



Koto player Mitsuki Dazai with my cat playing chamber music. Koto players (unless naturally endowed with claws) pluck the strings with the right thumb, index and middle finger, using ivory picks.

Q. What is a koto, and how is it played?

A. The koto is a Japanese member of the zither family (where the strings are parallel to the sounding board, unlike a harp where strings are perpendicular to sounding board).

It has 13 strings and is cradled by wooden supports on its back, over which the player plucks the strings, using movable bridges that make various tunings possible. Its range is B below middle C up to the 2nd octave C after Middle C (or, B₃ up to C₆).

Japanese music traditionally uses pentatonic scales, but since the koto bridges are movable, there is some flexibility, lending itself to contemporary modes.

The bass koto or jushichi-gen has 17 strings that are much thicker than those of the koto. Initially the bass koto was used only in ensemble music, but gradually solos and duos with shakuhachi were composed for it, and it's even been used in pop music (eg. the Japanese pop band Rin) .