

# Schools

## Storyteller's art is music to children's ears

By OSCAR HALPERT  
*Editor*

The sea of children fix their eyes on the stage in front of them. A dark-haired woman kneels in front of long, stringed instrument.

The children's noisy buzz settles to a still quiet as Renton's Elizabeth Falconer, 44, tells the story of Issunboshi, the 1-inch-tall boy who wants to become a samurai.

"It's amazing to me how much kids will be brought in by the story," she said.

Falconer is a master of the koto, a 13-string, classical Japanese instrument introduced to Japan from China about 1,000 years ago. She also is a storyteller.

She's been busy lately, appearing at South King County libraries and grade schools, where her performances have also helped to promote the King County Library System's Summer Reading Program.

Her interest in Japanese culture grew after a high school summer program sent her to Japan in the early 1970s. Falconer majored in Japanese as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon. After graduation, she moved to Japan, where she lived with husband John until 1990.

Though Falconer melds storytelling and koto playing, they usually don't go together. Originally an instrument reserved for royalty,



Photo by David Nelson

### Storyteller and musician Elizabeth Falconer performs at Cascade Elementary School. Falconer is a master of the koto, a Japanese instrument.

the koto has been used as a chamber music instrument and today can be found in a variety of musical ensembles, including jazz.

Koto was traditionally played with either other kotos or with the bamboo flute, called the shakuhachi, or with a three-string instrument known as a shamisen.

Because of its construction, the koto's parts are named after the dragon.

called KotoTales in 1998. It combines music with stories.

"About four years ago we adopted two boys (Brian, now 9, and Jesse, now 7) and I started reading to them," she said. "So I just decided on a whim to put stories to music" and introduce Japanese culture. She'll have a chance to revisit Japan next fall for a teachers' conference she has been invited to attend.

Falconer, who learned to play the bass koto from three koto masters during her time in Japan, developed a performance program

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"In Japan there's different approaches depending upon the school you attend. The school I happened to fall into focuses on hand technique and contemporary music."

Since combining music and storytelling, Falconer's work has been rewarded. She has her own CD label (Koto World) and her 2000 CD "Plum Boy!" and other tales from Japan" won a Parent's Choice award from the non-profit Parent's Choice Foundation, which is sort of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for children's products.

She divides much of her time between storytelling, teaching and her Taka Koto Ensemble, which performed last month at Seattle's Folklife Festival. Son Brian, who began his koto education at age 6, often plays duets with his mother as part of the ensemble.

She also has been hired by parent-teacher associations to do school assemblies and has been asked to be musical storyteller-in-Symphony.

After earning her Ph.D. in international education from the University of Iowa, Falconer and her husband, a translator, moved to the Puget Sound region.

"We thought it would be a good area for koto because of the Asian population," she said. "Besides, it's a great place to be a musician."