradition is carried on by the second-generation EIJIMA Kozan, who succeeded the name in 2022.

According to the second-generation EIJIMA Kozan, the sound produced by the *tarukinuta* has a unique quality that sets it apart from other percussion instruments: “The *tarukinuta* originally uses a wooden barrel as its instrument. The outer body and both the top and bottom lids are made from cedar wood, and bamboo hoops<sup>4</sup> secure the barrel's shape. The *bachi*<sup>5</sup> (drumsticks) for playing are made of hard oak wood. Striking the soft cedar wood with these hard sticks produces a clear, high-pitched tone. When played skillfully on a high-quality *tarukinuta*, the instrument produces a clear ‘koon’ sound that is both pure and beautiful.”

Unlike conventional *taiko* (Japanese drums), *tarukinuta* performances involve striking not only the top lid, which serves as the main playing surface, but also the wooden sides of the barrel, introducing tonal variety and allowing for intricate rhythms. Among the different playing styles, the *Eijima-ryu* method is



Photo: Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai

Unlike the more common *wadaiko* drums (pictured in the background), which use animal skin for the drumhead, the *tarukinuta* (pictured in the foreground) is made with wood for its striking surface.

Second-generation EIJIMA Kozan, head of the Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai (representative since 2017, succeeded the name in 2022).



Photo: Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai



Photo: Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai

The *tarukinuta* is known for its lively rhythms and dance-like performance style.



Photo: Eijimaryu Niigata Tarukinuta Densyokai

A performance at Art Mix Japan, where traditional Japanese performing arts gather in one place.

particularly distinctive: performers use their entire bodies, striking the barrel with movements that resemble a dance. The result is a visually dynamic and energetic performance.

“In the *Eijima-ryu* style of *tarukinuta*, which we preserve, we combine a set of fundamental striking patterns—called *kata*—with seven distinctive movements, including *kawazu-uchi*<sup>6</sup> and *happo-kuzushi*.<sup>7</sup> Some pieces are performed in a format where performers take turns striking the barrel, working together to complete a single composition. It is a performing art that requires both individual skill and harmony within the group,” explains EIJIMA.

Today, performances are held mainly at festivals and events throughout Niigata Prefecture. In addition,

the group actively participates in special classes at elementary schools, cultural festivals, and commemorative events, with a strong focus on passing this tradition to the next generation.

“Experiencing the *tarukinuta* at a young age offers children a meaningful opportunity to connect with their local culture. Every time I see them striking the barrel with such focused concentration, I’m reminded of the importance of preserving and passing on traditional culture,” says EIJIMA.

The *tarukinuta*, a traditional instrument long cherished in Niigata’s daily life and festivals, continues to be passed down to younger generations as a deeply rooted local cultural treasure and will surely be embraced by future generations as well. 📖

1. A cylindrical wooden container used for storing and transporting food products such as soy sauce, miso, and sake.  
 2. A traditional Japanese wooden barrel with a capacity of approximately 18 liters.  
 3. In Japan, the *Obon* festival is held once a year—typically in mid-July or mid-August depending on the region—to welcome, entertain, and send off the spirits of ancestors who are thought to return to the living world. *Bon odori* refers to the traditional dances performed during this period, either to honor ancestors or as a community event.

4. Hoop-shaped bands fitted around the barrel’s circumference to maintain its shape. These are made of bamboo or metal.  
 5. Stick-shaped tools used to strike percussion instruments such as drums and barrels.  
 6. Named *kawazu-uchi* (“frog strike”) because the movement resembles a frog leaping mid-air. It features distinctive long pauses and flowing gestures.  
 7. A striking technique called *happo-kuzushi* (“breaking in all directions”) intentionally breaks from the basic movements to enhance performance expression.

# The Sanshin, Okinawa's Traditional Instrument, and the Classical Performing Art, Kumiodori: Resonating to Create Sound Culture

Familiar from Okinawa Prefecture to the Amami Islands of Kagoshima Prefecture, the *sanshin* is a three-string instrument played with a light pluck. At 75cm-80cm in length, the *sanshin* is somewhat smaller than the *shamisen*,<sup>1</sup> another Japanese string instrument. The instrument is deeply rooted in the daily lives of Okinawans, connecting people's hearts in all kinds of settings, from traditional arts to everyday celebrations. Its sound is one of the pillars supporting Okinawa's unique musical culture.



The *sanshin*, one of Okinawa's best-known traditional instruments.

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

(Text: By MOROHASHI Kumiko)

“If you ask 100 Okinawans what the best-known instrument of Okinawa is, they'd all say the *sanshin*,” says KINJO Shinji, artistic director of the National Theatre Okinawa, which was founded in order to preserve and promote Okinawan traditional performing arts, with a focus on *kumiodori*, inscribed on the UNESCO representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The *sanshin* is an instrument that symbolizes Okinawan culture and is loved by many. The long neck of the *sanshin*, used for holding it, is made from Okinawan ebony<sup>2</sup> (also called *kuruchi*), and its body is covered in python skin, producing a soft, gentle tone. The main musical characteristic of the *sanshin* is its unique scale, called the Ryukyuan<sup>3</sup> *onkai* (Ryukyuan scale). This scale is based on the five notes of Do, Mi, Fa, So, and Ti, and produces a sound unique to Okinawan traditional music.



Ryukyuan instruments such as the *sanshin* (back row) and the *koto* (a type of zither), *kokyu* (Chinese violin) and *fue* (Japanese flutes) (front row) are essential to Okinawa's traditional performing arts.



*Kumiodori* is a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. This photo shows a scene from *Mekarushii* (“The Children Left Behind”), which depicts the deep affection between parent and child.

“The *sanshin* has developed with a focus on balance with the human voice. Unlike the sharp and powerful sound of the *shamisen*, the *sanshin* is characterized by its calm, gentle tones. It is played by plucking the three strings with a *tsume* (plectrum), a tool which is often made from a water buffalo horn. On stage, the *sanshin* is frequently joined by four other traditional Ryukyuan instruments<sup>4</sup>: the Ryukyuan *koto* (a type of zither), *taiko* (Japanese drums), *fue* (Japanese flutes), and *kokyu* (Chinese violin). These instruments blend with the *sanshin* to create the rich sound world unique to Ryukyuan music.”

The *sanshin* is an instrument that was introduced around the late 14th century (there are various theories) from China (Ming dynasty). In the early 17th century, the Ryukyuan Kingdom<sup>5</sup> officially adopted the *sanshin* as a court instrument, and it

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa



Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

The National Theatre Okinawa regularly hosts *sanshin* concerts.

was played at receptions for the nobility and other court functions. After it was introduced from China, the *sanshin* was modified and refined to suit Ryukyuan music. In 1719, during the reign of the Ryukyu Kingdom, Tamagusuku Chokun<sup>6</sup> created *kumiodori* (see “Singing and Dancing to Entertain Envoy,” *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, March 2020 issue), in which the *sanshin* played a central role.

