
TECHNIQUES THAT
SUPPORT JAPANESE
PERFORMING ARTS

III

Futozao
Shamisen

Three-stringed
lute with
thick-neck



太
棹
三
味
線

Crafting and Restoration of
Futozao Shamisen

Shigeo Isaka

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Isaka Shigeo is a rare and exceptional craftsman of *futozao shamisen*. He undertakes, almost single-handedly, the crafting and restoration of *futozao shamisen* that are used to play *Gidayu-busbi* music in Bunraku puppet theater and *shamisen* played by *Gidayu-busbi* performers called *Takemoto* in Kabuki theater. As the first day of performance draws near, Isaka receives one parcel after another containing the “body” of the *shamisen* from various performers, along with information on their desired range of sounds and the weight of the *koma*, or bridge that determines the sound quality of the instrument. Isaka surmises what type of skin is necessary and how taut it should be from this information alone and replaces the skin. As the sixth-generation owner of *Asadaya Shamisen Store*, Isaka’s technique of applying the skin to *futozao shamisen* continues to support the sounds of Kabuki that is performed somewhere in Japan almost every day.



“All sounds have a peculiarity, an exquisite sound that cannot be expressed in words. I strive to achieve that sound, but I’m not there yet. That’s why I consider myself as being in lifelong training.”

——— Shigeo Isaka

The technique of stretching the skin to the thinnest possible extent

Thin, cat skin is used for *Nagauta shamisen*, but even thinner dog skin is used for *shamisen* played by performers called *Takemoto*. The skin is stretched to its utmost so that the buoyant sounds of the *shamisen* reach all corners of the theater.

It is strenuous work that requires much physical strength, but subtlety is also needed to achieve a good balance in the tension of the skin across the entire the body. Isaka applies himself to the task, pressing and flicking the skin to verify the tautness of the skin through the well-honed senses of his fingertips and ears.

Sound

Various types of *shamisen* music are played in Kabuki theater, including *Nagauta*, *Takemoto*, *Tokiwazu-busbi*, and *Kiyomoto-busbi*, but there is practically no day that the *futozao shamisen* is not played by a *Takemoto* within *Kabuki* performances which are held almost every month throughout Japan.

Futozao shamisen is characterized by a thick-neck, as indicated by the term “*futozao*” which means “thick-neck,” but the neck is not the only part that is thick. Its strings are thick, and the *koma* that supports the strings has some weight and is elevated. The body is somewhat large and weighty, and the plectrum is long and maintains a certain thickness all the way to its edges. The instrument is thus heavy and thick as a whole, but *Takemoto* performers are expected to pour forth deep yet opulent sounds from it at considerable volume.

The seemingly contradictory technique of stretching a thin skin over a heavysset body to the thinnest possible extent supports the distinctive sounds of the *Takemoto* in *Kabuki* theater.



Curtain of Asadaya Shamisen Store that has survived the Great Nagoya Air Raid

Stretching board

The *shamisen* body is placed on the stretching board and the skin is stretched over it while hooking hemp cord onto projections on the four sides of the body and tightening the cord. A different stretching board is used for each type of *shamisen*.



Kisen

Wooden clamps resembling large clothespins are attached to the edges of the skin, and a small wedge is inserted between the ends of the clamps to adjust and secure their grip. Isaka numbers each combination of clamp and wedge, called *kisen* (literally meaning “wooden plug”). Any subtle looseness of the grip is tightened by attaching a thin board. *Kisen* wears down with use, so it is carefully repaired over and over again, but replacements are indispensable to the crafting and restoration of *shamisen*.



Mojiri

After firmly tightening the skin, a rod called *mojiri* is inserted between the strings and twisted to make fine adjustments to the tautness of the skin. Isaka uses *mojiri* made of ivory, metal, or wood according to the properties of the skin and the degree of adjustment that is needed. (Photo shows ivory *mojiri*.)

Tools

Technique

Futozao shamisen is frequently used in Kabuki and Bunraku performances, so re-skinning requests concentrate during the period between performances. These *shamisen* must be able to be played consistently throughout the following performance and to produce sounds that carry to all corners of the theater. The desired sound quality, however, differs according to each performer.

Isaka deduces each performer’s desired sound quality based on just a few words of instruction over the phone, and applies himself to each *shamisen* body that is sent to him with conviction. Even after re-skinning a body, however, he cannot assemble and test-play the instrument. The technique that he hones through frank interaction with performers supports their artistic skills in subsequent performances.

