

Playing Techniques of New Pieces of Koto Music in Japanese Urban Culture

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Abstract

A major element in the social understanding of urban culture is the relationship between social change and its impact on artistic culture. In Japan, the Koto is a musical instrument that plays a major role in Japanese urban society as its character has been dynamically developed along with Japanese urban culture and society. The changes to playing techniques and the birth of new ones along with various tempo changes in melody create a contemporary sound, which reflects more playing freedom. Additionally, differences in the style of switching the playing pressure applied to the strings have occurred as well as the new colorful combination of Koto with opera singing. These above mentioned developments and changes have been directly influenced by social urbanization in direction, degree, and character.

Keywords: Koto, Ikuta-ryu, Yamada-ryu, Playing Technique

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The study of urban culture is an interdisciplinary field where scholars research the needs of city dwellers and attempts to understand how they live together. They collectively construct ways of living and socially invest in cultural resources in order to improve the community's quality of life. In Japan, the Koto is a musical instrument that originated in a city dating back at least one thousand years. Its development was a result of responses and interactions with its expanding urban environment as well as mirroring the historical development of the country as a whole. Today's Koto performance methods and regulations have also changed from those in found in the past. In this article, the author will present the playing techniques of new pieces of Koto Music from the perspective of urban musical practices in Osaka and Kyoto. Specifically, his paper aims to discuss the playing techniques of contemporary pieces of Koto music in the style of the *Ikuta School* and *Yamada School*. The *Ikuta School* style was developed in the *Kansai* region, which is now the area of Osaka city; while a younger school was developed by *Yamada Kengyo* (1757-1817) in the *Kanto* region that currently comprises Tokyo. Both schools flourished in the expanding urban culture and enabled the younger generations to develop their playing techniques and repertoire, which are unique to their localities and urban settings.

In this study, the researcher examined the new playing techniques of Koto music employed in the performance of *Ikuta School* pieces such as *Tori no Yoni*, the most famous contemporary Koto piece written by *Sawai Tadao* and *Sousei Dai Ichi Ban* written by *Matsumoto Masao*. Other compositions of *Sawai Tadao* such as *Homura*, a piece written in 1979 and means "fire"; *Jogen no Kyoku*, another well-known new Koto piece; *Yomigaeru Itsutsu no Uta*, also written in 1979; *Ryu – Ryu*, one of the latest Koto pieces of the *Sawai School* written in 2008 by *Sawai Tadao's* son, *Sawai Hikaru*. The *Yamada School's* style composition selected for this study was *Seki Heki no Fu* written by a well-known national artist, *Nakanoshima Kinichi*. This song is considered the most famous modern-day Koto piece of the *Yamada School*.

The research findings are based on the field study in which the researcher took Koto lessons with teachers from both schools, *Iwahori Keiko* from the *Ikuta School* and *Nitani Tomiga* from the *Yamada School*. Major factors for the transformation of new Koto compositions and playing styles were identified. It was found that a number of new and different Koto playing techniques were introduced and combined with the traditional playing techniques. This resulted in many transformed and innovative playing styles, some of which have not yet been properly named. The major characteristics of contemporary Koto music are grouped under the following headings:

1. Changes in Tuning Technique

2. Changes in Playing Technique

- 2.1 The strings are played with the right hand tilted and its fingers pointing towards the tail end of a Koto
- 2.2 Harmonic playing techniques
- 2.3 *Uji Zume* playing techniques
- 2.4 *Vibrato* playing techniques

- 2.5 Hitting the strings with the palm of the left hand while swaying the right wrist so that the *Tsume* on the right-hand index and middle fingers scratch rather than pluck the strings
- 2.6 Plucking or scraping the strings on the left side of the *Ji*, (The *Ji* are the independent, movable bridges under each string in the shape of an inverted Y)
- 2.7 Plucking the strings outside the *Ryugaku* (The *Ryugaku* is a wooden bridge to the right of the player just before where the strings are fastened)
- 2.8 Hitting the strings with wooden stick to create special sounds
- 2.9 Hitting the Koto body with the palms of the left and right hands to create special sounds
3. High Ratio of Left-hand Playing in the *Pizzicato* Technique
4. Plucking the Strings with the *Tsume* and Fingers in the Same Melody System (The *Tsume* is a fingertip pick in the form of a wearable ring)
5. Harmonic Plucking of Many Strings at the Same Time
6. Playing with the Left and Right Hands in Two Different Melodies
7. Tempo Changes in Three New Performance Styles: Fast, Non-rhythmic Melody From Slow to Fast, and a Progression to a Slower Tempo Towards the End
8. Alternating Light and Firm Hand Pressures
9. Opera Singing Accompanied by the Koto

Details of each of the above headings are described below:

1. Changes in Tuning Techniques

First, introduction to tuning the instrument. In the past, no assisting device was used in Koto tuning and a western-styled tuning instrument has been recently introduced for convenience. Traditionally, the scales of each string are tuned to the first string or open string that could be pre-tuned to any pitch of the player's choice. This tuning method allowed for flexibility in low or high-pitched tuning of Koto strings, which could be altered to accommodate the voices of different singers whose best pitch varied. Therefore, traditional Koto tuning was usually determined by the optimal pitch of the singer. (*Iwahori Keiko*, Interview, October 21, 2008).

