

# Aki and Kuniko

## Tokyo's Eclectic Guitar and Koto Duo

**P**airing Western-rooted steel-string acoustic guitar with Japanese koto has tremendous potential for an intercontinental train wreck. But on their new recording, *Ha*, Hiroaki Sasaki (Aki) and Kuniko Obina avoid the clichés of all too many projects that could be filed under “cheesy” as well as “world fusion,” creating a sonic tapestry that defies any categorization at all. Neither an album of traditional Japanese music featuring cutting-edge guitar nor a spicing of Western music with “exotic” instruments, Aki and Kuniko’s debut album as a duo is a fine example of two artists achieving a stunning balance of strong musical elements from very different cultural traditions.

Sasaki, a former child opera star exposed only to classical music who performed throughout his native Japan, experienced an epiphany far removed from his heritage when at 15 he discovered “the music and persona of Elvis Presley.” “It was such an eye-opener, he literally captured my heart,” Sasaki explains. He taught himself to play on an old acoustic he “found lying around the house,” and eventually came across the music of German guitarist Peter Finger, who became Sasaki’s biggest influence and inspired him to start playing fingerstyle seriously. In 1998, Sasaki released his first album, *Jimi’s Spirit of Acoustic*, the title track of which is featured on *Ha*. After recording two more solo efforts, a mutual friend suggested he try playing with Obina, already an established performer. “At first, neither of us were very keen on the idea,” remembers Sasaki, “but as soon as we began playing, we were hooked on the magical interplay between the guitar and the koto, with Kuniko’s playing escalating us from level to level.”

With roots in ancient China, the koto is a large, hollow-body zither introduced to Japan in the late seventh or early eighth century. About six feet in length and most often fashioned from paulownia wood, it is typically fitted with 13 silk or nylon strings of the same gauge stretched with



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equal tension over movable bridges. The koto is tuned to a fixed scale, which makes changing key or tonality difficult during a piece, but Sasaki says that really doesn’t limit his duets with Obina. “What Kuniko and I are doing is merely blending and fusing the sounds of two stringed instruments,” he says. “We try to banish the idea of stereotypes completely from our thinking, enabling us to look for new and fresh possibilities and to create a more instinctive sound.”

With Sasaki often incorporating rhythmic strumming into his accompaniment of Obina’s strikingly idiomatic pitch-bends and pentatonic improvisations, *Ha* (Acoustic Music Records, [www.acoustic-music.de](http://www.acoustic-music.de)) presents familiar sounds and new sonic territory simultaneously. Peter Finger fans will recognize his influence in the voicings and melodic choices arising from Sasaki’s use of Finger’s signature E B E G B E tuning, sometimes modified with a partial capo.

By Teja Gerken

But despite a similarly aggressive right-hand attack and a facility for lightning-speed lines, Sasaki is not a clone, thanks largely to the originality of his writing. Whether strumming, playing unison melody lines, or fingerpicking arpeggios, Sasaki's round guitar tone provides a beautiful counterpoint to Obina's hard attack and the koto's unique short sustain and amazing string separation. For players seeking to inject a bit of Japanese tradition into their own music, Sasaki notes, "A form often used in Japanese music is the dropping of the fourth and seventh [of the scale]. There's also very little emphasis placed on chords in traditional Japanese music, delegating more importance to the melody than the harmony."

Looking ahead to their next recording project, Sasaki would like to augment the duo with an orchestra of traditional Japanese instruments. And he hopes that Aki and Kuniko will be able to tour the US and Europe in the near future. But wherever Aki and Kuniko go, it is sure to be a place full of sonic surprises and unexpected musical twists and turns. ■

### What They Play

On *Ha*, HIROAKI SASAKI's primary guitar was his signature model Morris ([www.morrisguitars.com](http://www.morrisguitars.com)). Based on the company's S-91 model, it has a cedar top, mahogany back and sides, and a double-X bracing pattern. Sasaki also played a Lowden D-32 on some tracks. In live performance, he uses the Morris, outfitted with B-Band ([www.b-band.com](http://www.b-band.com)) and EPM ([www.epm-ltd.com](http://www.epm-ltd.com)) pickups. He runs the signal through a Symetrix SX 202 stereo preamp (which is no longer made) and a Lexicon LXP-1 processor before going to the PA. Sasaki recorded *Ha* at his own Hayama Moon studio ([www.hayamamoonstudio.com](http://www.hayamamoonstudio.com)), where he did all the engineering, mixing, and mastering. He used AKG C 414 and Røde NT Classic microphones and a TC Electronic M5000 compressor. KUNIKO OBINA plays both 13-string and 17-string kotos and uses fingerpicks to pluck the instrument.

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