

ARTS MIDWEST WORLD FEST

Study Guide Japanese Music & Instruments

Who is Agatsuma?

Hiromitsu Agatsuma was born 1973 in Ibaraki, Japan. He began studying the Tsugaru-shamisen at the age of six and earned his first accolade—first prize at the 1988 All-Japan Tsugaru Shamisen Competition—at fourteen. Agatsuma continued his studies and, in 1995 and 1996, won top honors at the Tsugaru Shamisen National Competition one of Japan's most prestigious competitions.

Even with the high acclaim he has received in the traditional Japanese music world, Agatsuma continues to explore the traditional aspects of his instrument while experimenting in fusing its sounds with diverse musical genres. He arranged several jazz standards and other famous western songs for the shamisen on his latest album.

What is a shamisen?

A shamisen (Japanese: 三味線) literally means "three flavor strings." It is a Japanese stringed instrument which has a sound similar to that of a banjo. Shamisens have been used in Japan since before the 17th century. Today, shamisens are played at arts and culture festivals, musical performances, theatre and dance shows.

The shamisen is similar in length to a guitar, but its neck is much slimmer and without frets. Its drum-like rounded rectangular body, known as the *dō*, is covered front and back in the manner of a banjo with skin, a special type of paper, or in modern times, plastic.

The three strings are traditionally made of silk, or, more recently, nylon. The lowest passes over a small hump at the "nut" end so that it buzzes, creating a characteristic sound known as *sawari*. The upper part of the *dō* is almost always protected by a cover known as a *dō kake*, and players often wear a little band of cloth on their left hand to facilitate sliding up and down the neck. This band is known as a *yubikake*. There may also be a cover on the head of the instrument, known as a *tenjin*.

In most genres the shamisen is played with a large weighted plectrum called a *bachi*, which was traditionally made with ivory or tortoise shell but which now is usually wooden.

What is Tsugaru-shamisen?

Tsugaru-shamisen is a genre of shamisen music originating in Aomori prefecture in the northernmost area of the Japanese island of Honshū. Now it is performed throughout Japan, though associations with the Tsugaru area of Aomori remain strong.

The genre is played on a large shamisen with thicker strings than those used for most other styles. The *bachi* is proportionately small. Tsugaru-shamisen is easy to recognize by its percussive quality (the plectrum striking the body of the instrument on each stroke) and the lilt of the rhythms performed. Unlike most other Japanese music, some Tsugaru-shamisen pieces are in triple time, though the three beats are not accentuated in the manner of Western music.



Hiromitsu Agatsuma playing the shamisen in concert. Photo courtesy Agatsuma.

The 2010-2011 Arts Midwest World Fest is supported in part by these generous sponsors:



The Hearst Foundations MetLife Foundation



Learn more about Arts Midwest World Fest & view a complete list of sponsors online at <http://www.artsmidwestworldfest.org>