

Shamisen

(Three-Stringed Musical Instrument)

Nobuyasu Ito

No two Mitsumasa *shamisen* are alike. Working closely with those who play the instruments, the *shamisen* artisans are passionate about creating these elegant, delicate sounds.



Profile ● Born in 1944. Third-generation owner of Mitsumasa
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4-5-16 Tsukiji, Chuo-ku, Tokyo

The unsung heroes enabling traditional music to survive and thrive

Down an alley about a five-minute walk from the Kabukiza Theater in Ginza, you'll come upon a modest sign for "Mitsumasa." Enter through the lattice door to the faint sound of *shamisen*. You might expect to see rows of instruments, but there are none. "We don't sell ready-made instruments," says proprietor Nobuyasu Ito. "We only make them to order. We also receive many requests for repairs." Mr. Ito has been in the business for over 60 years.

Mr. Ito learned the craft under his father and his senior apprentices. "At first, they didn't teach me anything. All I did was clean up after them and ready their tools for use. I guess they wanted me to take the initiative rather than instructing me step by step. After about three years, my father finally said, 'Do you want to try making a *shamisen*?'"

Different craftsman once specialized in each step of *shamisen*-making, from crafting the instrument's neck and body to shaping the leather to making the pegs. Mr. Ito works chiefly on the leather, which is the heart of the instrument and determines its tone. His customers are mostly professional performers of *nagauta* music and other *kabuki* accompaniments. "I often get called in all of sudden," he says. "The caller will say, 'I'm at the Kabukiza. Please come right away and repair my instrument!'"

Mr. Ito's handmade *shamisen* all differ slightly, based on temperature, humidity, and the materials used, because wood, leather, thread, and glue are all natural materials. Adjusting their sound requires a sense of pitch, great sensitivity, and experience. He memorizes thousands of possible com-

binations, so as to respond to each and every different requests from more than two hundred performers. "Their feeling, when they go on stage is: 'I'll do anything for the sake of this one song, even if it means my *shamisen* gets torn.' I once worked with a teacher, adjusting the sound on his *shamisen* from midnight until around four a.m., till his wife said, 'Hey, it's about time you let Mr. Ito go home!'" Mr. Ito laughs.

Today, his two sons are following in his footsteps and working alongside him. When asked if people appreciate his earnest efforts, he replies calmly, "No, not at all. Mostly they have criticisms or requests for improvements. But I consider that a compliment. It is thanks to the valuable input of our customers that we are able to grow."



Top: Unlike a violin, a *shamisen* does not gain value as it ages. Rather, it deteriorates, requiring regular tuning. The ideal sound is achieved by shaving the body and neck and replacing the skin. Bottom: The body is made of wood, such as rosewood or quince. Rosewood can only be sourced through authorized agencies because of Washington Convention restrictions. It is also getting harder to obtain the skin and plectrum materials.



"I want to do all I can, however small, to ensure that the flame of traditional music continues to burn brightly."

To make *shamisen* is to create sound

Mr. Ito moistens the skin with water to make it soft, and then stretches it. He carefully adjusts the moisture content with an electric heater.

