Contemporary Taiko Performance in Japan I

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The family of Japanese drums known as taiko is ubiquitous in Japanese society. They are used in religious and court rituals, as accompaniment for theater and festivals, and on their own as featured instruments in concerts. It is this last usage of taiko that is perhaps best known outside of Japan, but it is also the most recent of musical developments concerning the drums. The usage of taiko at the center of a performance is a post-World War II development, a combination of musical and visual elements from both across Japan and outside of the country, resulting in somewhere the rests in between old and new.

This essay explores the history of contemporary taiko performance, tracing its expansion beyond festival and theatrical roots into a performance medium featuring the drums themselves. Five groups and artists will be highlighted, demonstrating how they helped to develop contemporary performance techniques and repertoire. With an emphasis upon the link between standard festival and theatrical usages of taiko and the contemporary use in concert settings, this essay will reveal how, in post-World War II Japan, artists combined many different musical and visual influences into a new mode of performance.

What Are Taiko?

Taiko is the Japanese word for drum, typically applied to drum types native to Japan (the term wadaiko, literally “Japanese drum,” can also be used). There exist within Japan a wide variety of taiko, all used in many different fashions, but a few in particular can be linked to contemporary taiko performance. The type of drum used most often in contemporary performance is a byō-uchi-daiko (“tack-hit drum”), a drum in which skins are attached to both sides of a wooden body using tacks. A byō-uchi-daiko with a barrel-shaped body called a nagadō-daiko (“long-bodied drum”) is perhaps the most frequently used type of byō-uchi-daiko in contemporary taiko performance (Figure 1).

Performed alongside byō-uchi-daiko in a variety of performance contexts is a rope-tied drum called a shime-daiko (“tightened drum”) or tsukeshime-daiko (“attached, tightened drum”) (Figure 2). The skin used for a shime-daiko head is stretched over and sewed to a metal ring; the resulting circular head is then placed on both sides of a short, cylindrical wooden body. After ropes are drawn through holes in the heads, the skin tension is raised by tightening the ropes.

One other prevalent types of taiko used in contemporary performance is a katsugi okedō-daiko ("shoulder-carried bucket-bodied drum"), commonly used in festival music of the Tōhoku region of Japan (Figure 3). While the bodies of byō-uchi-daiko and shime-daiko are typically made out of a single piece of wood, katsugi okedō-daiko bodies are comprised of many boards joined together like a bucket and fitted into a bamboo hoop; the heads, meanwhile, are constructed and tightened in a manner similar to shime-daiko heads.

The above types of drums are typically hit with bachi, or drumsticks, but there also exists a particular type of drum in Japanese music that is hit with the hand. Called tsuzumi, these are hourglass-shaped wooden drums with heads on rings placed on each side of the body and tightened using ropes (the body construction and hitting type serve to separate them from shime-daiko) (Figure 4). These drums are commonly used in hōgaku (Japanese classical music), particularly in theatrical settings.

Traditional Usages of Taiko

While taiko are used in a variety of musical settings in Japan, there are two primary genres from which contemporary taiko artists have routinely drawn inspiration: festival music and theatrical music. The drums discussed above are used in both genres, but often with different hitting techniques and used in different contexts. At the same time, however, these two musical worlds are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as elements of festival music can be found in theatrical music and vice versa, but as will be discussed later in this essay artists have taken particular elements from each musical environment while developing contemporary taiko techniques.

Festival Drumming

Taiko are a common sight at Japanese festivals (matsuri), used both for visual and musical purposes. One float carried as part of a procession during the June festival Sannō Matsuri in Tokyo, for example, features a statue of a rooster standing upon a painted nagadō-daiko (Figure 5). The musical role of taiko in festivals is more common than the visual, however; drums are hit during ceremonies are shrines and temples during festivals both as part of ritual and announce the beginning or end of a ceremony.

And yet, it is the use of taiko in the musical genre of matsuri-bayashi (literally, "festival orchestra") but a phrase used for both the ensemble and the music itself that is most closely linked with contemporary taiko performance. Matsuri-bayashi are an essential part of matsuri proceedings; in their most visible role, they serve as part of Shintō festival processions, accompanying the mikoshi, a portable shrine believed to serve as

palanquin for the gods, as it is carried around the area surrounding a shrine. In this situation, musicians either sit on a float as they play (Figure 6) or walk behind a cart upon which their drums are mounted (as seen in Video 1).

