

メトロポリス

Japan's No.1 English Magazine

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IN PERSON: CALLING THE TUNES

Shocking peers, maverick sensei Makoto Nishimura invites foreigners into the cloistered world of the shamisen. Sameena Ahmad took some lessons.

Wrapped in kimono, sitting seiza and plucking a shamisen, the three-stringed banjo that is one of the instruments used to accompany traditional Japanese theater, Makoto Nishimura looks like she belongs on a Noh stage.



That's until you notice she is the only Japanese in a coterie of foreigners playing shamisen as well as koto, a Japanese harp, taiko drums and the shakuhachi flute. On this typical Saturday morning, Nishimura and her students from eight countries are rehearsing for an upcoming concert.

"Music should be about pure spirit," says the teacher, who has chosen to teach music only to foreigners. "Compared to the Japanese, foreigners have a more spirited connection to nagauta (traditional theater performance). They are excited to learn. Teaching them is fun and risky, like an adventure." After more than 30 years of playing and teaching shamisen, Nishimura has found that Japanese students are all too often afraid of making mistakes, easily discouraged and too consumed with the ritual to really develop a love of the instrument.

But it has taken a great deal of courage on Nishimura's part to break with the traditional world of nagauta. The daughter of a famous theater dancer, she was forced to wear kimono and learn her mother's craft from the age of five. After studying shamisen at the elite Tokyo University of Fine Arts, Nishimura came under the tutelage of one of Japan's foremost sensei for the stringed instrument, Hiroaki Kikuoka, a regular guest teacher on NHK and author of a popular book series. Kikuoka would serve as her mentor for more than three



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The Spy Who Shagged Me [DVD]

IN PERSON:

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Deep Blue director Andy Byatt breaks the surface after five years of filming the ocean. Carlo Niederberger reports.

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Switch on a TV "wide show" and there's a good chance you'll see Dave Spector commenting on the news or debating panelists. Chris Betros meets the TV junkie.

[537: Casting a spell](#)

Fans in Japan can't get enough of Harry Potter, whether it's movies, books, merchandise or the stars themselves. Chris Betros catches some of the Hogwarts gang in Tokyo.

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Longtime Tokyo entrepreneur Rick Roa has enough stories to fill a dozen lifetimes, as his biographer found out. Chris Betros hears some of the juicy ones.

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Will Matthew Bourne's latest reinterpretation of a classic strike a chord in Japan? Lead dancers Scott Ambler and Richard Windsor tell Dan Grunebaum about Play Without Words.

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Puerto Rican star and Oscar winner Benicio Del Toro turns in another intense performance in 21 Grams. Chris Betros reports.

[533: The big freeze](#)

Roland Emmerich and his team are chilling audiences with their ice age disaster film The Day After Tomorrow. Chris Betros joins them out of the cold.

[532: Hitting a Homer](#)

At 40, Brad Pitt looks to be in pretty good shape after a tough shoot and even tougher publicity schedule for Troy. Chris Betros reports.

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A new book by Robert Whiting looks at Japan's latest quality export to America: Ichiro and the boys. Rob Smaal catches up with the author.

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decades.

However, rebellion has been as much a part of Nishimura's life as adherence to convention. It may be in her genes. Her mother, who was a professional kabuki-style dancer, secretly loved the tango, and caused a scandal by marrying a student seven years her junior and, at the age of 70, quit the dance world to become a photographer. Judged harshly because of her family history, Nishimura, now 56, reacted by becoming "a bad girl at school," who, at 15 and clad in kimono, smoked and dated boys. She married and divorced an abusive gambler—whom she later sued—and turned up at her teacher's door with two young daughters asking for refuge.



Kikuoka, who took her in, was in the midst of launching his own rebellion against the world of nagauta, and Nishimura became his most eager recruit. Both despised the iemoto system, the dominant organizational principle in Japanese traditional arts since the 18th century, whereby a single teacher rules a school of disciples. Access to this exclusive world comes through adopting the teacher's family name, which all performers from the same group share, and which non-relations must purchase at great cost.

That makes the world of traditional Japanese music, which even today is controlled by just a few family names, ruinously expensive, governed more by wealth than talent. Each year, shamisen students have to perform with professionals, an exercise in ritual humiliation for which they have to pay more than ¥1 million. That's in addition to the price of the instrument—the best shamisen are made with rare cat-gut skins and can cost up to ¥2 million—and the lessons, which can run to ¥7,000 for just 15 minutes. "I hate this feudal system," says Nishimura. "Only rich housewives can afford to learn these days. Many talented people simply don't have the money to take part."

In fact, with two children to feed, Nishimura could not have afforded Kikuoka's teaching had he not waived his fees in return for her helping his wife with housework. Now she is determined to follow his example and does not charge her students—many of

British actor Jude Law is very low-key about his sex-symbol status in Japan. Chris Betros gets a close-up look.

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After three years as a San Francisco 49ers cheerleader, Ai Yasuda tells Sachie Kanda the lessons she learned from the Gold Rush.

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Whether he's on InterFM or co-hosting the Japanese version of 60 Minutes, veteran Japan resident Peter Barakan brings a mature view to the masses. Chris Betros listens in.

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Comedian-rocker Jack Black is in fine form during a jaunt to promote School of Rock. Chris Betros listens in.

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Director Anthony Minghella and Oscar-winner Renée Zellweger revisit the Civil War in Cold Mountain. Chris Betros takes note.

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Dewi Sukarno wears many hats—social critic, TV personality and charity fundraiser. Chris Betros visits the former first lady of Indonesia.

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TV variety show presenter Hiroko Grace thrives in the hustle and bustle of New York. Chris Betros finds out what she's been up to.

