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# JAPANESE KOTO ORCHESTRA

Five Kotos, Hoteki, Shamisen and Shakuhachi  
Koto Ensemble of the Ikuta School

Played by the masters of Meian-ryu, Kimpu-ryu, Tozan-ryu,  
and Kikusui-ryu, at Darumaden of Nanzenji and Meianji, Kyoto, Japan



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The Development of koto music was one of Japan's most valuable contributions to the history of classical music. Some scholars trace the instruments back to the 8th Century or earlier but koto music became firmly established in the 16th Century, and the present-day 13 stringed instrument and the music written for it are inherited from that time. Originally a court instrument, the koto with its harp-like sound became a symbol of gentility and good taste in the home. Playing the Koto well is an accomplishment that enhances the marital prospects of well-bred Japanese girls.

Three schools were established among koto musicians from the 17th to the 19th Centuries. The traditions of each school (ryu) exist today . They are

the Yatsunashi-ryu, Ikuta-ryu and Yamanda-ryu . Each school used differently shaped finger picks, thereby producing differently shaped sounds and techniques. For example, musicians of the Ikuta-ryu who made this recording use square picks and play a koto that is longer than the usual six foot size.

During the Edo Period the koto began to be played in concert with the Shamisen (a three-stringed, plucked instrument) and the shakuhachi (bamboo flute). Such performances were called sankyoku, or music for three instruments.

In sankyoku concert shamisen plays the dominant part and is considered the "bone" of the music while koto is the "meat", shakuhachi, the "skin". Sankyoku is represented on this recording as well

as solo pieces for the three instruments.

All three can be traced back to Chinese proto-types. The koto was used at the Japanese Imperial Court (where it was known as the wagon or gaku-so) in the playing of Gagaku (Elegant Music).

The sound of the shamisen to many a Western ear is the very sound of Japan itself. It is the heart of kabuki music. No party is without the sound of its sharp, slightly wistful twang.

The history of the shakuhachi is a curious one. In the 17th Century, the freedom of those brave warriors, the samurai, was restricted. Masterless samurai, forbidden to carry weapons, redesigned the bamboo flute, making it strong enough to serve as a weapon as well as providing them a means of livelihood as musicians. Their heads concealed inside wicker basket hats, the komuso, as these flute-playing beggar-priests came to be called, wandered the streets, developing the art of the shakuhachi. Eventually the government recognized them as a religious sect in return for having

them act as spies. Komuso are still present in modern Tokyo, and it is believed that much of what they see and overhear from under their basket hats is passed on to the police.

**OTONE NO NAGARE NI SOTE (Along the Grand Tone River)** is a composition of Tsuyoshi Sakamoto and requires five kotos, hoteki, shamisen and shakuhachi. This piece is rarely played because of the great difficulty of assembling the necessary music talent. However, it is regarded as an outstanding example of koto music, and has no peer in sumptuous sonorities and excitement. The Tone is a river leading to the Sea of Japan and includes many short musical elements from Japanese folk songs. The 17-string koto acts as the undercurrent of the music, and the flute (hoteki) stands out to con-

vey the peaceful atmosphere to the listener. 18-stringed kotos are used as percussive sounds, while the shamisen stresses the gentler aspects to relieve the tension in accordance to tradition.

### **NAGARE (The Stream)**

is composed by Kazuko Tsukushi, the most talented woman in Japan who both composes and plays the koto. Nagare was composed in the 8th year of Showa, and is descriptive of small streams of Nikko - the streams leading to the temple of Chuzenji, which later combine with other streams to form the majestic waterfall of Kegon.

**SHOCHIKUBAI (Music of Pine, Bamboo and Plum Blossoms)** is a trio for koto, shamisen and kokyū or shakuhachi.

chi. Today the kokyū is seldom heard because of its strange sound. The instrument looks like a shamisen with a violin bow, although the sound is quite different from that of any other string instrument.

This piece is composed by Mitsuhashi Koto, representative of the classic form of composition. Sho, the pine tree, represents ever-lasting prosperity. Chiku, the bamboo, symbolizes formality and honesty; bai, the plum blossom, represents elegance. This music is gay and happy, and yet also elegant.

The Kokyū is played by Sadako Nishimura; the 17-string koto is by Hiroko Mitsuike, and the shamisen by Shukin Noda. The koto ensemble is of the Ikuta School.

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**10014**

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