

Selections from NDL collections

From the Kaleidoscope of Books (24)

"Harping about the harp: the Japanese *koto* and *koto* music"

This is a partial translation of the small digital exhibition

"Harping about the harp: the Japanese koto and koto music" in Japanese.



Koto, 箏 (Source: Sanjurokkasen, illustrated by Toshikata, published by Akiyama Buemon, 1893, NDL call no. 本別 7-292)

* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

1. Introduction

There are two different kanji that are pronounced "*koto*": 箏 and 琴. Although they have the same pronunciation, they refer to two different stringed instruments. The 箏, also pronounced "*sou*," is the Japanese harp, which uses movable bridges to determine pitch and is played with either finger picks or a plectrum. In contrast, the 琴, also pronounced "*kin*," is the Chinese zither (*guqin*), on which pitch is determined by pressing on the strings with the fingers.

The Japanese harp was brought to Japan from China during the Nara period, around the eighth century, and gradually became a major element of Japanese court music. Eventually, it came to be used to accompany vocal performances, and later, a unique genre of instrumental music, called "*soukyoku*," was established, comprising melodies written especially for the instrument. This article describes some of the materials at the NDL related to the *koto* and its music.

2. *Koto* melodies

The NDL's [Historical Recordings Collection](#) provides access via the NDL website to a wide variety of musical resources. Many of these resources were first available in Japan as 78-rpm recordings.

2.1 "Spring Sea"—a world-famous melody

The New Year holiday is a time of the year when the work "Spring Sea," composed by Miyagi Michio (1894–1956), is heard throughout Japan. The opening melody of this piece is well known even to people who are not that familiar with *koto* music. It is scored for *koto* and *shakuhachi*, a five-holed, end-blown, bamboo flute.

Spring Sea (Source: "Haru no umi" composed by Miyagi Michio, *koto* by Miyagi Michio, *shakuhachi* by Yoshida Seifuu, Victor, 1930.12, Product No. 13106)

- ["Haru no umi" \(1\)](#)
- ["Haru no umi" \(2\)](#)

2.2 "Cha-Ondo" —the song of a man and a woman

The impression is strong nowadays that the *koto* is primarily a solo instrument. During the Heian period (794–1185), however, it was often used by the aristocracy to accompany the singing of songs.

During the 18th century, Edo period musicians increasingly performed music written for *shamisen* and *koto*. Additionally, the *kokyū* and a bowed version of the *shamisen*, or the *shakuhachi* were often used in combination with the other two instruments.

A new style of *koto* music appeared in the first half of the 19th century, in which two vocal sections were separated by an instrumental interlude. Thus *koto* music developed hand in hand with vocal music.

"Chanoyu ondo," words by Yokoi Yayu, composed by Kikuoka Kengyou, arranged by Yaezaki Kengyou, Shakuhachi by Araki Kodou III, vocals and shamisen by Fukuda Kiku, koto by Kawada Tou, Victor, 1930.8, Product Nos. 51298 and 51299)

- ["Chanoyu ondo" \(1\)](#)
- ["Chanoyu ondo" \(2\)](#)
- ["Chanoyu ondo" \(3\)](#)
- ["Chanoyu ondo" \(4\)](#)



Ensemble Scene (Source: Ehon kōtori tsugai, illustrated by Nichō sai, [1---], NDL call no. 863-221)

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

3. Depictions of the *koto* in pre-modern art

The *koto* was brought to Japan in Nara period, around the eighth century, and was used at major events of national interest in ensembles together with instruments such as the *biwa*, Japanese lute, and *fue*, Japanese flute. The *Gagakuryō* was formed in 701 per the provisions of a major reform known as the Taihō Code and served as an imperial agency responsible for both foreign and indigenous forms of music and dance performed at the imperial court.

Although the *Gagakuryō* itself gradually declined in importance after the Heian period, the forms of music and dance that it dealt had already become popular among courtiers. Not only were these works performed at imperial events, the aristocracy also made the enjoyment of musical instruments a part of daily life.

3.1 Depictions of the *koto* in the diaries of and fiction by Heian period aristocracy



A *koto* is seen near the miniature shrine on the left side in this scene from *The Tale of Genji*. (Source: *Genjimonogatariemaki*, (*Pictures of The Tale of Genji*), written by Sesonji Korefusa, paintings by Fujiwara Takayoshi, NDL call no. ㏊-98)

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

The *koto* is mentioned in many stories written about the Heian period. *The Tale of Genji* (NDL call no. WA7-279 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)) contains a scene, in which four nobles perform with an ensemble of instruments including *koto* to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of retired emperor. In another scene, a noble woman plays the *koto* to express her love and sorrow, when her lover and protagonist of the story, Hikaru Genji, departs for Kyoto.