The following pictures show Western-styled tuning instruments that have been introduced to assist in the tuning for modern-day Koto music.



Figure 1: From left: Tuning fork – Onsa and a round turner – Fue.



Figure 2: Today's tuning instruments

The bulky western-style tuning instruments of the past have evolved into the slimmer electronic versions. The use of tuning instruments has resulted in a uniformity of Koto scales throughout nearly all regions of Japan. This differs from the traditional tuning practice, which was primarily determined by the singer's voice.

Second, modification in the scales of each song. The research found that in new Koto pieces, the distance of the scales between strings are far more complex or are tuned differently to the major scale. Such string adjustment appears only in the piece's notation and the adjusted scales generally go without a proper designation.

Third, modification in the use of the first string as an open string for tuning. This study found that new Koto pieces are usually tuned to lower pitches than those in the traditional practice. However, such modification is not imperative for the new Koto pieces. It represents only one of the many creative features of contemporary Koto music.

Fourth, scale adjustment during a performance. This adjustment is achieved by relocating each string's movable bridge known as *Ji*. It is a well-known fact that all Koto players must be able to adjust the scales mid-piece, because all advanced pieces of both the *Ikuta* School and *Yamada* School require at least 2-3 scale changes during a performance. In *Aoi no Ue*, a highly complex 35-minute piece written by *Yamada Kengyo* during the *Edo* period, there are as many as 5 scale changes. When the moving of the *Ji* is required during a concert, the player may mark the additional *Ji* positions on the strings or body of the Koto to ensure an accurate adjustment. If an error has been inadvertently committed, a skilled player can immediately re-adjust the *Ji* while continuing to play with the right hand.

Nitani Tomiga explained in an interview that new Koto pieces of the *Yamada* School do not generally require any scale adjustment or *Ji* movement during a performance. Players play the same pre-tuned pitch for the entire performance. This is the case with *Seki Heki no Fu*, a famous contemporary Koto piece from the *Yamada* School.

The general practice of the *Ikuta* School in this regard is not yet clear and their players do not pay much consideration to it. *Iwahori Keiko* explains in an interview that some *Ikuta* School pieces are played to the pre-tuned pitch with no adjustment at all. Examples of such songs are: *Tori no Yoni*, the most famous new *Ikuta* School piece written by *Sawai Tadao* and *Sousei Dai Ichi Ban*, another new *Ikuta* School piece written by *Matsumoto Masao*. However, other *Ikuta* School style pieces require some scale adjustment during a performance, but players do not pause to move the *Ji* as in traditional practice. They move the *Ji* while performing and the performance continues without pausing. One example of the new Koto pieces that require as many as 50 movements of the *Ji* is *San Ju Sou* written by *Koyama Kiyoshige*.

2. Changes in Playing Techniques:

During the field studies that focused on the playing techniques of the new Koto music and the new Koto pieces themselves, the researcher found a number of newly created playing techniques, some of which are assigned specific names

while others go without. The playing techniques whose detailed features will be discussed here have never been found in the traditional or general Koto pieces. Many playing techniques have been developed for diverse effects and playing styles in the new contemporary pieces. Below are the details of these new playing techniques:

2.1 The Strings are Played with the Right Hand Tilted and Its Fingers Pointing Towards the Tail End of a Koto

This technique is popular with new Koto pieces in which players tilt or turn both hands at different angles for a more creative performance. The right hand or the playing hand is tilted in such a way that the *Tsume* point toward the *Ji* or the tail end of a Koto while the strings are plucked. The technique is generally used when the right thumb and index finger are played together.



Figure 3: The right hand is tilted and its fingers pointing toward the tail end of a Koto.

2.2 Harmonic Playing Techniques

This technique is used to produce a note that is one octave higher. The thumb, middle, and index fingers of the left hand are lightly rested on the upper section of the strings mid-way between the *Ji* and the *Ryugaku*. This is followed by the plucking of a string with the right thumb. Normally when an open string is plucked its entire length vibrates. However, the finger positions in this playing technique generates a double vibration on both the left and right sides of the strings that are being pressed down in the middle. The technique also raises the note to be one octave higher.



