

# ELIZABETH FALCONER



The audience — about 15 adults and as many children — are sitting in a vestibule of the Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Most of them are leaning forward, watching and listening intently as a woman in a long silk jacket reels in a purple balloon that has been sitting over by the door. Her movements are slow, graceful, and mesmerizing, and she speaks all the while in a quiet yet authoritative voice, telling the story of an elderly couple and a giant plum that floats down the stream in front of their house. Suddenly there's a Batman-like WHAM! followed by a collective gasp of surprise and delight: The balloon has burst, and in its place is Plum Boy, the child-hero of one of the best-loved Japanese folk tales. And that's just the start of Elizabeth Falconer's "Koto Tales" show, which encompasses many more stories, lots of props (and other visual surprises) — and always the sound of the koto, a 13-string board zither that's at the heart of Japanese classical music.

Although Falconer has spent years at her craft, her entire musical career is something of a happy accident. That includes her achievements as a koto master, composer, writer, and storyteller. It's all so straightfor-

ward, and yet, none of it might have happened if her high school foreign exchange program had worked out the way she'd planned. For her, the ultimate overseas getaway was France — but she applied too late, and the program administrators offered her a chance to go to Japan instead. Even though this might not have been high on her list of destinations, she wasn't upset by it. "It was something that had never occurred to me before. I was 16 and decided to do something adventuresome, and I was introduced to the whole concept of people living differently..." It turned out to be a perfect fit, as Japan and its people and culture seized her imagination. She went on to major in Japanese in college, and in 1979, she decided to teach English in Japan.

That's where her musical journey begins — living alone on Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido, teaching and "looking for something to do; something really 'Japanese' One of my students said, 'Why don't you try koto?' and I did." Playing quickly became a consuming passion, one that was rewarding in its own right and, as Falconer said, "A therapeutic thing to do. When you're in another country, where daily life is a challenge, it's good to stop and involve yourself

with something like this. And my teacher, Utayumi Nagane, started teaching me more seriously when I began practicing more seriously." Falconer was part of a koto school; while we might think of bricks and mortar, the Japanese understanding of this term is "schools of thought... different styles of approaching the [traditional] art." Koto schools require their students to study for certificates (beginning through advanced). Once this process is completed, students can begin working toward a teaching license, which is an absolute must for anyone wishing to pursue a musical career at an advanced level.

Part of what attracted Falconer to the koto was the sheer "physicality of playing." This is easy to understand once you've seen a kotoist at her instrument, which is normally placed on the floor. The player kneels behind it, shifting her body weight forward in order to reach across the instrument and from one end to the other — a lot of territory to cover, given its six-foot length. Picking, plucking, and strumming those 13 strings is a formidable task — they're extremely tight, and it takes a great deal of physical strength to be able to pull one and get it to sound clearly.

## THE KOTO

The instrument that's known as the Japanese koto came to Japan from China early in the 8th century A.D. Like all of the other cultural influences which were brought from China at this time, the koto was given a very high status, and was immediately incorporated into the Imperial Court Ensemble. The beginnings of koto music in Japan are cloaked in an elite atmosphere and are associated with the luxurious lifestyle of the ruling class.

In the late 16th century, a Buddhist priest named Kenjun took the koto outside of the court tradition. He created a repertoire for koto and voice called *kumiuta*. His student, Kengyo Yatsuhasi (1614-1685), added to the core koto repertoire. Later players developed the two distinct schools that exist today: the Yamada School (distinguished by its rounded picks and emphasis on singing traditional pieces) and the Ikuta-ryu, or square-pick school, to which I belong. In general, Ikuta schools emphasize contemporary music.

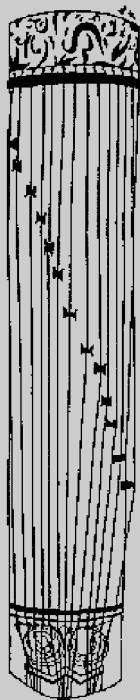
During the early 20th century, the great composer/performer Michio Miyagi (1894-1956) invented the 17-string bass koto. He also assimilated, adapted, and improved upon many Western musical ideas, creating an entirely new sound and repertoire for the koto. His work is seen as the turning point between the "old" and "new" music.

The continuing search for new ways of playing music led to the invention of the 21-string koto, which was introduced in 1969. While the instrument's range is only slightly wider than that of the 13-string koto, it is easily adapted to Western tunings.

Kotos are tuned via the insertion of bridges, which are moveable. Retuning during a piece is common, and is facilitated by the smooth surfaces of the koto's soundboard and of the bridges themselves. Kotoists wear a thumb pick and picks on the first and second fingers of the right hand. We play on the strings to the right of the bridges — the "tonal" side — while pressing the strings to the left of the bridges to create various effects. The picks are also used to strike and scrape the strings in order to create changes in tonal quality, intensity of sound, and more.

