

Sharing Knowledge

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Photo: Sophia Judkins

As a young taiko group, it is very valuable to learn what more experienced taiko groups do. The advantages of learning from more experienced groups are many, such as being inspired by what others do and to be able to share knowledge, making it possible to try out new creative ways of doing things.

As a young taiko group, it is very valuable to learn what more experienced taiko groups do, and we should always be very grateful when we meet taiko groups that are generously sharing their knowledge. What we learn from others can help us find new creative ways of doing things and it can also be a great inspiration. We had the wonderful opportunity to ask two professional taiko artists to share their knowledge with us.

There is a wonderful taiko community that we can connect to and share knowledge with, and being a part of this taiko community allows for amazing opportunities that we may not otherwise have had. Among these opportunities have been inviting professional taiko artists to come to Sweden and share their knowledge, not only through workshops, but having been able to share their knowledge in our articles.

We are very grateful to all the taiko artists that have so generously shared their knowledge

with us. It has inspired us and helped us as a young taiko group to find new creative ways of doing things. It is our hope that others will benefit and be inspired as well.

Earlier this year, in the beginning of September, we had the wonderful opportunity to hold an exciting event with Shonagh Walker and Martin Doyle from *Tsuchigumo Daiko* with taiko workshops and a joint taiko performance in Uppsala. In connection to that amazing event, we also had the great opportunity to do an interview with Shonagh Walker and Martin Doyle who are professional taiko artists based in Scotland.

Soo-Im Jansson: *Could you tell me a little about your taiko background and how you got started with taiko?*

Shonagh Walker: I actually started in school, the high school I went to. I was very lucky, in fact. One of the music teachers there had star-

ted a group, but did not have any proper taiko equipment. It was there I had my first experience of taiko, seeing this group playing in school. Seeing them on stage shouting and making these big shapes, I just thought that it was the coolest thing I had ever seen. So when I was able, I joined them and that was how I started playing. I then went on to join an established professional group just outside Glasgow. After working my way through their ranks, I began touring, teaching, and performing professionally. In total I've been playing for about 15 years. After leaving the group nearly 3 years ago, my partner Martin and I started our own group *Tsuchigumo Daiko*.

Martin Doyle: I started playing drumkit when I was around 16 or 17, just messing around in my parent's garage, before going on to join a variety rock and heavy metal bands. I absolutely love drumming and had thought seriously about trying to make a career out of it, but things came to a temporary halt in my 20's, as I dabbled with getting a "real job". Gradually, I came to the realization that I wouldn't be happy unless I followed my dream, so I left my job as a tech support engineer to formally study music.



Martin Doyle

Photo by:
Vera Cloe Zebrowska;
Courtesy of:
Tsuchigumo Daiko

It was in my third year of University that my lecturer, Ronnie Goodman, opened my eyes to taiko. He said, "okay, you love Japanese culture, you like martial arts, and you're a drummer, so you probably going to love taiko!" My first exposure was watching videos of *Ondekoza* and *Kodo*, which totally blew my mind. I was immediately drawn to the synergy between the physical and the musical; the use of the whole body and being to create this wonderfully powerful and life-affirming spec-

tacle. I had previously visited Japan and seen some groups drumming in the street, but at the time I knew nothing of the history or traditions, not to mention the sheer depth and variety encompassed by the umbrella term, "Taiko Drumming". I quickly resolved to make this art my career, and signed up for a weekend workshop with the same group Shonagh was a member of. One week later I auditioned and was accepted as a member of their dojo, where I eventually became a member of the touring ensemble. After 4 years touring and performing professionally, I decided to start my own group with Shonagh, which we called *Tsuchigumo Daiko*. We really weren't sure if it would work out, but things have gone really well so far, and we hope that's how it will continue.

SJ: Can you tell us a little about *Tsuchigumo Daiko*?