Figure 4: Illustrate the use of the middle finger, index finger, and thumb of the left hand to touch the marked positions on the strings while playing the string with the right thumb.



Figure 5: Playing the strings with the left hand's little fingers and thumb.

2.3 Uji Zume Playing Techniques

Uji Zume is a new playing technique that uses the black ring of the *Tsume* of the right hand's index finger to strike strings just to the left of the *Ryugaku*. It is a similar technique to the swaying of the hand to the right while scratching the middle finger on the strings.



Figure 6: Brushing or hitting a string with the middle finger.

2.4 Vibrato Playing Techniques

The *Vibrato* technique can be played by the index and the middle fingers of the left hand in the same way as the *Tsuki Iro* technique. Usually the *Tsuki Iro* technique uses two fingers to press on the left side of the bridge in rapid succession and the string is raised up one tone from the original tone. The *Vibrato* technique presses the string to make a higher sound of less than one tone and repeats it many times.

Sometimes the *Vibrato* technique cannot be clearly differentiated from the *Uri Iro* and *Hiki Iro* techniques. *Vibrato* produces oscillating sounds by the catching and releasing of strings with the left hand in rapid succession. The *Uri Iro* and *Hiki Iro* techniques are sometimes incorporated into the *Vibrato* technique. In traditional pieces, the *Vibrato* technique does not require the pulling or pressing of many strings. However in new Koto music, the *Vibrato* technique requires the numerous pulling or pressing of strings by the left hand after being played by the right, which creates the vibrato's oscillating high and low pitched tones.

2.5 Hitting the Strings with the Palm of the Left Hand While the Right Wrist is Swayed so that the *Tsume* on the Right Hand's Index and Middle Fingers Scratch Rather Than Pluck the Strings.

This new Koto playing technique combines two playing techniques together. The first technique involves the use of the base of the left palm to hit the upper part of the strings. With each strike at least three strings are hit at random positions, but it usually falls on the left side of the *Ji* when the left hand is used. Sometimes the right palm is used in a similar fashion and sometimes both hands are used simultaneously at various sections of the strings. When the right hand's palm is used, the striking position usually falls on the right side of the *Ji*. When both palms are used, they usually hit in alternate fashion as illustrated in figure 7.

The second playing technique involves a strumming technique similar to the *Tremolo*. The difference lies in the swaying of the *Tsume* on the right hand's index

and middle fingers over the strings and playing them in no specific order. The strings are alternately brushed or strummed up and down either from the high to low pitched strings or vice versa as shown in figure 8.



Figure 7: Illustrate the use of the base of the left palm on the strings.



Figure 8: Illustrate the use of the right hand's index and middle fingers on various positions of the strings.

2.6 Plucking or Scraping the Strings on the Left Side of the Ji

This playing technique involves a reverse hitting of the strings on the opposite side of the normal playing technique, which is on the left side of the Ji or in the area located between the Ji and the *Ungaku* (left end of a Koto).

This reverse playing technique also reverses the pitch of the string 1, which normally yields a low-pitched sound, to a high-pitched sound. Similarly, when this technique is applied to the normally high-pitched sound of string 13 the tone is reversed to a low-pitched sound. These changes are determined by the position of the Ji. In this playing technique both hands are used together to scrape upon or pluck the strings, especially when there is no *Tsume* on the fingers of the right hand. The ring finger of the right and the middle finger of the left hand are combined for continuous play of the strings.



Figure 9: Illustrates the placing of the left-hand's middle finger and the right-hand's small finger to play on the left hand side of the Ji.



Figure 10: Position for the technique of plucking outside the Ryugaku.

2.7 Plucking the Strings Outside the Ryugaku

This technique involves playing the strings just outside of the *Ryugaku* (the Koto's bridge) or to the right between it and the attachment holes of the strings. Players use the *Tsume* on the right-hand's middle finger to flick the strings toward the player in quick scratching motions from the high-pitched toward the low-pitched strings, producing sharp, high-pitched tones.

2.8 Hitting the Strings with a Wooden Stick to Create Certain Sounds

This technique was developed for new Koto performances and involves the hitting of strings with a small wooden rod. Sometimes this technique is applied to the playing of individual strings or applied simultaneously to many strings to produce the frightening "Pong" sounds. Additionally striking with a wooden stick can be used to keep the beat of the performance with the right hand. The wooden sticks used in this technique can range from a western-styled drumstick, to a pen, or a spoon.

