

The Japanese word for music is pronounced “ongaku” where “on” means sound and “gaku” means comfort or happiness. Just as the meaning of the word suggests, music plays an important role in traditional and modern Japanese culture.

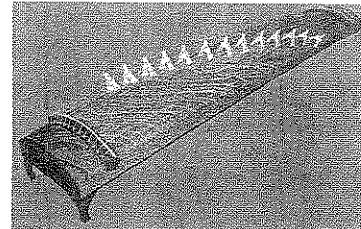
At least fifty genres of traditional Japanese music exist. The genre is not only defined by the instruments used or the songs sung, but by the **timbre** of the instruments or voices involved. Timbre is defined as the colour of music. Two voices or instruments can play the same notes and the same volume but have a different timbre or quality of sound.

The first traditional Japanese music styles to be documented are from the **Nara period** which began in the year 710. This is when Japan became an established and stable state. But archaeologists have found evidence of music from long before the sixth century. Clay drums, whistles made of deer antlers and stones and simple wooden stringed instruments were found, believed to be from the **Jomon period** (14,000 - 300 BCE). Carvings and statues were found from the Kofun period (250-538 AD) that depict musicians singing, playing barrel drums and zithers (horizontal stringed instruments). They may have been part of **Shinto** ceremonies, Japan’s oldest religion.

Japan also has a rich tradition of folk music. Songs vary depending on whether they are played for a Shinto ceremony, a festival, by workers or children. They often incorporate singing with instruments and dancing.

Examples of traditional Japanese instruments include:

Koto - The koto is a wooden, stringed zither. The koto was introduced from China and is at least 2,000 years old. It has 13 strings, although some models have more. The koto is Japan’s official instrument and was played in court music (gagaku), folk music and continues to be played today.



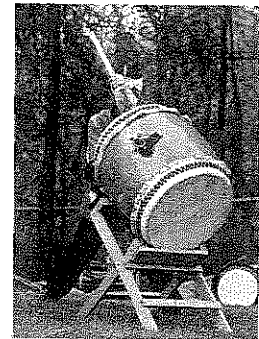
Koto

Shamisen - The shamisen is one of the most well-known traditional Japanese instruments. It is a three-stringed instrument with an elongated neck and square shaped base. It has been incorporated in folk music, kabuki and bunraku performances.



Shakuhachi

Taiko - If you have never seen a taiko drum performance, stop what you’re doing and watch this Japanese art form right now. The taiko drums are barrel shaped and made of trees at least 200 years old; the trees are cured for 50 years before being transformed into the percussion instrument. A Japanese taiko performance involves choreography, muscle power and intense rhythms.



Taiko Drum

Shakuhachi - The shakuhachi is a bamboo flute. It was played as part of folk songs and by Zen Buddhist monks. Its uplifting, natural sound continues to be popular all around the world.

Music in Japan often is associated with performance. **Noh** is a form of musical theatre that originated in the 14th century. Performers wear ornate masks and are accompanied by taiko and other percussion and woodwind instruments. A century later, **Kabuki** was created. Kabuki is a world-renowned musical theatre where men play the parts of both male and female characters and wear elaborate costumes and make-up. Finally, a musical puppet theatre style called **Bunraku** originated in the 19th century. The puppets and the puppet masters are like none other found in the world.