

Japanese Music and Shinichi Suzuki

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JAPANESE MUSIC

Japan has a rich, dignified and varied traditional music heritage with instruments like the *koto* and *shakuhachi*. The *koto* is the national instrument of Japan. It is a wooden instrument almost six feet long, with thirteen strings stretched along its length. These are plucked by the koto player as he kneels on the ground behind it. The pitches are changed by moving the bridges underneath the strings. The *shakuhachi* is a vertical end-blown bamboo flute whose name actually comes from its standard length of 1.8 feet—"shaku" meaning a foot and "hachi" meaning 0.8 of a *shaku* (foot). Nowadays there are other lengths and other materials besides bamboo, but all are called *shakuhachi*.

Taiko drumming is another Japanese tradition. Taiko drums were used in ancient times to give military signals and to rally warriors. The drums are hollowed out of a single piece of wood, so their size and pitch are determined by the diameter of the tree. They have drumheads on both ends and are played with sticks called *bachi*. In recent times, taiko ensembles have been formed with drums of many different styles and shapes, each performing a different sound and function, like a small symphony of thundering drums! Some of these drums are so large that they cannot easily be moved and the ensemble must meet where the big drum is located. One of the largest taiko drums is housed in the Festival Forest Museum (Matsuri no Mori) in Japan. It cost one-half million dollars to make, has a diameter and height each of 2.73 meters and weighs four and one-half metric tons! How would you like to have that in your house to play!

The Japanese musical tradition goes back thousands of years and has so many wonderful and unique musical and artistic traditions that it is impossible to do justice to them with a few sentences in this article. In addition to this rich variety of traditional music, you can hear outstanding performances of western classical music, jazz, pop, rock, bluegrass, country and everything that you hear in the USA.

SHINICHI SUZUKI

One of Japan's foremost proponents of children was a violinist name Shinichi Suzuki, who lived to be 100 years old! (1898-1998) As a boy, Suzuki worked in his father's violin factory. He wanted to learn to play violin, but his father did not approve, telling him that it was beneath his dignity to be a performer! Since he was not allowed to take lessons when he was a child, he taught himself by listening to recordings when he became a young adult. Later, he taught violin to children in orphanages in a similar manner. By working with these orphans, he developed a method of teaching that would become known throughout the world. In every country the process is similar – students listen over and over to recordings of the pieces they are learning and imitate what they hear. Teachers guide them and teach necessary skills. Parents support the students in practice sessions. This cocoon of repeated musical sounds and attentive, nurturing adults allows even children as young as three and four to enjoy playing classical music before they are old enough to read musical notation. It is similar to how children learn their mother tongue — through repeated hearing, trying, practicing along with family, peers and teachers. Also similar to the learning of the mother tongue is that from the first word there is a lot of positive reinforcement, love and praise given. Suzuki believed that as all children could learn their mother tongue, so too they all could learn the language of music, to the benefit of their character and soul. One of the most well-known pieces in the Suzuki program is "Variations on a Theme by Mozart." You might know the theme as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Perhaps you can find someone in your school to play this for your class.