“*Kumiodori* is a performing art that originated as a form of entertainment for *sakuhoshi* (Chinese imperial envoys),<sup>7</sup> and is a composite art form that integrates music, dance, and theater. It has also been influenced by *noh* and other Japanese classical performing arts. The lines spoken by the actor, or *dekata* are delivered in a uniquely cadenced singing style called *tonae*, which blends with the music in the play to create an elegant world. Another characteristic of *kumiodori* is the singing of the *jiutai*, the *sanshin* player, to express the characters’ emotions during important scenes of the story.” According to KINJO, with their playing and singing skills, the *sanshin* players play such a major role that they influence the overall quality of a performance.



Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

A scene from *Temizu no En*, a rare love-themed *kumiodori* work.

The *sanshin* is not limited to *kumiodori*. It plays a major role in many traditional Okinawan performing arts, including Ryukyuan dance,<sup>8</sup> Okinawan theater,<sup>9</sup> and folk arts in each region.

“Okinawan households display the *sanshin* in the *tokonoma*,<sup>10</sup> and the instrument has long been cherished as a guardian deity of the home. The sound of the *sanshin* is also essential to festivals and celebrations. Ryukyuan dance is often performed at wedding receptions and other celebrations. Especially elegant is the song “Kagiyade Fu,” which is widely popular among both professionals and locals, while the lively and fast-paced

## VARIOUS TRADITIONAL RYUKYUAN INSTRUMENTS



Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

### Sanshin

A three-stringed instrument with an ebony neck and a snakeskin-covered body. With a timbre that blends well with songs and dances, it has long supported traditional Okinawan performing arts.



Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

### Taiko

A traditional percussion instrument with a wooden body covered with a skin. Okinawan *taiko* drums produce a distinctive, light sound.



Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

### Ryukyu koto

A Ryukyu *koto* with a wooden body and 13 strings is responsible for playing melodies and chords in *kumiodori*.



Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

### Kokyu

A bowed string instrument. The kind used in Okinawa has four strings and is called a *kucho*. Pitched higher than the *sanshin*, it plays a role in emphasizing emotion.




Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

### Fue

A six-hole transverse bamboo flute that is characterized by its bright tone. A wind instrument that blends with the *sanshin* and adds color to the melody.

tune “Kachashii” brings a banquet to a climactic close. The *sanshin* is indispensable for these dances.

Playing the *sanshin* is not just about producing the sounds. It requires an understanding of Ryukyu history and culture and the hearts of its people, says KINJO.

“If you have the opportunity to visit Okinawa, I hope you will enjoy the traditional performing arts at the National Theatre Okinawa and experience the gentle sound of the *sanshin*.” 

1. A three-stringed instrument developed independently in mainland Japan based on the *sanshin*, played by striking the strings with a plectrum.

2. An evergreen shrub of the family Ebenaceae distributed in regions such as Okinawa, Taiwan, southern China, and India. Called *kuruchi* (black wood) due to its dark trunk.

3. Today's Okinawa Prefecture region. Ryukyu is a Chinese name that was used as the kingdom's official name from 1429 to 1879.

4. See the box “Various Traditional Ryukyuan Instruments.”

5. A kingdom established by Sho Hashi in 1429 after he unified the main island of Okinawa.

6. Lived from 1684 to 1734. A dancer and bureaucrat active in the court of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Chokun created *kumiodori*. His works include *Shushin Kaneiri* (“Possessed by Love, She Takes Possession of the Temple Bell”) and *Nido Tekiuchi* (“The Children's Revenge”), which were first performed at a banquet to welcome Chinese envoys.

7. Also known as *sapposhi*. Envoys dispatched by the Chinese dynasty to confer titles such as “king”

on monarchs of a tributary state.

8. A performing art expressed solely through dance, without using words. There are two types: the elegant *koten buyo* (classical dance), which is danced at a leisurely tempo and was cultivated in the imperial court, and the more accessible *zatsudori* (common dance), which originated in town theater houses in the 19th century.

9. A form of theater that emerged from *kumiodori* over time. In contrast to *kumiodori*, which combines classical music with stylized acting, the dialogue of Okinawan theater is close to everyday conversation and its acting is realistic.

10. Since the late middle ages, this has referred to a space created in a Japanese house for displaying hanging scrolls and other decorations.

Reference: The National Theatre Okinawa offers earphone guide services in four languages: English, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

# A Traditional Japanese Instrument Ensemble Pioneering the Future of Sound

AUN J CLASSIC ORCHESTRA, a musical ensemble formed in 2008 composed exclusively of traditional Japanese instruments. Far left: INOUE Ryohei.



**AUN J CLASSIC ORCHESTRA** is a musical ensemble made up of performers of traditional Japanese instruments—musicians who rarely have the opportunity to play together—uniting to explore new forms of musical expression that transcend conventional boundaries. We spoke with the group’s founder, INOUE Ryohei.

(Text: By MOROHASHI Kumiko)

**A**UN J CLASSIC ORCHESTRA (hereafter, “AUN J”) brings together seven leading *hogaku* (traditional Japanese music) performers, each a master of their instrument: *wadaiko*<sup>1</sup>, *shamisen*<sup>2</sup>, *koto*<sup>3</sup>, *shakuhachi*<sup>4</sup>, and *shinobue*<sup>5</sup>. The ensemble was formed in 2008 under the leadership of INOUE Ryohei, with members from diverse musical backgrounds and schools of traditional music.

“At the time, I was performing mainly in New York as part of a duo called AUN with my twin brother, INOUE Kohei,” recalls Ryohei. “After returning to Japan, the birth of my daughter inspired me to create a music CD for children. But I realized that the expressive range of just the instruments I played—*wadaiko* and *Tsugaru shamisen*<sup>2</sup>—was limited. Wanting to create a richer musical expression, I reached out to performers



A joint concert themed *ONE ASIA*, featuring traditional instrument performers from ASEAN countries, held in 2013 at Angkor Wat, Cambodia.



Photo: Hearttree Co., Ltd.

Scene from a concert held at Ise Jingu Shrine in Mie Prefecture, as part of a World Heritage performance series.



Photo: Hearttree Co., Ltd.

Live performance inside Mont Saint-Michel, France.

of other traditional instruments. That was the beginning of AUN J.”

Later, *koto* players ICHIKAWA Shin and YAMANO Azumi, *chuzao* (medium-neck) *shamisen* player ONOE Hideki, *shinobue* player YAMADA Michiko, and *shakuhachi* performer ISHIGAKI Seizan joined the project, enabling the formation of an ensemble of *wagakki* (Japanese traditional instruments) known for their rich expressive range and versatility. This marked the beginning of an experimental effort to expand the possibilities of these instruments.

“In ensemble performances with *wagakki*, the biggest challenge is balancing the volume levels between instruments,” Ryohei explains. “The overwhelming sound of the *wadaiko* can easily overpower the delicate tones of the *koto* and *chuzao shamisen*. Achieving harmony without one instrument drowning out the others is extremely difficult. At AUN J, we overcome this through thoughtful arrangement and orchestration, carefully maximizing the unique qualities of each instrument.”

For example, the *koto* supports the chord progressions like a guitar or piano, carefully avoiding overlap with the rhythm of the *wadaiko*, while the *shamisen* plays the melody and harmonies. Thanks to the performers’ exceptional skills, the group has succeeded in recreating Western musical structures using traditional Japanese instruments. Today, the ensemble boasts a repertoire of nearly 200 pieces, performing a wide range of music, from original compositions by members to classical masterpieces, film scores including works by Studio Ghibli, and contemporary pop songs.


