

TSUGARU SHAMISEN



The shamisen is an instrument that has been around for a long time in Japan. It is about 1 metre long and has 3 strings that are played with a large pick called a *bachi*. The *tsugaru shamisen* is a kind of shamisen whose unique form of play gives performers the opportunity to improvise. A lot of people say that it is similar to jazz and is “the jazz of Japan”. Many tsugaru shamisen players often perform with jazz bands.

Noriko Tadano performs in Australia with many top jazz and blues performers. She has even played rock and roll on the TV program “Spicks and Specks”.

The shamisen first came to Japan from China via Okinawa. People in Japan developed their own way of playing it including using the *bachi*. In the Edo period (1603- 1868), it was used as background music for Kabuki theatre. Its popularity soared as a result and it became one of the main instruments of Japan’s classical music.

The shamisen is basically made up of the body and neck. There are 3 main types differentiated by the thickness of the neck. The thickest, *futazao*, produces a deep, powerful sound, while the thinnest, *hosozao*, has a very gentle and delicate sound. The type used for tsugaru shamisen is even thicker than the *futazao* and the strings are a little thicker too. The *bachi* is used not just to pluck the strings but to hit them as well. The sound is loud and percussive.

The tsugaru shamisen developed in the Tsugaru area of Japan which is in the western half of Aomori prefecture in the northern most part of Honshu island, the main island of Japan. Tsugaru is one of the snowiest regions of Japan and is covered in snow from November to April.