[523: Manga mania](#)

TokyoPop founder Stuart Levy has struck gold as the leading publisher of Japanese manga in the US. Chris Betros finds out what's behind the boom.

[522: Queen of hearts](#)

Newly crowned Miss Nippon Yuriko Saga is ready to seize the day. Carlo Niederberger meets the new belle of the ball.

[521: Remember when](#)

A beefed-up Ben Affleck says he wants to keep all his memories—unlike his character in John Woo's thriller Paycheck. Chris Betros finds out why.

[519: Bilingual beat](#)

Red carpets at the Grammys, TV interviews and radio work keep Yuka Komaki pretty busy. Chris Betros catches up with the globetrotting personality.

[518: Full speed ahead](#)

Australian director Peter Weir takes us back in time on an epic voyage in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. Chris Betros books his passage.

[517: American dream](#)

Switch-hitting shortstop Kazuo Matsui is set to make a splash as the first Japanese infielder to play in the Major Leagues. Rob Smaal reports on his big move.

[516: Hail the hobbits](#)

Accolades and awards are making it hard for Peter Jackson and his cast to adjust to life after *Lord of the Rings*, reports Chris Betros.

[515: In the name of love](#)

Only 20, British actress Keira Knightley is already building an impressive body of work, the latest being the romantic comedy *Love Actually*. Chris Betros reports.

[514: Horsing around](#)

Tobey Maguire swaps his Spider-Man costume for a jockey's kit in the acclaimed Depression-era drama *Seabiscuit*. Chris Betros reports.

[513: Free bird](#)

Actress-model Anna Umeki juggles single parenthood, work and the tabloids. Chris Betros asks how she does it.

whom take two-hour classes each week. While her teacher ultimately failed in his mission to get rid of the name-based iemoto system, Nishimura is making better progress in a more low-key way. The concert on June 29, her fourth with foreigners in the past five years, will feature 19 amateur and professional musicians and singers from the US, Germany, Britain and Mexico, among others, as well as Japanese performers. The more than two-hour concert at a Noh theater in Tokyo's Kagurazaka will combine nagauta classics with innovative newer pieces.

For her efforts, Nishimura has received a hostile reception from traditionalists, particularly her late teacher's wife, who has tried to persuade professionals not to work with Nishimura. "Many people think what I am doing is some kind of crime. That my concerts are shameful," says Nishimura. "Almost every Japanese would say that foreigners can't play shamisen, that it is a uniquely Japanese talent. They are wrong."

Meanwhile, Nishimura supports herself with a day job that she says makes her feel like a "zombie" —sterilizing medical instruments at a hospital. But it is in the evenings and on weekends that she comes alive. "Inside I am very wild. At my job and with Japanese people, I have to behave like a Japanese," she says. "But when I am with foreigners, teaching them music, my spirit always comes out."

The next concert is scheduled for 3pm on June 29 at Yarai Noh Gakudo, Kagurazaka (Kagurazaka stn, exit 2, Tozai line). Tickets ¥2,000(A), ¥1,500(S), at door ¥2,500(A), ¥2,000(S). Makoto Nishimura: tel: 03 3412 6096, email: nagauta@livedoor.com

Photo credit: Courtesy of Makoto Nishimura

[512: Girl next door](#)

Fame hasn't gone to Holly Valance's head, Chris Betros finds after meeting the former Neighbours star and now Australian singing sensation.

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Fumiko Ishioka uses an old suitcase from a young Auschwitz victim to teach Japan's children about the Holocaust. Chris Betros hears more.

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Filipino singer Charito is still winning fans after 20 years on the Tokyo jazz scene. Chris Betros checks out her style.

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Hollywood can't get enough Japanese horror movies to remake. Producer Takashige Ichise loves it, Chris Betros learns.

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Tom Cruise and Edward Zwick say we can all learn from the samurai code of ethics. Chris Betros dusts off his armor for a few lessons.

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Ken Ohtaka swapped a top job at a securities company for mountain climbing to raise money for charity. Chris Betros finds out why.

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Vincent Gallo comes out swinging in defense of his controversial movie The Brown Bunny. Chris Betros dodges a few punches.

[503: Making J-Waves](#)

Radio navigator, TV host, event MC and jewelry designer Chris Pepler has a lot on his plate. Chris Betros finds out how he manages it all.

[502: Glitter Ball](#)

[501: Crossing swords](#)

Quentin Tarantino pays homage to Japan, strong women and anime with buckets of blood in Kill Bill. Chris Betros lives to tell the tale.

[500: Share the wealth](#)

To commemorate our 500th issue, Metropolis is asking Halloween partygoers to donate ¥500 to help two local children's charities. Chris Betros digs deep.

[499: In full bloom](#)

Okinawan-American singer DAHLIA hits the big time, thanks to Japanese rock icon Yoshiki and Expo 2005. Chris Betros meets the young talent.

[498: Just for laughs](#)

The Sushi Brothers have a joke for every occasion. Chris Betros meets the wacky pair.

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At 79, former US President Jimmy Carter is a busy man championing human rights, world peace and public health, as Carlo Niederberger observes.

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Live performances and self-promotion are all part of being a painter in today's world, artist Ponzi tells Krista Wilson.

[495: Action figure](#)

Angelina Jolie is busy these days, kicking butt as Lara Croft and standing up for refugee children around the world as a UN representative. Chris Betros hears more.

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Yuka Nukina brings the world to Japan on NHK's Weekend Japanology program. Chris Betros tunes in.

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Business maverick Yasuyuki Nambu's vision of a radically new Japanese society doesn't endear him to bureaucrats, but Chris Betros