“While Western music combines scales like Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Ti-Do to paint a musical landscape, I feel that *wagakki* tend to give each individual note deep meaning. Each sound carries a rich expressiveness that touches people’s hearts. I strive to perform while cherishing this uniquely Japanese aesthetic,” says Ryohei.

In addition to their own concerts, AUN J actively performs at culturally significant sites across Japan, including Ise Jingu Shrine in Mie Prefecture and Kasuga Taisha Shrine in Nara Prefecture, and has also given dedicatory performances<sup>6</sup> at World Heritage sites.

The group has also held numerous concerts overseas. Notably, their 2010 performance inside Mont Saint-Michel in France, the first-ever live concert held at the site, marked a major turning point for AUN J.

Ryohei recalls: “At a reception following one of our overseas performances, a diplomat who had spent many years promoting Japanese culture told us that a single evening concert had achieved the same impact as over a decade of cultural exchange efforts. That comment made me realize that, as performers, we also carry the responsibility of being cultural ambassadors.”

Through his performances abroad, Ryohei came to recognize the power of *wagakki* music to transcend language and cultural barriers and touches people’s hearts. He intends to continue performing energetically both in Japan and internationally.

“In recent years, more young performers have emerged who can adapt to a wide range of musical genres, signaling a shift in the world of *wagakki*. While showing respect for the culture preserved by those who have carried on these traditional performing arts, I hope to continue creating opportunities for people to engage with *wagakki* from fresh and diverse perspectives.” 

1. *Wadaiko*: A type of percussion instrument and a general term for traditional Japanese drums (*taiko*). Made with a wooden body covered with animal skin (usually cowhide), they are played using stick-shaped drumsticks called *bachi*. The sound varies depending on the thickness, shape, and tension of the skin. *Wadaiko* are used in a wide range of settings, including festivals, stage performances, and ceremonies. They are characterized by their powerful and dynamic sound.



Photo: Hearttree Co., Ltd.

2. *Shamisen*: A Japanese string instrument played with a fan-shaped pick called a *bachi*. The tone varies depending on the thickness of the neck: a thin neck produces a light, high-pitched sound; a medium neck (left in photo) offers a smooth and expressive tone; while a thick neck, such as that of the *Tsugaru shamisen* (right in photo), is characterized by a powerful and dynamic sound.



Photo: Hearttree Co., Ltd.

3. *Koto*: A traditional Japanese string instrument, typically with 13 strings. It is tuned using movable bridges called *kotoji* and played by plucking the strings with finger picks. The number of strings, schools (styles), and playing techniques vary widely. AUN J uses both 13-string and 17-string *koto* in their performances.



Photo: Hearttree Co., Ltd.

4. *Shakuhachi*: A type of vertical bamboo flute and a traditional Japanese woodwind instrument. It has a simple design with four finger holes in front and one thumb hole in the back. The player can produce a wide variety of tones by controlling their breath.

5. *Shinobue*: A Japanese transverse (side-blown) flute made from bamboo, traditionally used in festival music and folk songs. Its shape and scale vary depending on the region and occasion.

6. A traditional performance style in which music or dance is offered to deities at shrines and temples. These performances are carried out as acts of prayer or gratitude and are typically held during religious ceremonies and festivals. They are considered a way of connecting gods and people through the arts.



Photo: Hearttree Co., Ltd.

# New Musical Instruments and Technology Developed in Japan

Advancements in digital technology have accelerated the creation of innovative musical instruments in Japan. This article introduces two instruments that blend technology with traditional craftsmanship.

(Text: By MOROHASHI Kumiko)

Roland Corporation is a Japanese electronic musical instrument manufacturer known for developing and producing digital pianos, electronic drums, DJ equipment, and more. In 1980, the company released the rhythm machine called TR-808 Rhythm Composer, the world's first device capable of producing and editing 32 different rhythm patterns and freely combining them to create a full song rhythm track. In 2019, the National Museum of Nature and Science recognized the TR-808 as one of the Essential Historical Materials for Science and Technology (nicknamed the “MIRAI Technology Heritage” where *mirai* means “future”).<sup>1</sup>

The TAIKO-1 electronic taiko percussion, developed by Roland in 2017, is notable for its ability to produce the sounds of various types of *taiko* (traditional Japanese drums)—such as the *okedo taiko*,<sup>2</sup> *nagado taiko*,<sup>3</sup> and *shime daiko*<sup>4</sup>—all within a single unit.

In addition to its diverse tones, it comes preloaded with different *bachi* (drumstick) variations like the *take-bachi* and *yuki-bachi*,<sup>5</sup> as well as sounds for ensemble

performances, percussion effects, and vocal calls. We spoke with ONO Tomoichiro, who is in charge of Roland's public relations.

“Due to their size and weight, *taiko* are difficult to transport, store, and manage, which



The TAIKO-1, an electronic taiko percussion developed by Roland

Photo: Roland Corporation



Photo: Roland Corporation

Electronic *taiko* are also performed on stage by Kodo, the internationally acclaimed *taiko* ensemble.

means that, compared to other instruments, performers are much less likely to have their own,” explains ONO.

“In addition, even when considerable effort and cost are invested in transporting *taiko* to a venue, it can be challenging to achieve the best possible sound depending on the venue's environment. To address these challenges, Roland collaborated with Kodo,<sup>6</sup> Japan's world-renowned *taiko* performing arts group, in the research and development of electronic *taiko*.”

Since the 1980s, Roland has been developing electronic drums, utilizing the expertise gained to redesign and lighten the *taiko* structure. This effort



Photo: Roland Corporation

An Electronic Taiko Percussion that can reproduce the sounds of multiple *taiko* drums, different drumsticks, and vocal calls.



Photo: Roland Corporation

A lightweight, portable drum body that produces sound when connected to a speaker.

resulted in the world's first portable *katsugi okedo*<sup>7</sup>-style electronic *taiko* drum. It has been well received by a wide range of players, from professional groups to individual enthusiasts.

“The drum’s body vibration<sup>8</sup> is faithfully reproduced, and the striking feel closely resembles that of an acoustic *taiko* drum. We have received feedback that players can fully enjoy the unique performance techniques of *taiko*, such as hitting the drumhead center (*men-uchi*) and the rim (*fuchi-uchi*,” says ONO.

The instrument also allows for performances that blend electronic sounds, expanding new possibilities for creative expression.

Similarly, Yamaha Corporation’s casual wind instrument, the Venova™, has also attracted attention. This new instrument was created with the desire to make wind instrument performance more accessible and enjoyable for a wider audience.

It brings together the company’s expertise, which has previously been applied to products such as the Electone™<sup>9</sup> and VOCALOID.<sup>10</sup>

The Venova achieves a rich, saxophone-like tone through its unique design featuring a branched pipe

structure<sup>11</sup> and a curved shape that allows for easy fingering.