Skimming process

Moistening the skin

The skin is placed between a slightly moistened cloth and a dry cloth and rolled up to indirectly transfer the moistness of the cloth to the skin.



Stretching the skin over the body

After applying glue to the edges of the body, the skin is placed over it, clamped with *kisen* and secured with a wedge. Hemp cord is then wound around the projections on the stretching board and *kisen*, and pulled taut.



Essentials

Tools

When skinning the *shamisen*, a long hemp cord is wound around the projections on the stretching board and the *kisen*. Cords of different thicknesses are used for each application and according to each craftsman, and while some craftsmen like Isaka use a single cord to tighten all four sides, there are others who use a relatively short cord for each of the four sides. As the task of tightening the cord is also a race against time, the technique of skillfully manipulating the cord and swiftly stringing the four sides is a distinctive feature of skinning a *shamisen*. A metal hammer is used when inserting the wedges and a wooden mallet when removing them.

Materials

Dog or cat skin is used for *Gidayu-bushi shamisen*, but as both are no longer available in stable supply, there has been continued discussion regarding the use of alternative materials. Previously, an optimal skin was able to be selected from among a number of skins to match each performer's request, but that is difficult today. The availability of a stable supply of materials thus has a bearing on the technique of the craftsman, and ultimately on the performance of the *shamisen*.



Metal hammers and wooden mallets



Hemp cord

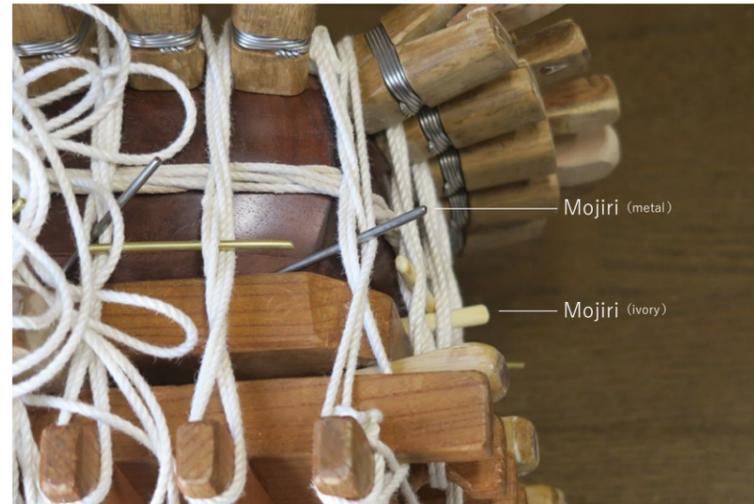


Skins



Fine-adjusting the tautness with *mojiri*

The tautness of the skin is fine-adjusted by inserting *mojiri* in the spaces made by the hemp cord and twisting them. Isaka says he uses ivory *mojiri* when he wants to stretch the skin tightly, and uses metal *mojiri* when making subtle adjustments to the tautness of the skin.



Mojiri (metal)

Mojiri (ivory)

Verifying the tautness of the skin

After verifying the tautness of the skin by pressing and flicking it, it is left to dry.



Pasting the edges

The *kisen* are removed, and glue is applied to the edges of the skin. Excess glue is pushed out (called *fuchidasbi*, *mimidasbi* or *kimetsuke*) and removed with an ivory spatula.



Pasting the plectrum guard

The plectrum guard is cut out with a knife and pasted onto the skin with watered down starch.

Making notches in the skin

Notches are made in the edges of the skin with a knife. The shape of these notches are said to be symbolic of each craftsman.



Crafting and Restoration of *Futozao Shamisen*

Shigeo Isaka

- 1944 Born in Aichi. Since his childhood, Isaka was naturally exposed to the technique for the crafting and restoration of *shamisen* through his frequent visits to his uncle Takatoshi Yamada, the fifth-generation owner of Asadaya *Shamisen* Store.
- 1962 After graduating from high school, Isaka studied the craft in earnest as an apprentice to Takatoshi Yamada, and thereafter succeeded Asadaya *Shamisen* Store as its sixth-generation owner.

Isaka has worked on the *shamisen* of famous *Gidayu-bushi shamisen* performers such as the second-generation Nozawa Kizaemon, ninth-generation Nozawa Kichibe, fourth-generation Nozawa Kinshi, sixth-generation Tsuruzawa Kanji, and seventh-generation Tsuruzawa Kanji.
Today, Isaka's eldest son Keitaro is studying to eventually succeed Isaka.

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