

# THE SOUNDS OF TRADITION IN THE ART OF MAKING KOTO

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*The koto is a traditional Japanese musical instrument popular both in Japan and overseas thanks to its elegant shape and vibrant, beautiful tone. Masahiro Kaneko, a koto craftsman in Tokyo, produces exquisite Tokyo-style koto using Aizu-kiri—paulownia wood from the Aizu area. He shares his philosophy regarding the art of making koto.*

In his workshop overflowing with materials and tools for making *koto* as well as unfinished instruments, Masahiro Kaneko laughs and says he remembers where everything is.

A *koto*'s body—carved from a single tree and measuring over 180 centimeters in length—is compared to that of a dragon and called the *kora*, or shell. After *koto* are decorated with materials such as tortoiseshell, ivory and kimono fabric, their cost can vary from a few hundred U.S. dollars up to ninety thousand dollars or more. “It’s the same as violins—the instrument’s sound and value are completely dependent on the materials used and the maker’s skill,” Kaneko says.

Musical instruments created by attaching strings over a wooden base have a long history, and instruments similar to the *koto* exist elsewhere in Asia. The number of strings of an instrument equals how many tones it can play at a time, and vary from only one string to up to eighty. The most common is the thirteen-stringed *wagon* (Japanese zither), which uses movable bridges called *kotoji* to tune the strings. It was brought to Japan from Tang Dynasty China during the Nara Period (710-94) and used in *gagaku*, Japanese court music.

Kaneko learned *koto*-making techniques from his father, a master *koto* craftsman. The Tokyo-*koto*, which only Kaneko

and a few other Tokyo craftsmen build, is rare and valuable. Compared to instruments made in Fukuyama in Hiroshima Prefecture—one of Japan’s major *koto*-producing areas—those made in Tokyo have a different shape



Kaneko creates each part of the *koto* to ensure each one is unique and original



1 *Koto* craftsman Masahiro Kaneko

2 The process of creating a *koto* requires many tools and detailed work

3 Each *koto* has a beautiful cloth-covered cap that protects the "head" of the instrument

and size, and boast a relatively mellow sound.

Out of all the *koto*-making materials, Kaneko is most particular about the quality of the wood. “There are many types of *kiri* (paulownia), and the hardness, softness and resonance of a *koto*’s sound depends on where the wood was grown. Paulownia from Aizu in Japan creates particularly fine, resonant sounds.”

However, selecting *kiri* is not easy. The craftsman purchases a large *kiri* log, judging quality by evaluating the wood grain. After drying and sawing it, however, chance dictates whether the grain will appear as expected; sometimes it does not, and other times can be far more beautiful than expected.

“A *koto* is considered more aesthetically attractive if the wood’s aging creates a grain with more wavy patterns,” Kaneko explains. “But the grain I find

pleasing can be altered instantly by a flake of only a few millimeters while I shape the wood. This is why wood is interesting.”

Unfortunately, Aizu paulownia stocks are declining, he adds. Fortunately, his storage facility in Fukushima holds many valuable unfinished *koto*, each made from logs he selected personally.

Kaneko is also obsessed with the materials used for creative design work on the instrument, such as the *kotoji* bridges and ends of the main body—called *ryuto* and *ryubi*—which literally mean “dragon head and tail.” Ceramic and plastic materials have replaced the ivory, tortoiseshell, deerhorn and whalebone inlays once used on these parts because of mass production, cost reduction and resource protection. Making *koto* requires thorough knowledge of materials required, and Kaneko devises ways to make beautiful sounds by combining traditional natural materials and new

manmade materials.

The art of making *koto* has changed with the times. Kaneko says his philosophy is to make instruments quickly and precisely while combining the old and the new in a well-balanced manner. He honors traditional materials but is not shy about incorporating contemporary technology where possible, such as putting *koto* components together using modern adhesives. “The world of traditional crafts is declining in some ways but improving in others,” he says. “There are high school and elementary school *koto* players with the ears to recognize good sounds. I’m glad the younger generations have a passion for good sounds and good instruments.”

Kaneko expects to continue shaping the wood and natural materials into instruments that create those beautiful sounds for future generations. ■