ANDO Mao, who is in charge of Yamaha’s Corporate Communications Division, explains: “Unlike typical wind instruments that require training to produce sound, the Venova allows players to produce notes relatively easily. Its user-friendly fingering and wide range of expressive possibilities are key features. Beginners can enjoy playing it, and because it uses a saxophone mouthpiece and reed, it also satisfies those seeking an authentic blowing experience.”

Since releasing their wind instruments, Yamaha has accumulated technological innovations and expertise through ongoing dialogue with top players both in Japan and abroad. Today, their instruments are beloved by a wide range of users—from beginners to professionals.


These new instruments embody the developers’ desire for a wider audience to enjoy music more casually and freely. With advances in technology, the development of Japanese instrument will continue to unlock new possibilities. 



Photo: Yamaha Corporation



Photo: Yamaha Corporation

Above: The Venova™ — a new wind instrument that beginners can easily start playing yet also enjoy authentic performance expression.

Below: Compared to conventional wind instruments, which are vulnerable to environmental changes such as direct sunlight, the Venova is easier to handle and highly durable, allowing for casual play even outdoors.

1. The National Museum of Nature and Science has been registering materials that demonstrate the development of industrial technology since 2008. So far, selected technical materials include items that have played a significant role in the history of scientific and technological advancement or have had a major impact on daily life and the economy, such as floppy disks and camera-equipped mobile phones.  
2. *Taiko* drum with a body made by joining wooden boards like a bucket, stretched with horsehide on both ends and tightened with cords.  
3. Beer-barrel-shaped *taiko* drum with a bulging middle section and metal studs, commonly seen at festivals and shrines.  
4. Flat *taiko* drum with both drumheads tightened by cords on each side.  
5. *Take-bachi* are drumsticks made from bamboo. They are flexible, lightweight, and produce a soft tone. *Yuki-bachi* are thicker drumsticks crafted from particularly soft white-wood materials known as *yuki*, such as *yuki-matsu* (snow pine) or magnolia. They have a heavier weight and bring out deeper bass sound.

6. *Kodo* is a *taiko* performing arts group based on Sado Island in Sado City, Niigata Prefecture. Established in 1981, they have promoted the *taiko* performance genre worldwide through international tours.  
7. A *katsugi okedo* is a *taiko* drum with a wooden barrel-shaped body and drumheads stretched over metal hoops, designed to be worn on the shoulder using a sash for playing while moving.  
8. The deep, low echo produced when vibrations from the drumhead travel through the drum body. In *taiko* drums, this body echo is a crucial factor that determines the sound’s richness and lasting tone.  
9. An electronic organ developed by Yamaha in 1959.  
10. Developed by Yamaha in 2003, VOCALOID is a singing voice synthesis technology and application software that can create vocal parts for songs by inputting lyrics and melody (musical score) information.  
11. A structure using a “branched pipe” added to the cylindrical bore. This design applies synthesizer theory developed by Yamaha in 1993.



The venue of last year's symposium (JSIP2024)

Photo: Japan Patent Office

# Holding of the Judicial Symposium on Intellectual Property / TOKYO 2025 (JSIP2025)

The Judicial Symposium on Intellectual Property / TOKYO 2025 (JSIP2025) will be held in Chiyoda City, Tokyo, on October 23 and 24, 2025, focusing on judicial decisions related to intellectual property (IP) disputes and recent IP topics. Pre-registration is required to participate in the symposium, which will also be available to online viewers via live Internet streaming. The following is an overview of the symposium and information on how to participate.

The Judicial Symposium on Intellectual Property (JSIP), which started in 2017, is now in its ninth year, under the joint sponsorship of the Supreme Court of Japan, the Intellectual Property High Court (IPHC), the Ministry of Justice, the Japan Patent Office (JPO), the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, and the Intellectual Property Lawyers Network Japan. The symposium, which brings together trial examiners and other legal professionals from Europe, the United States (the US), and Asian countries, offers updates on the IP judicial system in Japan as well as the systems and procedures in other countries / regions around the world. This rich and varied program consistently attracts a large number of participants each year.

Last year, the symposium was divided into two parts: the Court Part, held on the first day, and the Patent Office Part, held on the second day. On the first day, judges from Japan, the US and Europe conducted mock trials on the theme “Cases Where Patent Validity is Disputed in Patent Infringement Litigation,” followed by a panel discussion featuring participants in the mock trials. On the second day, officials from the patent offices of Japan, the US and Europe delivered presentations on current trends in patent trials in their respective countries / regions. These were followed by mock oral proceedings conducted by JPO, which were very well received by the participants.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the IPHC. To mark this milestone, the symposium will bring together judges and trial examiners etc. from Europe, the US, China, the Republic of Korea and ASEAN<sup>1</sup> countries for discussions on IP disputes and other events under the theme



Mock oral proceedings on hypothetical cases conducted by the JPO during the Patent Office Part of last year's symposium (JSIP2024)

Photo: Japan Patent Office



TAMURA Kiyoko, former Director-General of the Trial and Appeal Department at the JPO (left), and Ingo Beckedorf, Chair of the Legal Board of Appeal at the European Patent Office (EPO) (right) deliver presentations at last year's symposium (JSIP2024).

Photos: Japan Patent Office

“Evolving Approaches to IP Dispute Resolution: Marking the 20th Anniversary of the IPHC”, drawing on the latest information in this field. (For more details, see the program attached afterwards.)

On the first day, October 23, the program will feature a plenary session and a part led by the Ministry of Justice. The plenary session will include some presentations and a panel discussion. HONDA Tomonari, Chief Judge of the IPHC, and NONAKA Matsuo, Director-General of the Trial and Appeal Department at the JPO, will deliver presentations on “Twenty Years of the IPHC and IP Administration”. The panel discussion will focus on “International Trends in IP Fields and the Role of Specialized IP Courts”. The part led by the Ministry of Justice will feature a panel discussion about “Sharing Experiences on the Enforcement

of Intellectual Property Rights Infringement Cases in ASEAN Countries and Japan”.

The program for the second day, October 24, will consist of two parts, one led by the patent offices and the other by the courts. Both parts will be conducted in a panel discussion format. The patent office part will discuss trial-related IP administration in each country / region, while the part led by the courts will explore “IP Justice in a Rapidly Changing Society”.

With this two-day program, the symposium is expected to provide a valuable opportunity not only for lawyers and patent attorneys practicing in the field of IP law but also for industry representatives and researchers to deepen their understanding of the IP legal systems of each country / region.

**Judicial Symposium on Intellectual Property / TOKYO 2025 (JSIP2025)  
Evolving Approaches to IP Dispute Resolution : Marking the 20th Anniversary of the IPHC  
Program (Tentative)**

**Thursday, October 23 13:30 – 18:10**

**Plenary Session**

- (1) Presentations (Twenty Years of the IP High Court and IP Administration)
- (2) Panel Discussion (International Trends in IP Fields and the Role of Specialized IP Courts)

**Ministry of Justice Part**

- Panel Discussion (Sharing Experiences on the Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights Infringement Cases in ASEAN Countries and Japan)

**Friday, October 24 13:30 – 18:05**

**Patent Office Part**

- Panel Discussion (IP administration related to trial and appeal systems in various countries and regions)

**Court Part**

- Panel Discussion (IP Justice in a Rapidly Changing Society)

Scheduled speakers for both days of the symposium

Judges, lawyers, trial examiners, patent attorneys, and other legal practitioners from Japan, Europe, the US, the Republic of Korea, China, and ASEAN countries

All programs with simultaneous interpretation in English and Japanese

**●How to participate (on-site participation, viewing of the live Internet stream)**

Pre-registration is required through the designated website, which is scheduled to open in early September 2025.