— Elizabeth Falconer

[For lots more information on the koto and Liz Falconer's recordings, visit [www.kotoworld.com](http://www.kotoworld.com)]



The depth of the classical tradition, the beauty of the instrument's sound, and the sense of being in the right place continued to draw Falconer more deeply into her music studies. After earning an associate master's license, Falconer and her husband moved from Hokkaido to Honshu, Japan's main island. She had no teacher there, and worked as a freelance writer for *The Japan Times*, all the while looking for some way to get back into the koto world. Ironically, a writing assignment led her to her next koto teacher — Kazue Sawai, the doyenne of avant-garde koto technique and wife of one of the most famous modern masters/composers, the late Tadao Sawai. As Falconer told it, "The Sawais came to our area to perform, and I thought I would do an article about their concert. First of all, the concert blew me away! I was on the edge of my chair. I went backstage and talked to [Tadao], and got a couple of pictures. And Kazue said, 'If you ever come to Tokyo, contact me.'" The Sawai School proved to be the right place for Falconer, as she could simultaneously build on her prior education while bringing her own gifts (including her background in Western music) to the fore, and ultimately, find her own voice as a performer and composer. This freedom — typical of the Sawai School, which values aesthetic gain and new music over rote memorization of pieces from the classical repertoire — is unusual, and has produced a wealth of new works for the koto, as well as many groundbreaking performers and teachers, of which Falconer is one.

Falconer said the Sawai approach was daunting at first, but equally exhilarating: "More advanced players are made responsible for developing their own sound. Where most schools are very concerned with their own way to play a piece, from tempo and dynamics to the position of picks, Sawai teachers — especially Kazue — stress making your own deci-

sions based on listening and *sound*... When I was studying there, Tadao Sawai was writing new pieces all the time, and it was so exciting to play them, and introduce them to the world! Even when the Sawais play traditional pieces, they bring their own flavor and personalities to them. I was struggling for a while to relearn some basic classical pieces in the Sawai style, and it was very frustrating, because there were differences between [the Sawai approach] and that of the first school I went to. Finally, Kazue pointed out to me that I should take the aspects I liked from both schools, and combine them to make my own way of playing the pieces. I did, and it is immensely satisfying. It's also satisfying to know that I've been given permission to do that by someone who has thought for a long time about how to continue a tradition and keep it alive."

She further described the learning style of a good koto school as conducive to creativity. For starters, "private" lessons are held in front of all the other students. Falconer said, "I think this is an excellent way to learn, because you're going to be sharing your music, and sometimes Westerners get afraid to play in front of other people. The Japanese way alleviates that fear from the start. You can learn a lot by watching others learn: about music, about pieces, about your teacher, and what they're aiming for. The group experience — which is very Japanese — is strengthened by all of this. Here in the United States, I took violin lessons for many years, but was terribly nervous about playing in front of people. Learning koto helped me a lot with that, although it doesn't mean that you never get nervous when others are around. You just learn to deal with it better. And it helps motivate students, as in 'Hey, I want to learn that piece, too!'"

There was also a great openness to Western music and Western students at the Sawai

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## ELIZABETH FALCONER

### ***Deep Pool: Koto Solos Inspired by an Art Exhibit***

Koto World KW003 (2002)

### ***Oyasumi: Japanese Lullabies and Restful Melodies***

Koto World KW005 (2001)

### ***Plum Boy! and Other Tales From Japan***

Koto World KW001 (2000)

### ***Hana and the Dragon***

Koto World KW004 (2000)

### ***The Crane's Story: Tales of Love From Japan***

Koto World KW006 (2002)

### ***Once Up On a Lily Pad***

Koto World KW007 (2003)

From the wisdom of the ages to turn-of-the-century paintings, Elizabeth Falconer dips deep into the well of Japanese tradition and the flights of her own imagination to offer these beautiful collections. With her own excellent, articulate voice and koto mastery, she tells stories of long ago, when “the sky was young” and creates musical impressions upon viewing an art exhibit. From the tales of love, trickery, humor, and kindness to songs sung by mothers in hushed voices, these recordings reflect a sensitive, witty, and genuine master.