Shonagh Walker: *Tsuchigumo Daiko* is based in Glasgow, Scotland. We are an inclusive group open to all levels and abilities, and we have a progression route in place where players can test themselves at a higher level should they choose to do so. For example, our Thursday group is made up of recreational community players. They have real fun with their playing, and don't necessarily have aspirations to become professional level players. It's a really great group that we fully enjoy working with.



Shonagh Walker

Photo by:
Vera Cloe Zebrowska;
Courtesy of:
Tsuchigumo Daiko

We also have an intermediate group, who take their training more seriously and are challenged accordingly. Finally, we have our Saturday group for those wishing to test their mental and physical limits. It's here we try to cultivate professional standard performers, so we push these guys really hard and they form the core of our main performing group. On

occasion we mix the groups up and involve everyone, but it depends on the type of performance that has been requested. As the level increases, so too does the intensity of the training, complexity of songs, etc.

Martin Doyle: We have people who come along and want to learn and know everything, but quickly realise that perhaps the time commitment is too much, or the techniques and exercises are a little too challenging for their current level. So, as Shonagh said, it's important that those people have a place where they can feel challenged, but not out of their depth. Over time things tend to self-regulate, and people find where they fit best.

Shonagh Walker: Basically, we won't slow down for you. If you can keep up at a higher level, you're welcome to come along and join in with practice as long as you like.

Martin Doyle: When it comes to performance, it's a case of reaching an objective standard, so if you can't play a particular part as required, you need to work until you can. I think that's again where self-regulation comes into play. People are generally honest enough to say, "ok, I'm not quite ready for that, so I'm going to continue here [at the lower level] and do that for a while until I feel able to try again [at a higher level]" We actively encourage our players to aim high and try to move out of their comfort zones. We use video as a feedback tool to highlight and help correct and issues, and aside from pointers in each class, I give each member personal feedback every few months to help with technique, form, etc. I want our players to become very comfortable in a range of situations, not just as taiko drummers, but as musicians, and have a well-rounded vocabulary to draw upon.

Shonagh Walker: Aside from the classes, we also do work in schools, collaborate with local artists, and take part in outreach activities. We also lead workshops with other taiko groups as well, which is a huge privilege. It's always humbling when a group asks us to come and work with them.

Martin Doyle: That takes up the majority of our time at the moment. We share a variety of

skills and concepts; a few of which might not be classed as "Taiko" per say by some, but which we believe can be useful in a taiko context. Polyrhythms, polymeter, metric modulation, and rudimental stickings actually appear in many taiko songs, and are becoming more prevalent as the art evolves, so we want to highlight these techniques and show that anyone can learn and apply them. Obviously, we also do a lot of workshops that are very much related to our fundamental approach to taiko playing; i.e., on body awareness, movement, form, technique, etc. I think it's really fun to explore different rhythms, different drumming cultures to get new stimulus, then take it back to your group and say, "okay, we're going to try this new thing," but frame within the context of taiko and express the idea in their own unique way.

So that's what we're doing at the moment, but we're also focusing on our upcoming theatre show. Ultimately, we would like to tour at some point in the future, maybe around Scotland at first, but going abroad would be amazing, too. Obviously, it takes a lot of work, but the first step was to create a theatre show; our product, essentially. Every member in our group has really embraced the grind and is doing their bit to ensure a successful debut. Everyone in each of our groups will be a part of the show. *Tsuchigumo* is a big family for us, and everyone has a part to play.

SJ: *Your theatre show sounds incredibly exciting. How have you approached it and does it consist of only your own compositions?*

Martin Doyle: We wanted to have a blend, because we're very much a community focused group. We want to be involved with as many people around the globe as we possibly can. That's good for your music, your taiko playing, your inspiration, and your soul! We definitely want to have a combination of pieces for our show. Around 75% of the content is our original material, but there are a few traditional songs and other compositions we learned from other teachers. For example, we play "Omiyage" by Shoji Kameda, a guy who we deeply respect and who has played a huge part in our development, and we're going to play

“Narushima” by Katsuji Kondo, which we learned from Eiichi Saito at ETC3 [3rd European Taiko Conference]. We are also including our own takes on “Yatai Bayashi”, “Miyake” and “Buchiwase”.