[<https://jsip-tokyo.go.jp/2025/en>]  
Participation is free of charge.

Venue: Auditorium “CREO,” Bar Associations Building, 1-1-3 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda City, Tokyo

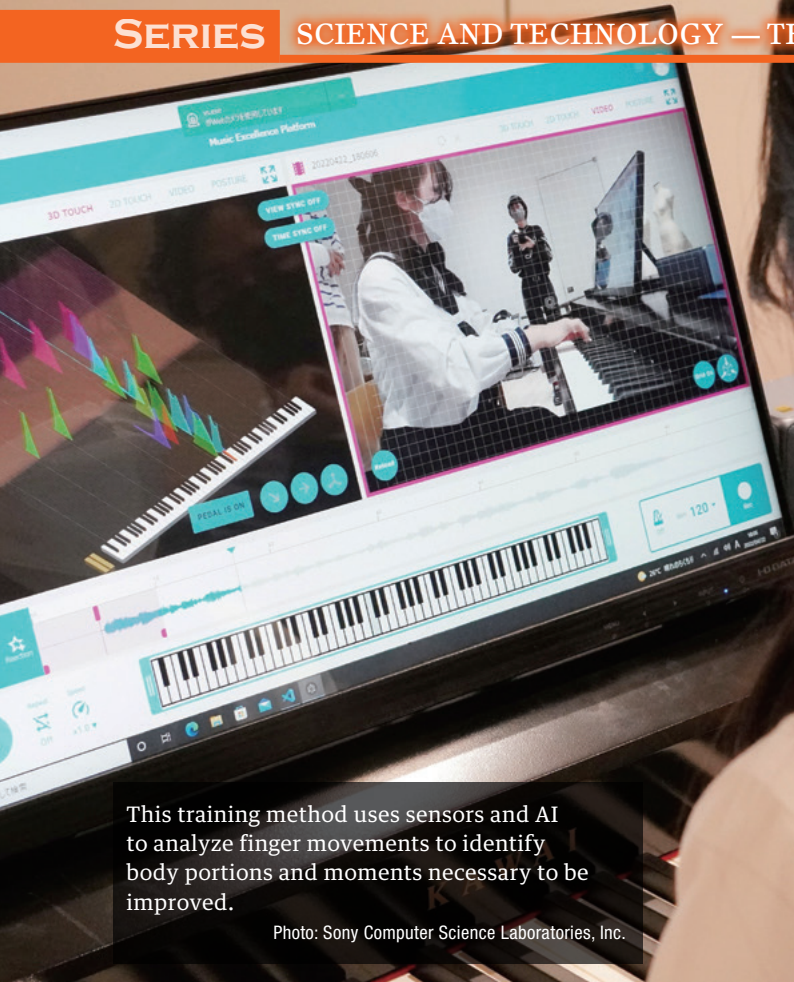
Venue capacity: 250 people (tentative)

Pre-registration is required for either on-site attendance or viewing the simultaneous Internet stream.

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in English and Japanese for all events in the program.

Tablet devices will be available for rent for participants who wish to view the materials at the venue.

1. Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Established in 1967, ASEAN currently comprises ten Member States: Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Laos. Country names have been abbreviated.



This training method uses sensors and AI to analyze finger movements to identify body portions and moments necessary to be improved.

Photo: Sony Computer Science Laboratories, Inc.

## Dynaformics — Breaking Through the Limits of Musicians’ Skills, Based on Principles of Brain and Body

Dynaformics is a new field that uses the power of science to support musicians’ mastery and prevent injuries in order to help them achieve rich musical expression. We spoke with FURUYA Shinichi, a pioneering dynaformics researcher working to bring science into the world of music, just as it has been in fields like sports.

### FUKUDA Mitsuhiro

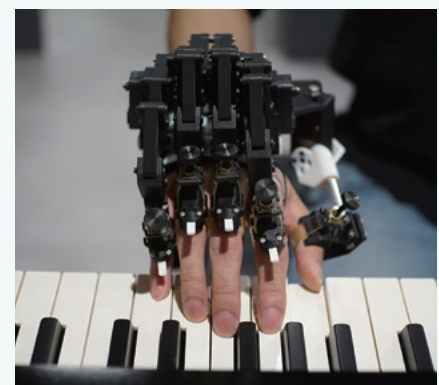
It is said that in order to achieve rich musical expression, pianists and other musicians have to cultivate four elements: sensitivity, interpretation, function, and skill. Active research on how to nurture sensitivity and deepen interpretation has been carried out in music education settings. In order to play as they envision based on their sensitivities and interpretations, they need the ability to coordinate and control multiple muscles in their bodies to move their fingers quickly, precisely, and smoothly – that is, they require function and skill. Efficient use of the body and training methods based on human anatomy have been established in the field of sports, but there has been hardly any specialized scientific research of this nature in music or other arts. As a result, even after practicing for long hours on their own, many musicians find that they cannot achieve the hoped-for performance. They often feel limited in how much

they can improve their skills, and sometimes, some wear themselves out physically and mentally by practicing excessively.

The scientific approach to enhancing the functions and skills of musicians is called “dynaformics.” FURUYA Shinichi, Research Director of Tokyo Research at Sony Computer Science Laboratories, Inc., has been carrying out research and development in this field. FURUYA received the 21st (FY2024) JSPS Prize (see box for details) for his study titled “Interdisciplinary Study on Supporting Skill Acquisition in Performing Art and Treatment of Diseases Caused by Overtraining,” which is based on dynaformics.

FURUYA’s research team developed a training method that allows users to experience high-speed and complex finger movements that cannot be performed voluntarily by wearing an “exoskeleton robot” that enables each of the five fingers to move independently at high speeds. With this training method, users can

passively learn precise finger movements, leading to improvements in skill that could not be attained through conventional practice alone. Skills also improved similarly in the fingers of the other hand, which did not undergo the training. However, the lack of numerical changes seen in finger muscle strength or quickness before and after training suggested that the training does not improve strength or quickness, but rather



The exoskeleton robot allows users to passively experience high-speed and complex finger movements that cannot be performed voluntarily.

Photo: Sony Computer Science Laboratories, Inc.