*Deep Pool: Koto Solos Inspired by an Art Exhibit* is a collection of instrumentals composed and performed by Falconer, inspired by an exhibit of Kyoto artists she viewed in 1999. “The artists in this exhibit,” she writes in her liner notes, “worked to balance the old with the new, seeking inspiration from past traditions and incorporating modern influences, all the while creating their own style.” Likewise, Falconer has created her own voice, while respecting and being guided by the koto tradition. In the liner notes, a photo of the art that inspired it accompanies each song. No other explanation is offered, nor is one needed. Through Falconer’s mastery and imagination, such subjects as a “Summer Evening” and “Azalea and Butterfly” are granted a mysterious beauty as seen through the eyes of the artists. In “Moon and Stars,” the listener might see parallels to Debussy, but without the form restrictions found in European classical composition. This is music that lives in the moment, breathes, and moves gracefully from one image to another, bringing the conscientious listener on a magical journey from the turn of the century to the present — where time is both cherished and irrelevant.

Gorgeous and touching, *Oyasumi: Japanese Lullabies and Restful Melodies* has been honored with a Parents’ Choice Gold

Award. A generous 16 restful songs grace this collection. Falconer is joined this time by vocalist/guitarist Aiko Shimada, and the women give each lullaby a loving, soothing treatment, sometimes using harmony or gentle counterpoint. “Furusato” (“My Heart’s Home”) features delicate harmony over a sparse koto. “Sakura, Sakura” (“Cherry Blossoms”) will be familiar to many Western ears, as it is often used as background in the media. Shimada also sings one verse in English. “Aiko’s Lullaby” is also performed both in Japanese and English, as is “Aka Tonbo” (“Red Dragonfly”) and “Umi” (“Vast Ocean”), though the sensual effect transcends language. “Hatsu Yuki” (“First Snow”), an instrumental, begins softly, one flake at a time, and slowly builds as the storm takes flight. “Hama Chidori” (“Plovers on the Shore”) has perhaps the most beautiful melody, arranged simply for vocal and koto. Two lullabies, “Hagoromo no Komoriuta” and “Komoriuta,” are sung almost a cappella. The collection concludes with “Oyasumi” (“Goodnight”), a dreamy little song sung mostly in English, “Night time has come; gone is the sun.” In this world of troubles, in which everyone seems to be going at a breakneck pace to somewhere, this exquisite collection offers a place apart, where peace and comfort prevail, and the spirit can be replenished.

Tales of bravery and personal determination, a lesson in appreciation, a humorous story of two cats learning to share, and a fantasy illustrating the power of love highlight *Plum Boy! and Other Tales From Japan*, volume one in Falconer’s “musical adventures.” Falconer’s animated and gentle voice expresses the joy of these beloved folk stories. Accompanying herself on the koto, an ancient 13-stringed instrument, she captures the sense of whimsy as her instrument adds sound effects and drama to each performance. Falconer is a gifted storyteller. Her delivery is articulate; the pace is appropriate to the story. A collection likely to charm even the most restless adult.

Somewhere in the collective consciousness of children, there is a ready understanding of the singsong repetition and vocal sound effects Falconer uses so effectively. An American inner-city class immediately chimed in with her as they listened to the five stories in volume two of Falconer’s “musical adventures,” *Hana and the Dragon*. The language, Japanese or English, mattered not at

all. No prompt was given. No preparation was needed. Such is the appeal of this gifted storyteller and musician, whose presence is palpable and dynamic. And, in truth, she sounds as though she’s enjoying the telling as much as her audience. The themes play on the children’s sympathy as they learn of a poor dragon who has no friends until he is touched by kindness, the perils of a magic fan that makes your nose grow, a clever rabbit vs. a more clever crocodile, the enchantment of a special gift, and the value of sharing, even if one has only three rice balls. Irresistible.

Volume three of Falconer’s “musical adventures,” *The Crane’s Story: Tales of Love From Japan*, offers three touching stories — two of them over 15 minutes long — and two koto instrumentals. The familiar “Crane’s Story” is given a new perspective as Falconer

assumes the identity of the crane in an energetic performance. It is followed by “Wings of Love,” an ethereal koto solo. In “The Tanabata Legend,” the two lovers may meet only on the seventh night of the seventh lunar moon. Love and determination are the themes in “The Golden Arrow.” Here the heroine “pours all of her lonely heart into her playing,” as does the storyteller. Liner notes tell us that “All music and sound effects [are] created on the koto, even the fire, snakes, and bees!”

*Once Up On a Lily Pad* is Falconer’s “musical adventures,” volume four. This is

perhaps her most appropriate album for the very little ones, but us old folks will find ourselves drawn into the magic and silliness of these five tales, as well. The title track features a pair of misguided frogs. “The Cricket’s Chirp” uses the familiar ABC song to teach Japanese syllables. With clever twists of plot and humor, “Roofle!” takes the listener on a wild ride. And “Papachu,” a chubby but loving father mouse, takes us on a journey in his magic mouse-mover to find the perfect mate for his daughter. And who is his wife? Why, Mamachu, of course. The CD concludes with a sort of Japanese name game, “The Looooong Name.” It answers the question, “Just what do you say when Muki-muki just won’t do?” Fun and engaging, this is a treasure for all ages.