With musical performances flourishing at the Imperial Palace, an imperial agency for managing such performers was established. Similar agencies could also be found in Nara and other places where major Shinto and Buddhist rituals were accompanied by the performances. But as court society declined during the late Heian period, so too did the once flourishing need for court music fall off, although some players managed to survive through the patronage of shrines, temples, or samurai families.

During the last half of the 16th century, during the Azuchi-Momoyama period, a priest named Kenjun (ca. 1534–ca. 1623) reorganized the existing forms of *koto* music for court music and songs, which are preserved at the Zendoji temple in Kyushu's Kurume region, into what is now recognized as the Tsukushi school of *koto* music. One of Kenjun's disciples, Yatsushashi Kengyou, continued this work, which contributed to the popularization of *koto*

music during the Edo period.

3.2 The spread of *koto* music during in the Edo period

Throughout the Edo period, the composition, performance, and teaching of *koto* music was generally undertaken by blind males, who organized themselves into a mutual-aid society for professional *koto* players. And since many of these men were also expert *shamisen* players, music for these two instruments developed in parallel. Later, as this style of music became more popular, it was expanded to include the *kokyū* and *shakuhachi*. And in addition to professional performers, taking *koto* and *shamisen* lessons was also a popular diversion for women.

During the Edo period, the citizens would commonly organize seasonal events that included banquets accompanied by music and dancing. In addition to traditional flower-viewing parties, events for viewing the full moon, viewing autumn foliage, catching fireflies, or even digging clams could all be occasions for music. Many publications from this period, such as *Naniwa kagami* (Naniwa Reflections), edited by Ichimuken Doya (NDL call no. 162-91 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)), or *Owari meisho zue* (Famous Places in Owari), edited by Okada Kei and Noguchi Michinao (NDL call no. 839-76 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)) contain images depicting such events as well as historical sites and local topography.



Playing the *koto* at a moon-viewing party (Source: Yoshu Chikanobu "Edo fuzoku junikagetsu no uchi hachigatsu tukimi no en" illustrated by Utagawa Toyokuni et al. *Nishikiejo* NDL call no. 寄別 8-5-2-2) *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).



This portrait shows Bando Mitsugoro III and other kabuki actors playing the *koto* and *shamisen* together at a private residence on the night of a moon-viewing party. (Source: "Sanjurokuban tsuzuki yakusha junitsuki hachigatsu junidan tsukimi no zu," illustrated by Utagawa Toyokuni I, from *Shodai toyokuni nishikiejo*, published around 1800, NDL call no. 寄別 2-6-2-6)

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).



Playing the *koto* and *shamisen* under cherry blossom trees
(Source: "久喜楼仲の町分" *Kodaiedoeshu*, NDL call no. 巻-88)

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).



Playing the *koto* in the Shogun's harem at Edo Castle (Source: "Chiyoda no ooku koto," illustrated by Yoshu Chikanobu from *Chiyoda no ooku*, published by Fukuda Hatsujiro, 1895, NDL call no. 寄別 8-5-2-1)

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

Toriyama Sekien (1713 - 1788) was an *ukiyo-e* artist during the mid-Edo period, who drew a haunted *koto*, "*kotofurunushi*" in *Hyakki tsurezurebukuro* (1805, NDL call no. わ-38 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)). The haunted *koto* has taken on the appearance of a dragon with big eyes and broken strings like disheveled hair.

Hyakki tsurezurebukuro, a collection of phantasmagorical illustrations, was one of several books produced by Toriyama Sekien, including *Gazu hyakki yagyo* (*Hyakki yagyo* published by 長野屋勘吉, 1805, NDL call no. 辰-23 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)) which is bound with six *Hyakki yagyo shui*, *Konjaku ezu zoku hyakki*, and *Konjaku hyakki shui*. Many of the paintings of this book were derived from *Tsurezuregusa* (NDL call no. WA7-219 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)) and *Hyakkiyagyomaki* (NDL call no. 亥-106 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)). Volumes 1-3 contain illustrations of about 50 different phantasmagorical beings.

4. *Koto*—a traditional Japanese art

The *koto* is a major element of traditional Japanese music. During the roughly 1,300 years since its introduction from ancient China, Japanese have continued to listen to and play music for the *koto*. *Koto* music continues to be written and performed to this day by musicians in Japan and around the world.



Picture of a haunted *koto* called "*kotofurunushi*" (Source: *Hyakki tsurezurebukuro*, illustrated by Toriyama Sekien, 1805, NDL call no. わ-38 *Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)).

The NDL Digital Collections contains a wealth of digitized material about the *koto*, including the music used in this exhibition. Those who are interested in learning more about the *koto* are welcome to browse our database for historical information about and musical scores for the *koto*.

(Translated by Rie Watanabe and Tomoaki Hyuga)