### A groundbreaking system that measures and analyzes the movements of performing musicians

The system uses software that can synchronize multiple sensors, as well as keyboard sensors, pedal sensors and other original hardware, to produce high- precision, **high-resolution measurements of various aspects of the body's movements while playing the piano.**

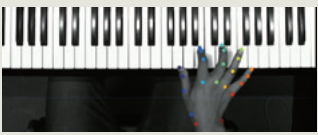


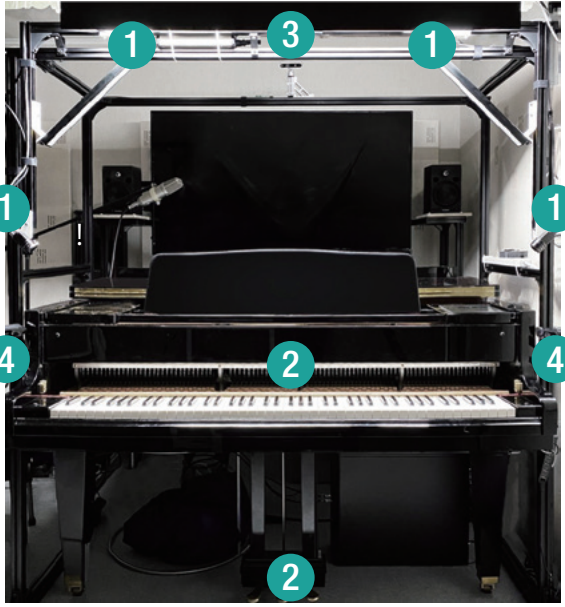
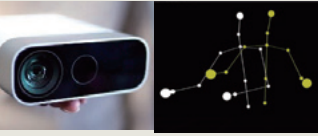
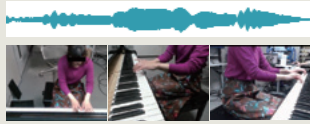
<p><b>1. Finger position estimation</b> Vision-based hand pose estimation</p>  <p>R&amp;D into three-dimensional finger skeleton estimation is also underway.</p>	<p><b>2. Precise touch and pedaling measurement</b></p> <p>“HackKey” : touch sensing system</p>  <p>Can be retrofitted to pianos made by various manufacturers.</p> <p>Pedal Sensor</p> 	
<p><b>3. Full body posture analysis</b> Depth-image based bone estimation</p> 	<p><b>4. Video and audio analysis</b> 3 x Web-camera &amp; microphone</p> 	

Photo: Sony Computer Science Laboratories, Inc.

works on the central nervous system that controls the movements. In fact, non-invasive<sup>1</sup> magnetic stimulation tests on the scalp at pre-training and post-training revealed plastic changes (flexible changes in the workings of the brain) in the areas of the cerebral cortex<sup>2</sup> that control finger movement. These research findings received a big response when they were published in the international scientific journal *Science Robotics* on January 15, 2025. FURUYA and his team are also supporting the improvement of musicians’ skills by using methods such as measuring keystroke strength

and finger movement using sensors, and quantifying and analyzing the data to look for more specific ways to move the body. This kind of scientific approach aimed at maximizing the creativity musicians possess and

empowering them to play what they hope to, could prevent injuries caused by excessive practice as well as provide significant help with overcoming what has until now been considered the “limits of talent.”



FURUYA at his piano recital. Once an aspiring pianist himself, after suffering an injury due to his own excessive practicing, he decided that he wanted to scientifically research ways to improve musicians’ skills and rehabilitate themselves from their injuries.

Photo: FURUYA Shinichi

#### The JSPS Prize

In order to raise the level of scientific research in Japan to the world’s highest standard, it is important to recognize and support young researchers with rich creativity and superlative research ability at an early stage in their careers. To sustain the zeal of such researchers while offering them support in advancing their work, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science<sup>3</sup> established the JSPS Prize in FY2004. For more details, see the website of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [ <https://www.jps.go.jp/english/e-jps-prize/index.html> ].

1. Methods and technologies used in the fields of medicine and testing that do not harm the body or cause physical burden.
2. The layer of grey matter that covers the surface of the brain. Its neurons are organized in a regular layered pattern. Its different regions manage higher-level brain functions, including perception, movement, thinking, and memory.
3. Established in 1932 with an endowment from Emperor Showa, JSPS is today Japan’s only independent funding agency with a mission to advance science. JSPS carries out a wide variety of programs in pursuit of this mission. They include programs to fund scientific research, foster researchers, promote international scientific exchange, and reform university systems.

# Experience the World of Calligraphy with All Five Senses

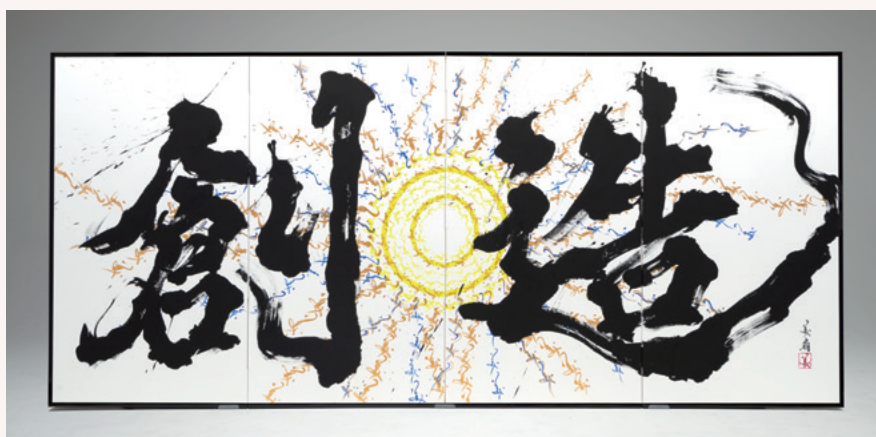
AOYAGI Bisen is a calligrapher and artist. In this month's issue, she speaks of calligraphy in Japan.

A *kigo* calligraphy dedication performed at the Great Memorial Service commemorating the 1,250th anniversary of the birth of Kobo Daishi, founder of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, at Mount Koya, a World Heritage Site.

Photo: Koyasan

## AOYAGI Bisen

**S**hodo, or Japanese calligraphy is a world-renowned traditional Japanese art form. Originally, calligraphy was a way to pass on characters that had been introduced into Japan from China. However, from the late 8th century to the late 12th century, it developed into an art form that expresses beauty and the mind, and it continues to captivate many people today. In Japan, calligraphy learning starts in the third grade of elementary school (ages 8-9) in *shosha*<sup>1</sup> class, where students use brushes and ink to copy characters and naturally get familiar with Japanese calligraphy culture as part of their compulsory education. It is



Sozo (Creation), a work by AOYAGI

Photo: Danny Danks (Arrow Photography)

also a popular hobby enjoyed by a wide range of people from children to adults.

While the object of *shosha* is to write characters correctly and legibly, *shodo* adds artistic and spiritual

aspects. The movements of the brush, the shading of the ink, and even the use of blank space on the paper are filled with intention, and reflect the calligrapher's heart and mind.

As a calligrapher, I have given



## AOYAGI Bisen

Calligrapher and artist. Began calligraphy study at the age of four. AOYAGI has presented *shodo* performances in more than 10 countries worldwide. She was the opening act at the Final of the Emperor's Cup JFA 99th Japan Football Championship at Japan National Stadium in 2020, performing in front of 58,000 spectators. In addition to *kigo*<sup>2</sup> at the UNESCO World Heritage Site Mount Koya, she has created numerous calligraphy works and calligraphy titles for artistic works, including CAPCOM's *Monster Hunter Rise*; *Dororo*, a TV anime series based on TEZUKA Osamu's manga; World Athletics Championships Tokyo 2025; as well as works for the VIP room at Japan National Stadium. AOYAGI has also appeared on media programs such as TBS's *Jounetsu-Tairiku* ("A Continent of Passion") and NHK E-TV's *Nihongo de Asobo* ("Play with Japanese.")

