

# Taiko

## Japan's Number One Energy Export

by Marc Steuben

The cycle is like a turbine: The drummers give their energy to the drums. The drums take that energy and give it to the audience. The audience takes that energy and gives it back to the drummers. A few times around that loop and the world starts to seem different. Better.

Taiko (usually translated as “great drum”) have been used in Japan for thousands of years. Drums were originally used in religious ceremonies, for communication between villages, and in warfare for setting marching paces and signaling troops. It wasn't until 1951 that taiko started to be used as musical ensemble performance art, for which the drums are now famous.

Oguchi Daihachi, sometimes called “Daihachi the Drummer,” had energy specifically in mind when he formed the first taiko ensemble (the Japanese term used for ensemble taiko is *kumi-daiko*, but for simplicity, “taiko” will be used here.) Before taiko, one of Oguchi's many pursuits was jazz drumming, and he's said that an important goal for playing jazz in local dance halls in post-war Japan was to “energize the worn spirits of a defeated people.”

As the local drum expert, one day Ogushi was asked to interpret a sheet of taiko music found at Osuwa Shrine. With no existing record of the musical notation, it was an almost impossible task, but he was fortunate enough to find a man named Narisawa Sabaji who was familiar with the notation and rhythms from his youth. Together they deciphered the music.

It was a great success, but there remained one problem: the music, especially to the inclinations of a jazz-minded drummer looking to energize worn spirits, was boring. From this music, he needed excitement. He needed power. To get that, he reasoned, he needed more drums. He needed drums of varying pitch. He needed more drummers. And he needed them to play with their entire bodies and souls. In other words, he needed taiko.

So he created the taiko group Osuwa Daiko. The original members had almost no musical training, so Oguchi based their first pieces on variations of the original shrine score. The evolution of that score has continued ever since, and the once humble, boring taiko score still lives as an exciting piece in Osuwa Daiko's repertoire called “The Thunder of Suwa.”



Kenny Endo

photo courtesy of Raymond Yuen

Another group which started around the same time as Osuwa Daiko was Sukeroku Daiko, and they added more power and choreography to the game. This group broke up, but its members went on to form new groups, one of which was Oedo Sukeroku Daiko, which was the world's first professional taiko group. The energy continued to spread throughout Japan. Currently the world's most famous group, Kodo started on Sado Island in 1969. In just 15 years, taiko spread throughout Japan, and due to its long history, coupled with modern innovation, it became ingrained in the Japanese culture. But that was just the start.

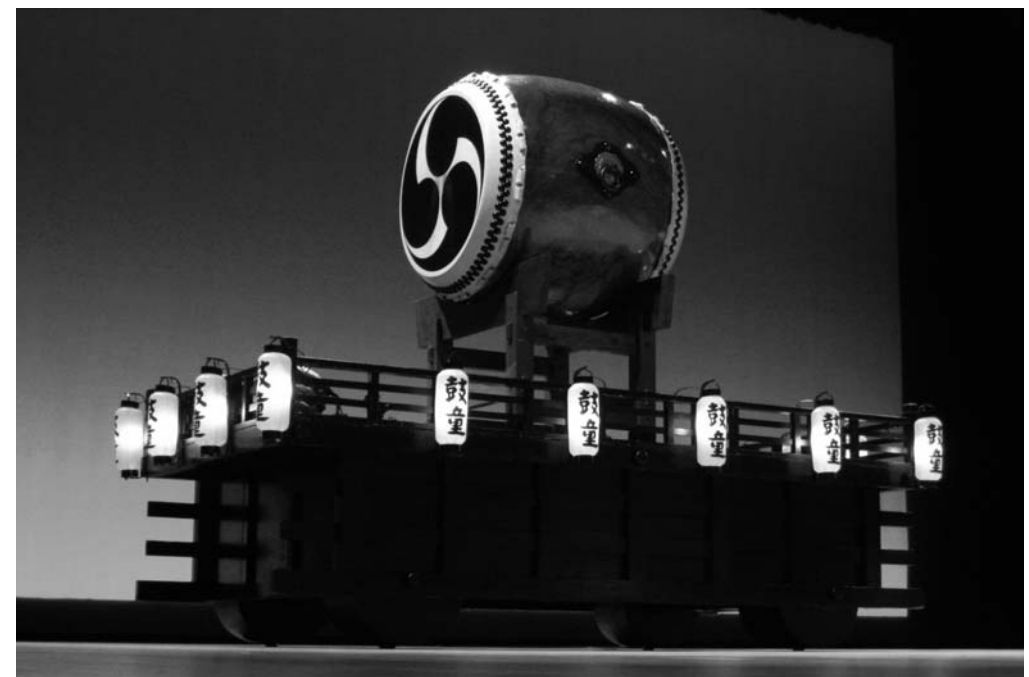
In 1968, a farmhand named Tanaka Seiichi who had just immigrated to the United States the previous year moved to San Francisco. He attended the San Francisco Japantown Cherry Blossom Festival and was disappointed by the lack of taiko drumming. While taiko drums had been brought to the United States as early 1910, their use in the United States was quite limited. But Tanaka had studied with Oguchi, and he knew the potential. At that festival, he found his calling. He borrowed drums from the local Buddhist Temple, gathered some friends, and they prepared to perform at the Aki (Autumn) festival. That performance was the birth of the San Francisco Taiko Dojo—the first taiko group outside of Japan, and still one of the best in America.

