

Koto Music (Web Text)

The national musical instrument of Japan is the *koto*, a type of long wooden zither with 13 strings that are plucked with fingerpicks. The history of the *koto* goes back 1,300 years, and it remains popular in both solo and ensemble performances.

Read More

Until the seventeenth century, the *koto* primarily reflected the tastes of the nobility and was often used in *gagaku* court music. It became more popular with commoners in the Edo period (1603–1867), a mostly peaceful time when many performing arts flourished. A blind musician and composer named Yatsushashi Kengyo (1614–1685) is credited with laying the foundations for *koto* music as it is known today, making it much more accessible as an art. At present, *koto* performances encompass everything from the traditional *gagaku* to joint concerts with Western instruments. The Gion Corner: Traditional Arts Performance offers a selection of representative *koto* pieces, including one composed by Yatsushashi.