Both the music played by matsuri-bayashi ensembles and the instrumentation of the ensembles themselves varies according to region, but most ensembles feature a small nagadō-daiko with a head diameter of 12 to13 inches, at least one shime-daiko, a bamboo flute called a fue (or some other melodic instrument), and a metallic percussion instrument (often a handheld gong called atarigane or a pair of small handheld cymbals called chappa). The drums and percussion instruments primarily serve as rhythmic accompaniment for the melodic instrument in matsuri-bayashi, but in some festival settings taiko have a much larger role. For example, the drums are the main focus of the music of the Gozu Tennō Matsuri on the island of Miyake, part of a chain of islands southeast of the main island of Honshū.

Bon daiko

Matsuri-bayashi are largely associated with Shintō festivals, but there are drumming traditions as part of Buddhist rite that have also influenced contemporary taiko performance. Most prominent among Buddhist usages of taiko is the drumming called bon daiko, played for the late summer festival of Obon that honors ancestor's spirit. A major part of Obon festivities are nighttime celebrations featuring group dances called bon odori. In bon odori, dancers circle around a tower called yagura, stepping and moving their hands in time to folk songs called ondo. At the top of most yagura rests a single taiko (typically a nagadō-daiko). Before World War II, a full musical ensemble could be found on the yagura, featuring drums, melodic instruments like the fue or shamisen (a three-stringed lute-like instrument), and a singer. In the postwar period, however, the ensemble disappeared, leaving only the taiko (Figure 7).

Theatrical Drumming—Hōgaku

While festival drumming was a major influence on the development of contemporary taiko performance, it was not the only stimulus for artistic development. The music performed in noh and kabuki theater, part of a larger genre called hōgaku, has also served as a source of inspiration for contemporary taiko artists. In the theater, taiko serve as accompaniment for songs and dancing as part of a larger ensemble, often featuring many of the same instruments that can be found in matsuri-bayashi as well as the tsuzumi (Figure 4). However, taiko are also occasionally featured on their own, such as in a kabuki piece called "Ichi-ban Daiko." This work is performed on a large nagadō-daiko called an ō-daiko (literally, "large drum") prior to the opening of a kabuki play, serving as notice that the play is about to start (Video 2).

The Rise of Kumidaiko: Oguchi Daihachi and Osuwa Daiko

Even as taiko have remained pervasive in Japanese society through their use in festival and theatrical music, the beginnings of the contemporary taiko movement stemmed as much from Western music as it did from these Japanese settings. Indeed, it was a jazz drummer who paved the way for the development of new compositional and performance techniques. Oguchi Daihachi, from Okaya, Nagano Prefecture, is credited as starting the contemporary taiko movement. Born in 1924, Oguchi took drum set lessons as a student at Waseda University in Tokyo before he was drafted into the army and sent to fight in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War during World War II. Following the war, Oguchi returned to Okaya and founded a bread company. At nights, he played drum set in light music groups in the region (light music was a general term for Western-influenced popular music developed in the post-war period).

Despite Oguchi's drum set experience, however, he had very little experience playing taiko in festival settings, but his Western drumming experience would intersect with the world of Japanese festival drumming in the mid-1950s when he was asked by a relative to take a look at a fragment of a festival drumming score found in a local miso cellar. The score contained a drumming pattern for festival drumming that had not been in the region since the beginning of the century. Oguchi's relative asked him to interpret the score and play the music at an upcoming festival, but Oguchi had no knowledge of either the notation or the music. As he later said, it was as if "a Western-style cook took in an order for sushi." Nevertheless, he found the concept of reviving the music for a festival to be interesting and set out to learn how to play the music.

Oguchi managed to find an older resident of the town who had studied the festival drumming music with the person who wrote the score; additionally, he learned how to read the score from local priests. Thanks to these efforts, he was able to interpret the score and figure out how the music was supposed to sound: it was a series of several patterns played in alternation by two drummers on opposite sides of a single nagadō-daiko. Oguchi began to teach others how to play this music, with the intent of presenting it at the local Suwa Grand Shrine's annual Ofune Matsuri. As they played, however, Oguchi found himself to be dissatisfied. The music did not appeal to his Western-influenced musical tastes, as he found it to be slow and repetitive. Meanwhile, the drumming was meant to occur using just one drum, but he found it more interesting and fun to have all his friends play together on many drums.

