The ancient performing art that is Nihonbuyo “is Japanese dance itself,” and in more than just name.

ROB GILHOOLY

ISHIKAWA Kei stands beside her father, Minosuke, and replicates his shuffling steps, supple tilts of the neck and graceful hand movements, which are punctuated by deft flourishes of a folding fan.

Minosuke makes frequent glances over his shoulder, scrutinizing his daughter’s every move, made to the sounds of traditional shamisen guitar, tsuzumi drums and meandering song, and offers words of encouragement as she rehearses a dance of the ancient Nihonbuyo (literally “Japanese dance”) tradition.

Kei started dancing at the age of two years and nine months, and just nine months later, she says, “Before I knew it, I had made my stage debut.” That was a turning point. “Performing was fun.”

Starting at such a tender age is a common custom, explains Minosuke, who was also just a toddler when his father, Nishikawa Senzo, first put him through his paces at the Nishikawa School in Tokyo. Established over 300 years ago, the Nishikawa School is the oldest of the five major schools of the Nihonbuyo tradition. The school has nurtured a long line of revered performers, among them Senzo. Current Head Master Senzo has received numerous awards, including the prestigious title of Living National Treasure, which was bestowed upon him in 1999.

“We all start as children, so learning is from feeling, not theory,” says Minosuke, a Nihonbuyo master whose career spans some fifty-seven years. “This is probably true of all Japanese classical performing arts. Performers acquire the skills naturally and in the case of Nihonbuyo with the instructor teaching at the student’s side.”

This has long been the way in a dance genre that began around 400 years ago, but whose roots go back even further to some of Japan’s oldest performing arts.

According to the website of the Nihonbuyo Kyokai (Japanese Classical Dance Association, or JCDA), Nihonbuyo “is Japanese dance itself,” and in more than just name. Over the centuries it has incorporated
Minosuke’s second daughter, Nao, 14, is also a Nihonbuyo performer, and like Kei wants to spread Nihonbuyo to a wider audience. “There are many people who don’t know about Nihonbuyo and I want to raise awareness even if only to a few people,” says Kei. “That goes for people from overseas. I want them to become interested, too.”