

THE SOUND OF THUNDER



PHOTOS: TAIKO CENTER OF LOS ANGELES

TAIKO DRUM ENSEMBLES

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ The word *taiko* means large drum in Japanese. But that doesn't adequately tell the story when it comes to the drumming and choreography that takes place at the many taiko centers in Japan and all around the US. The high-energy percussive performances last from five minutes to about half an hour and typically speed up as they move toward a high-energy grand finale.

There are two basic types of taiko: *byou uchi-daiko* and *shime-daiko*. Both have tight heads on both ends, creating a sealed resonating cavity with high pitch relative to the size of the drums. They are generally struck with a hammer-like stick called a *bachi*. Traditionally, byou-uchi daiko are made from a single piece of hollowed out tree and have heads nailed to the body. They are



PICTURED: (Right) Rev. Tom Kurai, director of the Taiko Center of Los Angeles performing on a nagado-daiko. (Above) Members of Taiko Center of Los Angeles performing on shoulder-slung oke-daiko in concert.

not tunable. Shime-daiko have tunable heads sewn onto iron rings laced around the drum body. The most common drum found in taiko ensembles is the *nagado-daiko*, a byou uchi-daiko, which is elongated, shaped like a wine barrel.

The largest drum in many taiko ensembles is the *odaiko*, which translates appropriately to big taiko. These drums require great endurance to play. Ranging in diameter from 12 inches to 12 feet, many of them are too large to even move.

Sometimes taiko ensembles will incorporate other Japanese instruments such as *shakuhachi* or *shinobue* (bamboo flutes) and string instruments like the *biwa* (a short-necked, fretted lute), *koto* (a zither), and *shamisen* (a three-stringed lute).

Taiko is the subject of much Japanese folklore. One myth about the origin of taiko is that the sun goddess Amaterasu was so upset by of her brother, Susanowa, the god of thunder, that she went into a cave and vowed never to come out. The world was plunged into darkness and the other gods pleaded with her to come out. Uzume, the goddess of dawn, opened a barrel of sake, turned it upside down, and began to beat and dance, creating the first taiko. Everyone laughed and rejoiced, drawing Amaterasu out of the cave.

Most historians believe that taiko migrated to Japan from China and/or Korea around the 5th century. For hundreds of years the drums were used to ward off disease, bring rain, bless harvests, call ancestors to celebra-

tion, communicate, send soldiers to war, and call fishermen in from the sea. It wasn't until the last century that taiko ensembles became performance art.

Oddly enough, the modern taiko movement was actually inspired by jazz. A former jazz drummer, Daihachi Oguchi put together the first taiko ensemble (*kumi-daiko*) in 1951 when he was asked to play a piece for a Japanese shrine. Because of his background, the master Japanese drummer decided to add some jazz-style flare by creating a taiko ensemble that followed the orientation of a jazz drumset.

Afterward, he formed a more permanent ensemble and the movement grew from there. Other groups added choreography and solos, and upped the speed, fluidity, and power of the ensembles as they became more skilled. Distinct taiko styles developed in different parts of Japan.

The taiko movement first arrived in the US in the late 1960s with Japanese immigrant Seiichi Tanaka who founded San Francisco Taiko Dojo (sftaiko.com). By the early 1970s there were two more taiko ensembles in the US—Kinnara Taiko in Los Angeles and San Jose Taiko. Because of the cost and lack of taiko drums in the US, enthusiasts fashioned drums in new designs and methods from improvised materials, such as wine and nail barrels. In this way, taiko drumming in America diversified itself from Japanese drumming. Today groups can be found in major cities all over the US.

TAIKO VOCABULARY:

bachi: straight wooden sticks used to play taiko drums.

byou: tacks that hold the skin in place on a byou uchi-daiko.

chanchiki: a high-pitched hand-held instrument used to establish common tempo.

fuchi: the rim of the drum.

hara: the center of the drum head.

jikata: a performer who plays the ji (or main) rhythm. Also called *ouchi*.

jiuchi (or ji): a basic or backing rhythm.

ka: the okedo rim sound.

kanagu (or kan): ring-shaped handles on larger nagado-daiko.

kawa: the skin on the drum head.

kizami: straight, simple meter.

ko: the body of the drum.

kumi-daiko: an ensemble of two or more drummers.

ma: the period between hits on the drum (an interval or space).

nawa: the rope on a shime-daiko or okedo-daiko.

oke-daiko: taiko with barrel-stave construction with heads stretched over steel rings and laced to the body with rope. It is often played slung over the shoulder.

oroshi: a series of hits on the taiko that gradually speed up.