 AOYAGI Bisen



A *shosha* class at a Japanese elementary school

Photo: PIXTA



A *shodo* experience in France

Photo: AOYAGI Bisen

*shodo* performances in more than 10 countries. A *shodo* performance is a form of live expression where the performer writes characters on large paper in coordination with music. I often explain the difference between *shodo* and *shodo* performance by drawing a similarity to music. A *shodo* piece created through quiet concentration is like a musical work that is perfected after repeated recordings in a studio, while a *shodo* performance is like a live concert created by the ambience of the space and the sense of oneness with the audience. Even if it may sometimes be somewhat unrefined, it produces an emotion that can only flower in that moment. These *shodo* performances are an evolved form of Japan's unique cal-

ligraphy culture, and are symbolized by *Shodo* Performance Koshien. *Shodo* Performance Koshien is Japan's largest national *shodo* performance competition, with over 100 high schools participating from all over the country annually. High school students work together as teams to compete in both calligraphy technique and performance ability. The competition is gaining much attention as it marks its 18th year in 2025, including exposure on the official stage of Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan (see "Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan," July 2025 issue).

In recent years, *shodo* experiences for non-Japanese have also become popular. *Shodo* is a precious experience that lets us feel Japanese cul-

ture with all five senses—the quiet moment of grinding ink, the scent of the ink, the texture of the brush and *washi* (Japanese paper), the sound of the brush sliding across the paper, and the visual beauty of the spreading ink. The lines and compositions that overseas participants create with their free imaginations show us new perspectives.

*Shodo* is a culture that every Japanese person has experienced at least once, and a proud traditional art form that has been passed down through many generations. I recommend people all over the world to pick up a brush and experience the charm of calligraphy. A quiet, deeply moving experience waits for you.

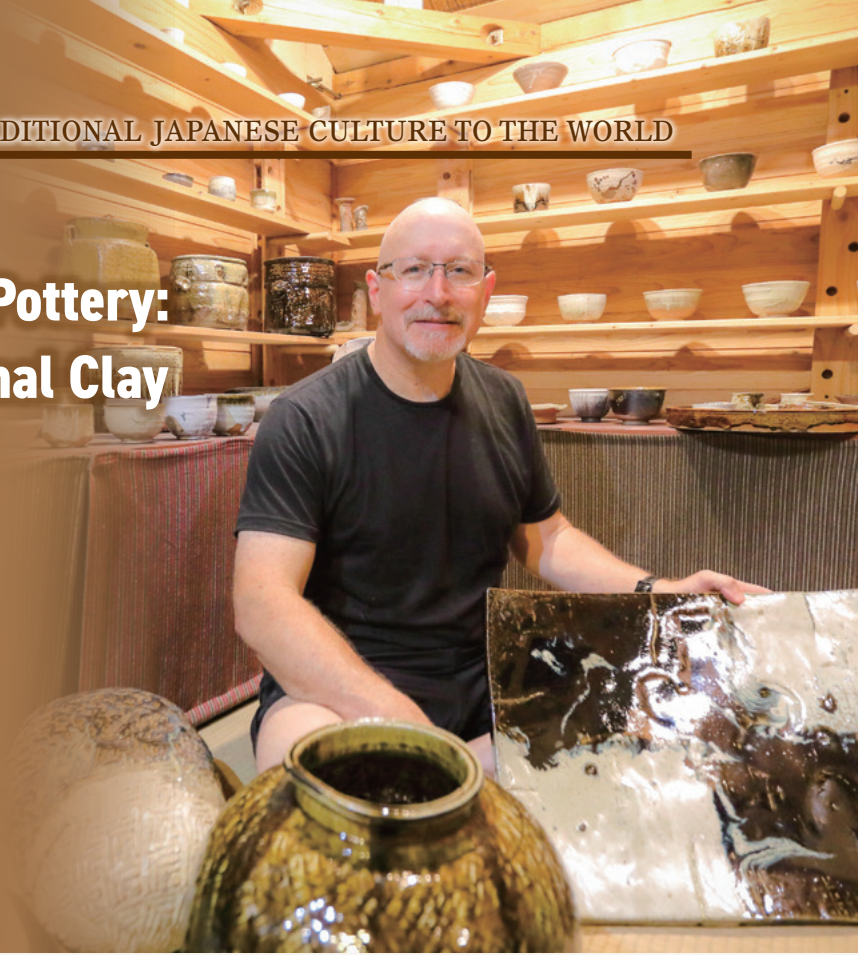
1. Japanese education terminology for a class taught at Japanese elementary and junior high schools in which students learn skills for writing characters.

2. Writing characters filled with gratitude and prayer at a shrine or temple.

# The Richness of Japanese Pottery: Diversity Shaped by Regional Clay and Craftsmanship

Mike Martino, originally from New Mexico, USA, now works as a *Karatsu-yaki*<sup>1</sup> (Karatsu ware) potter in Saga Prefecture. Having explored ceramics across Japan and been captivated by their unique appeal, he shares his perspective on the enduring charm of Japan's *toge* (pottery and ceramic craft) culture.

A selection of *Karatsu-yaki* pieces by Mike Martino.  
Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



## MURAKAMI Kayo

**M**y fascination with Japanese pottery may trace back to experiences from my childhood. In our garden, I would uncover centuries-old shards of pottery with my father, and together we would imagine how people long ago might have used them. Those fragments seemed to whisper stories of the past, captivating me with the sense of history they carried.

In 1990, I came to Fukuoka Prefecture to train in karate, and on weekends I often visited the *Kamamoto* kilns<sup>2</sup> producing *Koishiwara-yaki*<sup>3</sup> (Koishiwara ware) and *Takatori-yaki*<sup>4</sup> (Takatori ware). While pottery is also popular in the United States, the world of Japanese ceramics was unlike anything I had experienced. Each region has its own clay, techniques, and designs, giving rise to distinct traditions. I was completely captivated by this diversity.

For example, *Karatsu-yaki* reflects influences from the culture of the Korean Peninsula, *Arita-yaki*<sup>5</sup> (Arita ware) is known for its translucent white porcelain, and *Bizen-yaki*<sup>6</sup> (Bizen

ware) is distinguished by its robust, unglazed firing technique.<sup>7</sup> Each type possesses a character that can only be produced in its native region.

Among them, one that particularly captivated me is *Iga-yaki*<sup>8</sup> (Iga ware). By keeping a wood-fired kiln burning for ten days, the flying ash melts into a natural glaze on the vessels, creating beautiful, greenish glass-like effects known as ‘natural glaze’, a form that human hands cannot replicate. Equally fascinating is *Oribe-yaki*<sup>9</sup> (Oribe ware), favored by the 16th-century tea master FURUTA Oribe.<sup>10</sup> The *Kutsu-chawan*, a tea bowl distinguished by its deliberately irregular shape and bold green glaze, was born from a free-spirited approach reminiscent of contemporary art, challenging the era’s conventional preference for symmetry.