In a moment of initiative that was the beginning of the contemporary taiko performance movement, Oguchi decided to modify the festival drumming fragment. He expanded the instrumentation from just one drum to many drums of different sizes, bringing together

various types of taiko that he and his friends were able to acquire at local pawnshops. Next, he started to arrange the music according to his Western influenced musical tastes, speeding up the rhythms and altering them slightly to sound more like jazz. Further, he used an instrumentation method borrowed from Western jazz bands, dividing drums into groups of high-, medium-, and low-sounding instruments and then assigning them to accompanying or melodic roles. He named the resulting arrangement "Suwa Ikazuchi" ("Suwa Thunder," borrowing "Suwa" from the Suwa Grand Shrine). In 1957, Oguchi and his group of friends debuted the piece first at a banquet for a local businessmen's association and then at the Suwa Grand Shrine Ofune Matsuri. The performance was a huge success. Spurred on by this achievement, Oguchi and his friends called themselves Osuwa Daiko and began playing at other festivals in the region (aided by the fact that the Suwa Grand Shrine is one of the oldest shrines in Japan and head shrine for the Suwa network of shrines across the nation).

Oguchi's arrangement of "Suwa Ikazuchi" and formation of Osuwa Daiko marked the beginning of the contemporary taiko performance movement. It was the first time that taiko were made the sole focus of a performance, brought out of the accompanying role it typically holds in festival and theatrical music. At the same time, however, by combining festival drumming with non-Japanese elements like jazz, Oguchi created a new style of performance unlike any previous use of taiko. The ensemble drumming style of performance he created would come to be known as kumidaiko ("group drumming"), and would gradually spread across Japan as Ōsuwa Daiko performed in increasingly larger-scale environments. Beginning at regional festivals, the group was soon featured on local, and then national, television programs, with this expansion culminating in a role in the opening ceremonies of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Oguchi continued to create new works to be played alongside "Suwa Ikazuchi" at the many performances given by Ōsuwa Daiko. One such work is "Hiryū Sandan Gaeshi" ("The Dragon God Descends Three Times"), composed in the early 1970s for performance at the Osaka Expo and regarded by Oguchi as one of his favorite compositions (Video 3).

Despite the fact that Oguchi was composing original pieces that combined festival music and jazz, Japanese and non-Japanese musical influences, Oguchi maintained that the music he and his group were playing was a revival of older festival music found in the Lake Suwa region; he also stated that it was the revival of the war drumming of Takeda Shingen, a sixteenth century daimyō (warlord) who had ruled that region. It is difficult to either confirm or refute Oguchi's claims of revival. Certainly, he based "Suwa Ikazuchi" on a found festival drumming fragment from the area, and drums did serve military purposes in Japan's past, but this perspective ignores the contemporary performance elements brought in by Oguchi. Beyond the rhythmic and instrumentation

changes made for Ōsuwa Daiko performances, Oguchi also brought many together many taiko in a single set to be played like a drum set, playing a role not unlike the one Oguchi would have behind a Western drum set in his light music band.

And yet, despite these apparent anachronisms, Oguchi would continue to advertise the status of Ōsuwa Daiko as “revival,” featuring old names for the region surrounding Lake Suwa on banners and performance garb. Further, the group would tap into elements of Shintō ritual through the attachment of gohei, Shintō paper offerings to the gods, to taiko, as well as the chanting of original norito, Shintō chanting, during the performance of original songs. Regardless of the veracity of these connections to the past, they have proven to be influential, particularly on the context in which kumidaiko performance can be found. Today, groups can be found across Japan performing original compositions as part of festival activities on Shintō shrine grounds alongside matsuri-bayashi ensembles playing older festival music. Taiko continue to have a place in festival settings, even if the music being played on the drums is changing.

Suggested Reading

Bender, Shawn. 2012. Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

Endo, Kenny. 1999. “Yodan Uchi: A Contemporary Composition for Taiko.” MA Thesis, University of Hawaii.