

# The Fourth String

## A Memoir of Sensei and Me

BY JANET POCOROBBA

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Reviewed by Anne Prescott



A young native English speaker goes to Japan to earn money to pay her debts. This is not an unusual beginning for the “foreigner discovers Japan” memoir. But shortly after Janet Pocarobba settles into her new life, it takes a surprising turn when a friend points out an ad in an English-language publication: “Free lesson in shamisen and singing! Take something home with you from your stay in Japan!” (60). In September 1996, Pocarobba responds to that ad and meets Sensei, as she calls

the woman who becomes her teacher. “She was in full Japanese gear, which I later learned she donned for first meetings. They expected kimono, didn’t they? ‘Very Japanese-y,’ she said and laughed” (14–15). Little by little in the course of this book, Sensei’s story, and her place in Japanese society, becomes clearer to Janet, much in the same way that Janet’s understanding of *nagauta*, shamisen, and Japan—and herself—do.

Sensei is a conservatory-trained musician in *nagauta*, a style of shamisen music associated with the kabuki theater. *Nagauta* is also performed as a standalone art outside of kabuki, primarily by amateurs and often by women whose primary motivation for taking lessons is for “wife training.”

Advice given to Sensei by her professional teacher has sent her down this road. “You don’t have the heart for this,” Kikuoka-sensei told her one day and advised her to remain an amateur” (29).

In the course of this book, we learn that Sensei operates on the outer perimeter of the traditional *nagauta* world, in part because of her amateur status and in part because of her pessimism about the future of *nagauta* in Japan. Sensei feels that foreigners eager to experience Japanese culture are the key to countering a declining interest in the traditional arts among Japanese.

Some of Sensei’s teaching methods are unconventional. In a musical culture that values long-term bonds between teachers and students, such relationships are taken very seriously. A student generally stays with a single teacher for life; it is very difficult to move from one teacher to another. Decisions to stop studying are also not acted upon lightly. This dedication and loyalty is difficult for foreigners to adhere to, particularly those who are apt to be in a highly transient population. But Sensei willingly accepts students who are not likely to stick around for long, which means that this lifetime of dedication is not expected.

Sensei demonstrates her independent nature in other ways. She shares her knowledge and talent for free. She embraces the work and support of an established American academic and helps another get his foot in the door. She travels abroad to do short-term lectures in English. But there is also evidence of her grounding in the traditional world as she maintains a more traditional relationship with her teacher, which sometimes benefits her come-and-go foreign students when they perform on programs with Japanese groups.

Sensei also moves away from the tradition of teaching primarily by example and imitation—although there is plenty of that, as is shown when she says to Janet, “*narau yori nareru*,” “instead of learning, experience” (19). Pocarobba encounters this idea near the start of her studies when she is pushed to perform onstage after just a few lessons, before she is even close to mastering the music. “During our meal, Sensei asked, ‘Would you like to perform with us in three weeks? We need a singer’” (23). This incident teaches her that appearance is the better part of the goal, and with it she is off on a twenty-year (and continuing) *nagauta* journey.

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However, many of Sensei's pedagogical tools run counter to accepted methods in the Japanese musical world. Traditionally, verbal explanations are kept to a minimum, if they happen at all. In a typical learning situation, the concept of *ma* (space, silence) is modeled but rarely described. Sensei, however, names and explains *ma*. "Wait! Space!" she called. My fingernail split. Shouldn't there be another note, something to complete it, restore it to balance? 'No,' she said. There was nothing. Only *ma*, space, the 'live blank' that existed between sounds" (11).

Pocorobba also offers us insight into the larger nagauta musical world that she and the other foreign students of Sensei encounter. They struggle to understand customs such as paying to perform in concerts and recitals (albeit at a lower cost than in the more conventional traditional music world), and wearing—and later purchasing—kimono. Some of them, including Janet, expand their studies to the drums and flute, which play together with the shamisen in nagauta music, as well as the dances that are accompanied by nagauta music.

We read about some other people in Janet's life who, by extension, are also part of Sensei's life. In particular, we encounter an academic researcher whom Sensei takes under her wing and is a rival for Sensei's attention. But the constant is always Sensei. Sometimes Janet and Sensei argue, sometimes Sensei favors other students over Janet, but each encounter offers a little more insight into music, Japanese culture, and into Janet herself.

In the end, Sensei's advice "instead of learning, experience" takes Janet beyond the music world and into Japanese culture in general. "I developed a taste for leggy *enoki* mushrooms and pickled plums. I still ate curried noodles in the cafeteria but no longer had to season my white rice with grated cheese, enjoying the pearly grains plain. The change was less a deliberate decision than a natural occurrence, as if something inside me had said, 'It's time to eat plain rice now,' and so I did" (48–49). By learning the shamisen, she learns to listen differently to the world around her. "Sound was king. The ear how I took in everything. Not only music but all of Tokyo. The train chimes, a million pairs of shoes on the station steps, vendors hawking their wares. Tokyo was a carnival, a free-for-all bazaar" (67).

A caveat about this book: It is one person's experiences with one teacher, and while there are certainly foreigners who have similar stories, Pocorobba's experiences do not always align with the experiences of all other non-Japanese studying traditional arts in Japan. Most teachers operate strictly within cultural norms, and some foreign students integrate well into that world. My personal experiences with two *koto* teachers were very different than Pocorobba's, but so were my objectives, which influenced my interactions. Readers should be aware that this memoir offers a look through one window into the traditional arts world, but there are other windows, with other vistas, into the same world.

If there is one lesson to be garnered from this memoir, perhaps it is summed up in this short exchange between Janet and Sensei: "If I made excuses, 'This shamisen is hard to play' or 'This one has a short neck,' she would look dubious. 'Shamisen is shamisen, Janet.' To her, it was always up to you, the player" (52). ■

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ANNE PRESCOTT is the Director of the Five College Center for East Asian Studies in Northampton, Massachusetts, and a National Director for the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia. Her recent NCTA work includes study tours and programming on peace studies centering on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She is the Editor of *East Asia in the World: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2015), which won the Buchanan Prize in 2016. Trained as an Ethnomusicologist specializing in traditional Japanese music, she spent eight years studying *koto* in Japan.



The poster features a black and white photograph of the Boston skyline, including the Sheraton Boston Hotel & Hynes Convention Center. In the top left corner, there is a circular logo with a map of Asia and the text "Association for Asian Studies". In the top right corner, a black box contains the hashtag "#AAS2020". The central text reads "Sheraton Boston Hotel & Hynes Convention Center" above the word "BOSTON" in large, bold, white letters. Below "BOSTON" is the text "Call for Proposals: Summer 2019". At the bottom left, the text "2020 ANNUAL CONFERENCE BOSTON MARCH 19-22" is displayed next to a line drawing of a three-masted sailing ship. At the bottom right, it says "Further information will be available on the AAS website: <http://bit.ly/AAS2020>".