Besides hitting the strings with a piece of wood, Koto players sometimes place the stick under just one of the strings, then strike the wooden shaft palm-down with their five fingers spread to generate vibrations at both ends of the wooden piece. The vibration is transferred to the adjacent strings that it touches, producing both long and high-frequency sounds. While the wooden piece is still vibrating and resonating the strings, the musician can play the strings at their normal positions as an accompaniment to these long and high frequency sounds.



Figure 11: Holding and hitting positions of the left hand.



Figure 12: The left hand hitting the stick to initiate sympathetic vibrations in the strings.

2.9 Hitting the Koto Body with the Palms to Create Special Sounds

This technique involves striking the Koto body or back with the left or right hand. The resulting sound is comparable to that of striking a large, open wooden box with a drumstick.



Figure 13: Hitting the outermost edge of a Koto body next to the first string.



Figure 14: Hitting underneath the Koto body next to the player.

3. High Ratio of Left-hand Playing in the Pizzicato Technique

This study finds that the left-hand is utilized at a higher ratio in new Koto pieces. This means at times, its use is nearly equal. Such generous use of the left hand is known as the *Pizzicato* technique. The *Pizzicato* technique incorporates the use of the ring fingers of the right and left hands to flick the strings without a *Tsume* or plectrum.

4. Plucking the Strings with the Tsume and Fingers in the Same Melody System

Another unique feature of the new Koto music is the playing strings with the right hand's thumb and index finger simultaneously with the left hand's thumb and index finger using the same playing style of lifting strings upward to create sounds similar to those of a piano. The setting of tempo is relatively free with a fast tempo at the beginning of a melody set that slackens to slower tempo towards the ending of the same set.

5. Harmonic Plucking of Many Strings at the Same Time

Simultaneous application of the *Harmonic* technique to many strings is popular in the new Koto pieces. In *Tori no Yoni* as many as five strings are played together. Sometimes six strings are played as well, with the right-hand's index and middle fingers playing the same strings at the same positions.

6. Playing with the Left and Right Hands in Two Different Melodies

In the new Koto performances, composers have created and incorporated many innovative playing techniques that are very difficult to execute. Through the researcher's first-hand experiences in receiving formal training in the new Koto playing techniques, the author found that one such technique is a combination of the left and right hands playing simultaneously while in different melodies. Although the technique produces unusual, blended melodies, it remains very difficult to perform. The researcher has classified these playing techniques into two major styles as follows:

- Style 1** Playing the *Wari Zume* technique with the right hand and the *Pizzicato* technique with the left hand
- Style 2** Playing the *Tremolo* technique with the right hand and the *Harmonic* technique with the left hand
- Style 3** The right hand plays in the six-sound system while the left is in the four-sound system

7. Tempo Changes in Three New Performance Styles

The new contemporary Koto performances are distinguished from traditional Koto performances in three aspects:

First, a faster melody. It is widely known among the Koto circle, that new Koto performers play a much faster melody than in the past.

Second, there is a non-predetermined, freestyle element of the performances where the tempo accelerates from a slow to fast.

Third, there is a non-predetermined tempo acceleration from slow to fast, which unwinds to a slow tempo near the ending of the piece.

8. Alternating Light and Firm Hand Pressures

This is one of the very well-known characteristics of contemporary Koto music. There are two styles for this playing technique. In the first style, the same melody is played twice: In the first round it is played with firm hand pressure while the repeat is replayed with light hand pressure. For the second style the melody is played only once, but involves a lengthy, continuous performance incorporating alternating light and firm hand pressure.

9. Opera Singing Accompanied by the Koto

Nowadays opera singing is generally performed accompanied by the Koto. For example, *Kataoka Risa*, a teacher of Koto at the Osaka college of Music and at many other tertiary educational institutes, has been hailed as a New Koto master. *Kataoka Risa*, who was a student of *Miyagi Michio*, performed in a concert at the Millennium Hall, Osaka College of Music on 4 October 2008, during which he played the Koto as an accompaniment to a number of opera songs such as *Amazing Grace*, *Kosumosu*, *Haru no Umi*, *Ichikotsu*, and *Sen no Kaze Ninatte*.

Conclusion

From the above discussion of different aspects of Koto performance, it is apparent that throughout the years the Koto has undergone many developments and transformations as a result of major contributing factors such as the expansion of urban settlements, changes in the tuning technique, playing techniques (with and without a proper designation), innovative yet complicated left and right hand playing techniques, and the blending of Japanese and Western musical traditions that resulted in the Koto accompanying operas. Together these factors have been responsible for the introduction of the new forms of Koto music.

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