Though taiko was respected and appreciated in the US from the start, its spread outside of San Francisco was initially quite slow. The high expense of traditional Japanese taiko drums, which are made from solid shells carved from trees, and the slower progression of information in the pre-internet age, kept the taiko boom contained for a while. In 1969, Kinnara Taiko was formed by Reverend Maso Kodani



photo courtesy of Raymond Yuen

Kenny Endo Taiko Ensemble



Kodo taiko drum



On Ensemble

photo courtesy of Jason Lew

of the Senshin Buddhist Temple of Los Angeles. This group, just the second in the US, made its mark on the history of taiko right away: It figured out how to make good new drums out of old wine barrels. Now anyone with access to a wine barrel and rawhide (and willing to do a lot of hard work), could make a drum. In California, many people did.

One of these people was Roy Hirabayashi. Recruited by the Reverend of his Buddhist temple, Roy's goal was to establish a taiko group for the people of the community. Roy visited Kinnara Taiko and learned how to make



San Jose Taiko

drums and run a taiko group, and, in 1973, San Jose Taiko was formed. These three seminal groups: San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Kinnara Taiko, and San Jose Taiko complete what is known as the First Wave of Taiko Groups in the United States.



San Francisco Taiko Dojo; Seichi Tanaka is seen in the center.

The Second Wave almost tripled the number of groups in North America, adding five groups and bringing the total to eight. More important than the number of groups brought by the Second Wave, however, was the geographical diversity that was added. A foothold was made in the central US when Denver Taiko was formed in 1976. Then Soh Daiko immediately took the phenomenon coast to coast when it formed in New York in 1979. Back on the west coast, the wave flowed to the north when



Shasta Yama

Vancouver's Katari Taiko formed in 1979, Seattle's Kokon Taiko formed in 1980, and Shasta Taiko formed in 1985.

Since the mid 1980s, the progression is difficult to track. Players from the groups of each wave relocated, forming new groups. Players from new groups relocated and formed newer groups.

It is estimated that there are now a few hundred taiko groups in North America. There are dozens of groups throughout Europe, dozens more throughout the rest of Asia. The Taiko Community group on Facebook has over 1,800 members. The great concentration is of course still in Japan, where there are around 10,000 groups, but even those "home grown" groups continue to radiate energy because several professional Japanese taiko groups go on world tours annually. Kodo sometimes performs together with popular local cultural music groups when they travel. Modern groups, like the eclectic On Ensemble, use taiko and other traditional Japanese instruments and throw in instruments and elements of hip-hop, rock, and electronica.

So the turbine of Japan's number one energy export continues unabated. It has likely gained players and fans faster than any other cultural folk music. The reason for its widespread attraction has been debated with no clear answer, but one possibility is particularly compelling: though the music is Japanese in origin, its main element—the beat—is universal. The first sound heard by any human baby is the heartbeat of the mother as the baby grows inside her. That energy resides in us all. ♥

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# Around the World with *Eye-Ai*



**Section chief: Mark Buckton**  
**Reporter: Terri Nii**

We are delighted to bring you another installment of *Around the World with Eye-Ai*, the brainchild of Mark Buckton.

We're waiting to hear from you! Why not take a photo of yourself and/or your family or friends holding a recent copy of *Eye-Ai* to be published in an upcoming issue? Stand in front of a scene or object that represents your town and snap a shot. Or take a picture of yourself(ves) on vacation and send us the photo. We'd love to see you holding *Eye-Ai* and standing in front of any landmark, local or international. It would be fun to make a collage of multiple photos. Together with the photo, send us a caption to describe the photo and people. If you prefer that names not be mentioned, just give us the location and other details as desired. Please send whatever text you'd like us to use.

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*Eye-Ai* editor Minami Matsushima enjoys the scenery in Mardin, located in southeast Turkey. Notice the architecture on the hill in the background. The guide giving the tour was an archeologist who explained the meaning behind the various relics that continue to be found in the area.

Photo © Akiya Tamba

Kathy and Rick Jasper pose with recent issues of *Eye-Ai* in front of an iconic kiss. Based on the famous V-J Day photograph taken in Times Square, New York city on August 14, 1945, this huge (25-foot, 7.6m) statue entitled "Unconditional Surrender" by J. Seward Johnson is located next to the USS Midway Museum in San Diego. ♥