We really wanted the show to tell a story, so it will have an overarching narrative. This show is essentially our origin story! I am a huge comic book fan, so the idea of an origin story on stage really appealed to me. The way the pieces are organized is representative of different points on our journey, so the pieces have been chosen or composed specifically for their mood.

SJ: *You're here in Sweden teaching “Kuru-Kuru”. Could you tell us a little about your composition of “Kuru-Kuru”?*

Shonagh Walker: “Kuru-Kuru” basically means to go round and round, and it’s also the nickname given to the conveyer belts at sushi restaurants (those are awesome by the way!). Basically, the piece itself has a number of different fundamentals in it. Different ways of moving, different timing, different way of filling in the space. Some different ways of moving your body. It’s almost like a training piece with all those fundamentals in it. Our idea of “Kuru-Kuru” and going around, aside from physically going around the drum which we do at one point, is the idea that in our taiko training we learn and we progress, but always need to revisit our fundamentals, our basics, our roots. And every time you revisit those you have a new-found appreciation, a new perspective that allows you to continually improve even in small increments. So your taiko journey is not necessarily a linear path, it loops back on itself, and occasionally takes you on interesting side-quests!

Martin Doyle: And you can see that in the piece and the structure. With each composition I’ve created, I wanted to have some kind of function within them, where you learn something about your playing, your technique, your body etc. So, I’ll include techniques that I want the group to reinforce in that particular song. But it simply can’t be a bunch of practice rhythms masquerading as a “song”. I also want to make it tuneful, memorable, and fun, by in-

cluding a variety of textures and layers so there is a lot to learn in each song, plenty of aspects to practice and master.

In “Kuru-Kuru” I’m attempting to tell a story. It’s about revisiting the things you tend to neglect as you find newer and perhaps more interesting things to try. The hope is that when you revisit them you understand better how they work and how they can be used. It might be a musical revelation, or a physical one, but the hope is that you find a new perspective and use that to inform your playing going forward. For this to work, it’s very important to keep a learner’s mind, to always be open to new ideas, and constructively criticize your own playing.

The opening is strong and precise, and the second section is softer and more graceful, highlighting the contrast between hard and soft, light and shade, and showing how each can flow seamlessly into the other. The piece also features jumping around the drum to provide a footwork challenge, and a central call and answer section to represent the internal dialogue you have with yourself when learning a new rhythm. Finally, you come back to where you started; with those fundamentals.

SJ: *Is “Kuru-Kuru” a community taiko piece that you created for people to learn, that they can take with them to be able to play in their own groups?*

Martin Doyle: Yes, that’s right. I was hugely influenced by Shoji gifting “Omiyage” to the community. And of course, there’s *Kagemusha Taiko*’s, “Shimabayashi” and “Stepping Stones”. There’s a clear function in the pieces, concepts to be learned, but they’re very musical as well and help ingrain those ideas whilst having fun doing it. Another factor was my desire to give something back to a community that has been very kind to us as a group since our inception. Going to the first European Taiko Conference was the best decision we ever made, as it opened our eyes to the wider community and the people therein were so positive and enthusiastic. We met so many really great people who we now consider friends, and they gave us so much whether directly or indirectly. The knowledge and inspiration we

gained from them by watching them play and teach has been instrumental in the evolution of *Tsuchigumo*, so I've given free access to "Kuru-Kuru" and "Mozamjam!" as a way of giving something back.

SJ: *What are your thoughts on the growing global taiko community?*

Shonagh Walker: I think it's really exciting. It's only really in the last few years that we've gotten to know the taiko community at large; especially at the European Taiko Conference as Martin said. I think it's been incredible, we've made so many friends over the last couple of years. There's so many collaborative pieces and compositions and projects coming out of it. It's a super-exciting time!