— Linda J. Morris (Glen Rock, PA)



School. Falconer began her studies there in the early 80s, when Kazue Sawai was beginning to “take the koto and play it abroad. She was making her own music out there, aside from the Sawai School, and I was one of her first foreign students, so she was really excited [about teaching me]. Kazue likes the idea of non-Japanese people playing the instrument and making something new [or] more interesting.” Many of the techniques Falconer learned at the Sawai School — for example, using koto picks and other objects to strike, bow or scrape the strings in order to get a variety of sounds from the instruments — have carried over into her storytelling work, where almost all sound effects (including hissing snakes, crackling fires, and more) are created on the koto. This is equally true of improvisation, which is unique to the Sawai School.

Falconer’s immersion in the Sawai approach has equipped her to take on a unique (and entirely unexpected) role — that of a storyteller. Her first efforts at this were due to necessity: In 1997, she and her husband John adopted two sons (now 10 and 12 years old), and she found herself pitched headlong into what she describes as “Story, story, story.” A keen observer, she said, “The thing that struck me was how kids really are transported by opening a book, looking at a picture — they are *there* in that book, that picture. When kids are playing together, they’re acting out stories, they’re talking about stories — it’s absolutely real to them.”

As far as Falconer knows, storytelling with koto accompaniment has never been tried before. She explained, “In Japan, koto is a classical tradition, and storytelling is a folk tradition, and the two aren’t brought together. They’re done by different groups of people. I kind of stumbled on combining them in the way you’d find out, ‘You got peanut butter in my chocolate — hey!’ I was thinking about stories, talking to the kids, and then I was trying to practice. And while I was practicing, the stories were running through my brain. While I was telling stories to the kids, I was thinking about koto, and they just came together one day.”

Falconer’s 1999 debut was both spur of the moment and serendipitous: Asked to do a showcase performance at a local library, she decided to include a story, along with playing and giving a short talk. “I didn’t expect it to go any further than that,” she said. “I didn’t have the story memorized, and I read it as I played. But the audience was leaning forward, on the edge of their seats... After years and years of playing, you have a certain kind of response, and then all of a sudden, when the response is different, it has a really big effect on you. So I decided to explore it further.”

Falconer found that “storytelling was a natural way of bringing Japanese culture to people. All the traditional things that I’m

always trying to explain are right there in the stories,” she said. “Valuing gratitude, and a sense of responsibility — sometimes it’s called ‘duty,’ but I also have the sense of responsibility; if you say you’re going to do something, then doing it. And sharing — not that we don’t have these things here. But it’s different in Japan. And these things are even more important when you’re raising kids.” She describes her storytelling style as a big adventure. “Just to look up from the instrument was my first challenge. You spend all these years looking at your hands and playing... But you *have to* [engage with] the audience when you’re telling a story — you have no choice. Looking up is a technical thing, and can be done with practice, but the mental part of it — meeting peoples’ eyes while you’re onstage, and looking at people in the audience...I had to start with kids and slowly work up to adults. You see questions in peoples’ eyes, and many emotions, but you can’t let that distract you. You just have to keep going with the story.”

Falconer’s storytelling has gotten a ringing endorsement from her friend and mentor, Kazue Sawai. As Falconer tells it, “Kazue really taught me not to be afraid of doing new things. And she’s really excited about the stories.” In fact, Falconer recently performed some of her “Koto Tales” at her teacher’s Japanese home — in English. She said that even though audience members couldn’t understand all of the words, their reaction was overwhelmingly positive. This has encouraged her to continue working on storytelling as a tool for teaching English as a second language. Given the participatory nature of the material, along with Falconer’s infectious sense of humor and love of teaching, this seems to be a natural next step.

What else is on the horizon for Falconer? More stories, of course, but she also plans to spend more time composing. Recent projects include transcriptions of some of Bach’s “Lute Suites” for bass koto, and a piece that she and son Brian — who’s an accomplished kotoist — perform as a duo. They’ve been working together for several years, and Falconer wants to write more pieces for future recitals and just plain fun. (They plan to record sometime this year.) Further work with Aiko Shimada (the Japanese immigrant singer/songwriter whose talent helped make *Oyasumi* possible) is on the list, too. In fact, there’s very little that Falconer *won’t* tackle, given her love of surprises and adventurous spirit.

“Follow your heart, and seek out the people you’d like to emulate,” she said. “I have found so much support from key people — that’s taken me a long way when times are tough or I feel lost. Also, if you have a passion for something, don’t worry too much about those who don’t understand — just keep doing it!”

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