

Taiko Drumming as Sound Knowledge



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Abstract: This article explores the history of Taiko drumming as a practice of sound knowledge. It also discusses the history and cultural significance of Taiko in the United States.

Keywords: Taiko drumming, Japan, drums, music, Asian American music, identity politics

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The history of taiko drumming underscores the complexity of identifying any one source or point in time of indigenous practice. Rather, it provides a powerful illustration of how indigenous knowledge and practice of taiko are never fixed and discrete, but, rather, are produced, assembled through various cultural influences, and on the move. According to Carter (2013), Taiko drumming is an “invented tradition” in that it continually remakes itself, both in Japan and around the globe, to reflect contemporary influences as well as historical ties.

The Japanese word *taiko* typically refers to both the instrument itself (literally translated as ‘fat drum’) as well as the practice and performance of drumming. Influenced by music of Japan, China, Korea and India, the many roots of taiko are found in various contexts. The tradition is thought to have originated in Buddhist practices in India, China and Korea around the sixth century, in festivals associated with Buddhism and Shintoism, in war as a battle drum, as a form of communication across distances, and as a component of *Gagaku* (Japanese Imperial court music) in the sixth century. The form and style of Gagaku are part of contemporary taiko. Gagaku music has a fixed form, steady rhythm, and an

elastic, “breath rhythm” that mimics inhaling and exhaling rather than a steady tempo (Malm 1977). Similarly, *ma*—a word associated with spiritual principals (Takemitsu 1995)—connotes the vibrancy of empty spaces, or rests, between sounds. By increasing or decreasing this silence, the expression of sound takes on different qualities, creating tension and release (Kodani). Other taiko influences derive from festival drumming in different Japanese prefectures. Festival music often uses a collection of drums and other instruments such as a *hayashi* (flute), gong, or *kagaku* (conch shell). Different Japanese prefectures often have drum patterns or melodies that are unique to particular villages or towns. To this day, certain regions are associated with certain stylized movements and stances.

The first taiko ensembles, in which different drums played different rhythmic and melodic parts together were established in the 1950s in Japan. This ensemble style of playing is generally referred to as *kumidaiko* (harmony drum) in North America or *wadaiko* in Japan. The style often includes soloing, which exhibits the characteristic melody and rhythms of the existing piece while also using the steady rhythm maintained by the other players as a base for artistic innovations, skill, and artistry. *Osuwa-Daiko*, established in 1951, is among the first Japanese ensembles of this style, and incorporates both traditional Japanese and jazz rhythms (Takata 1997). This style pervades American taiko. Perhaps one of the most noticeable appropriations is the American jazz idiom of improvisation. Many American taiko ensembles add solos to precomposed pieces. Furthermore, many taiko compositions draw on musical traditions from around the world, such as Afro-Cuban rhythms, salsa, popular music, and instruments not traditionally played in taiko, such as the guitar.

Integral to drumming is *kata*, the physical movement and visible, choreographed form of taiko drumming. Drums are played gracefully, with purposeful movement, so that the visual aspect of music is emphasized as much as the aural. Martial arts stances, such as lowering the hips to stabilize the body, have influenced the *kata* of many contemporary taiko ensembles. Certain styles of *kata* have also been developed by taiko ensembles. The *Sukeroku* style, named after *O Edo Sukeroku Taiko*, is characterized by identifiable movements that correspond with a slanted drum configuration, in which the drum and the drummer's stance are aligned on a diagonal plane.

Taiko in the United States: Re-Sounding Identity

Historical events in the United States, notably the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, have served as the basis for a reconceptualization

of taiko in the United States as a cultural project concerned with Asian American identity politics. Although taiko drumming is characterized by the sound conventions of steady, elastic rhythms, *ma*, visual–sound integration through *kata*, percussive instruments such as small cymbals and shakers, and *kumidaiko* (ensemble drumming), North American taiko borrows from musical forms such as jazz, Native American drumming, and salsa. Like the music itself, *kata* is hybridized, incorporating movements drawn from gagaku, martial arts, and contemporary dance.

Taiko drumming has played a significant role in Asian American politics, and I have written elsewhere about the ways in which taiko drumming configures the social construction of identity (Powell 2012, 2008). Sound has been addressed as a mode of experience that has both physical and psychological dimensions (Feld 1990, 1996; Gell 1995). Acoustemology, a term popularized by Steven Feld, is “an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of the ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth” (1996, 97). Important for indigenous studies is the way in which acoustemology highlights the somatic experience of place as a means of composing identities that, paradoxically, transcend a particular instance or locale. For example, Johnny Mori of Kinnara Taiko, has noted that his practice of Japanese American taiko does not have an explicit connection with Japan. Rather, he describes “making...up” a musical style for his group, in keeping with the concept of an invented tradition (Fromartz and Greenfield 1998).

North American taiko is constructed through, and as, sonic, gestural, and overtly political discursive practices that locate it within the larger field of taiko drumming, as well as the larger landscape of identity politics. Fromartz and Greenfield (1998, 44) have called attention to the aesthetic practices of taiko drumming that disrupt the cultural myth and stereotype of a “quiet” and “docile” Asian: the strong stance, the physical stamina needed for drumming, the loudness of the drums, and the use of martial arts movements in the drumming, creates a space that is “anything but quiet”. Deborah Wong (2004, 229), has discussed the ways in which taiko “remodulates” racial categories such as Japanese, Japanese American, Asian, and Asian American, noting how the “sensual, sounded body” moves through historical constructions to create new ones .

San Jose Taiko: Sounding Place, Placing Sound

[San Jose Taiko](#), a taiko performance group located in California--with whom I’ve apprenticed, researched, and studied—is an example of a taiko drumming

ensemble that has composed several original compositions that nod toward older, historical elements of taiko as well as toward contemporary global music and dance. Since their inception, San Jose Taiko has been developing a style that reflects Japanese American concerns, jazz idioms, and their own American experiences and musical influences (Hirabayashi 2001, pers. comm.). Over the years, their compositions have included Afro-Cuban rhythms, electronica (see for example, their [collaboration](#) with The Bangerz, 2010), rock, funk, hip hop, and Filipino musical instruments and influences. They have also experimented with sonification of events (e.g., seismic sonification) and of urban spaces. They have developed compositions for San Jose Japantown's cultural events, such as the annual *Obon* festival and Day of Remembrance, which commemorates the United States presidential executive order 9066, authorizing the relocation of Japanese Americans to internment camps in 1942. One of three remaining in the United States, San Jose Japantown is a historic, one hundred and twenty-five-year-old neighborhood developed from the first settlement of Japanese immigrants in the Santa Clara Valley of California. Franco Imperial and Wisa Uemura--artistic and executive directors, respectively, of San Jose Taiko--are developing work pertaining to the sonification of urban spaces and stories and experiences of Japantown (pers. comm.).

Another example of experimentation with taiko as a mode of expression can be found in the work of PJ Hirabayashi, Artistic Director Emeritus, former Artistic Director, and founding member of San Jose Taiko. She has recently founded [TaikoPeace](#), an interdisciplinary, collaborative project that brings together taiko, Japanese *butoh* dance, *haiku* writing, spoken word, and chanting towards the goal of self-expression, connection, and compassion. Over the years, Hirabayashi has engaged in numerous artistic collaborations, and TaikoPeace is an example of how sound as a way of knowing reverberates beyond a physical location.

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