Looking at the UK, we're probably a generation behind the [United] States, in terms of taiko development, possibly two, so it's great to be more involved in the community at this time and be part of its development. Right now in UK we are in the midst of a second wave of taiko, coming on the back of the first one which began 20-25 years ago. The next generation of players are finding their own voice, and ways of expressing themselves through taiko. It'll be interesting to see where we are a generation from now!

Martin Doyle: I think it's amazing to see how close some groups were geographically, but there was no regular contact between them or collaborative projects. There are of course some exceptions, but with Facebook and other social media platforms now forming a major part of our collective consciousness, the ability to communicate and organize has become much easier and has shrunk the taiko world somewhat. Events like the European Taiko Conference have also had a major bearing on changing the landscape. A raft of new festivals and collaborative performances are springing up across Europe and beyond, as people come together to share their love for this wonderful art. Not only that, but a support network is now available, where we can help solve our individual problems with the guidance of someone who's been there, seen it, and done it! There's a wealth of knowledge in the community and it's great to see groups come together and share

without an ulterior motive. If it continues in this vein, the community will only continue to grow stronger.

Shonagh Walker: The amazing thing is, that the knowledge that these people are sharing is knowledge that has taken decades to accumulate, and they are passing it on freely. What that does is move us along those decades, we instantly benefit from their time and effort, their mistakes and successes, so it's incredible that it's being shared in the spirit of building community.

Martin Doyle: We're so appreciative of this. People like Shoji Kameda, Yoshi Miyamoto, Tiffany Tamaribuchi, Jonathan Kirby, and other members of the vibrant taiko community in Europe, are committed to helping it develop and grow. Like Shonagh said, we've been given the opportunity to jump decades of trial and error because they've done the legwork for us. We're standing on the shoulders of giants, if you will.

For me, one of the most inspiring things is seeing how other groups are doing things. It's a huge melting pot out there, with different cultures and backgrounds effecting how the art is evolving. It's particularly apparent at events like Taikopalooza or Taiko Spirit, when everyone comes together to play and share. Everyone has a keen appreciation of the art, but they understand that for it to grow it has to move in different directions without, of course, becoming detached from the root. Yes, these are very exciting times.



Shonagh Walker and Martin Doyle at Gamla Uppsala Museum in Sweden

Links

Tsuchigumo Daiko
<https://www.tsuchigumo.co.uk/>

Glossary

Buchiawase

A traditional taiko piece.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gchXQV8bG0o>

Kuru-Kuru

Taiko community piece composed by Martin Doyle.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNDPqtZ_ZGg

Mozamjam!

Taiko community piece composed by Martin Doyle.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbDiXYP3lv4>

Miyake

Traditional festival drumming from Miyake Island.

<https://estoestaiko.com/2015/07/10/miyake-kodos-continued-arrangement-of-regional-drumming-styles/>

Narushima

A taiko piece written by Kondo Sensei.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY7vZ1gVAq4>

Omiyage

Taiko community piece composed by Shoji Kameda.

<https://taikosource.com/song-database/omiyage/>

Shimabayashi

Taiko community piece composed by Jonathan Kirby.

<https://kagemusha.com/education/taiko-resources/shimabayashi/>

Stepping Stones

Taiko community piece composed by Oliver Kirby.

<https://kagemusha.com/education/taiko-resources/stepping-stones/>

Yatai-bayashi (屋台囃子)

A traditional taiko piece inspired by an annual festival in Chichibu, Japan.

<https://estoestaiko.com/2015/12/07/chichibu-yatai-bayashi/>

taiko (太鼓)

The word *taiko* means “big drum” or “drum” and it also describes the Japanese musical instrument.

wadaiko (太鼓)

Wadaiko means “Japanese drums”. Since any drum, e.g. tom-tom, bongos, djembe, conga, are called *taiko* in Japan, the word *wadaiko* is used to differentiate drums that are native to Japan.

Taiko Shin Kai

Taiko Shin Kai is a non-profit organization, that wish to encourage and spread taiko, Japanese drumming, in Sweden. Taiko Shin Kai offers taiko training and workshops in Stockholm and Uppsala for children and adults.