In 2002, I met my master, TSURUTA Yoshihisa, and began pursuing pottery in earnest. Surprisingly, the first lesson in his workshop was not about “making” but about “observing.” My training began by studying old pottery shards that he had carefully collected.

When I held a 400-year-old *Karatsu-yaki* shard, the childhood sense of

“learning from the old” came rushing back. What surprised me was that while these ancient pieces never leaked, some 20th-century works included a note claiming that any



*Karatsu-yaki*: simple, earthy beauty that showcases the clay.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



The underside of *Karatsu-yaki* reveals not only the texture of the clay but also how the firing and the flow of the glaze create patterns and color variations—beautiful accidents born in the kiln.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



## Mike Martino

Originally from New Mexico, USA. From a young age, he developed an interest in pottery, exploring ancient sites and collecting ceramic fragments. He came to Japan in 1990, and in 2002 began studying under a master *Karatsu-yaki* potter, creating his own works. In 2005, he established his own kiln, Gotanbayashi Kama. Many of his pieces are used as tea utensils for the tea ceremony, and he also actively produces Japanese and Western tableware, as well as sake vessels.

Note: Visits to his studio require advance reservation. Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



leaks would stop with use. Why didn't the older pottery leak? Research revealed that, although *Karatsu-yaki* today is shaped purely from clay, early potters mixed clay with stones or sandstone to create a clay body that would mature well during firing. Because working with sandstone to achieve the right consistency was labor-intensive, it was gradually replaced by more manageable materials as new raw sources were discovered, leading to changes in production methods. These old shards proved to be an invaluable resource, offering a direct way to study traditional techniques and serving as the ideal learning material for a potter.

What I find remarkable about Japanese ceramic culture is the depth of knowledge among the general populace. In the United States, functional ceramics are rarely regarded as art, but in Japan, through the culture of tea ceremony that has continued for over 400 years, many people naturally develop an eye for discerning the quality of tea utensils.



*Arita-yaki*: white porcelain adorned with vibrant painted designs.

Photo: PIXTA



*Bizen-yaki*: unglazed and undecorated, fired in its natural state.

Photo: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/?locale=en>)



*Iga-yaki*: beautiful green, glass-like surface texture.

Photo: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/?locale=en>)



*Oribe-yaki*: beauty found in deliberately irregular, asymmetrical shapes.

Photo: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/?locale=en>)

Pottery from across Japan has developed this rich culture through mutual influence. Its diversity and depth, along with an aesthetic sensi-

bility rooted in everyday life, are the true allure of Japanese ceramics. My current goal is to share this remarkable tradition with the world.

1. *Karatsu-yaki*: A general term for pottery produced mainly in Karatsu City, Saga Prefecture. While there are several theories, it is said to have begun in the late 16th century, incorporating techniques brought over by potters from the Korean Peninsula, which boosted production. Made with coarse, unrefined clay, its vessels convey a rustic yet powerful impression.
2. *Kamamoto*: Refers to a workshop where pottery is produced, or to the potters themselves.
3. *Koishiwara-yaki*: Pottery produced primarily using clay from the Koishiwara district of Toho Village, Asakura-gun, Fukuoka Prefecture, with kilns dating back to 1682. Influenced by exchanges with the already-established *Takatori-yaki* in Koishiwara, it is characterized by simple, warm, and distinctive patterns.
4. *Takatori-yaki*: Pottery produced mainly in Toho Village, Asakura-gun, Fukuoka Prefecture. Its origins trace back to 1600, when potters from the Korean Peninsula established kilns there. It has been especially highly regarded for its tea utensils, known as *chatou*.
5. *Arita-yaki*: Porcelain produced mainly in Arita Town, Saga Prefecture. It is said to have been first made in the early 17th century by potters from the Korean Peninsula who came to Japan. It is characterized by its hard, white porcelain, often decorated with vivid colored paints.
6. *Bizen-yaki*: Pottery produced mainly in Bizen City, Okayama Prefecture. Its origins trace back to the techniques of *Sueki*, a hard-fired earthenware introduced from the Korean Peninsula around the 5th century, which later evolved into *Bizen-yaki*. It is fired without glaze or painted decoration, allowing the natural texture and color of the clay to be fully expressed.
7. Glaze: A glassy coating applied to the surface of pottery.
8. *Iga-yaki*: Pottery produced mainly in Iga City, Mie Prefecture. Its origins date back to around the 8th century, when it was primarily used to make jars and pots. From the early 17th century, it became highly valued as tea utensils for the tea ceremony. Repeated high-temperature firings cause the clay's components to melt and react with wood ash, forming a green, glassy surface and a rich, tactile texture that showcases the natural qualities of the clay.
9. *Oribe-yaki*: Pottery produced in southeastern Gifu Prefecture. Favored by the tea master FURUTA Oribe, it is characterized by tea utensils that embrace beauty in asymmetrical, irregular shapes and feature a variety of designs, including checkerboard patterns, geometric motifs, and fans.
10. FURUTA Oribe (born 1544, according to some sources; died 1615): Born in Mino (present-day Gifu Prefecture), he was both a military commander and a tea master. A disciple of Sen no Rikyu, the great unifier of the Japanese tea ceremony, he created *Oribe-yaki*.<sup>9</sup>



## Japanese Hare

The Japanese hare is native to Japan and found in various regions across the country. It is around 45 cm to 55 cm in body length and weighs around 2.5 kg. It lives in forests, grasslands, and farmlands, eating grass, leaves, hard tree branches, and bark, using its well-developed upper incisors. Its fur is brownish-red, a color that blends into its surroundings and protects it from enemies. In snowy areas, some turn completely white in winter, except for the tips of their ears. It has long, well-developed hind legs that enable it to run at speeds up to 80 km/h. The Japanese hare is active at night and does not have a shelter, so in the daytime it hides in the bases of trees, in the shade of rocks, or in grassy areas. Its highly cautious nature makes it hard to spot.

In Japan, the most beautiful moon of the year is called *chushu no meigetsu*<sup>1</sup> (mid-Autumn moon), and there is a tradition of viewing the moon on that day called *tsuki-mi*<sup>2</sup> (moon-viewing). One ancient belief passed down is that the patterns on the moon's surface show a rabbit pounding *mochi* (rice cakes).

1. The moon seen on the night of the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar calendar (September to October in our present-day solar calendar, as the date varies each year). Also called *jugoya* (literally, "night of the 15th").
2. A traditional event where people enjoy viewing the moon. It especially refers to viewing the mid-autumn moon and the *nochi no tsuki* (later moon) on the 13th day of the 9th month of the lunar calendar, which is considered the last moon of autumn. During *tsuki-mi*, people express gratitude for the autumn harvest by preparing dumplings made by kneading grain flour with water and shaping it into little balls that are steamed or boiled. They also enjoy foods like potatoes such as taro and sweet potatoes as well as chestnuts, and make decorations of *susuki* grass.



Top: PIXTA; Bottom: Hiroshima City Asa Zoological Park

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