

Starting a Taiko Group

Article by: Soo-Im Jansson and Ralf Jansson, 2017-09-21

When starting up a taiko group, there will be obstacles to overcome at different points in time in a group's growth. Common issues are finding an initial place to practice, something to practice on, and finding ways how to learn the artform.

Our experience from talking to people in the taiko community is that all groups have had their own share of obstacles to overcome, and at different points in time in the development of their groups. We have found that we shared common issues that groups face, such as finding an initial place to practice, people to play with, something to practice on, and finding ways on how to learn the artform.

It's important to have a place of practice where we do not disturb, but the nature of drums (the loudness), and especially taiko drums, makes this harder than playing an instrument that is not as loud. The loudness of taiko drums can create a big challenge, to find a place where these drums can be played without disturbing anyone else. Furthermore, a safe place to store the taiko drums is also desirable, especially if high quality drums have been procured.

Not everyone may own taiko drums at the beginning and may need to find alternative ways to practice the artform. Tires, large cans and packing tape can be the first alternative to a practice drum.

Same goes for learning the artform. It may be difficult finding someone to learn taiko from in the local area. So this can also prove to be a challenge to find a taiko instructor.

But starting up a taiko group entails not only practical things as getting drums and a *dojo* to play in. There's a lot more to think about when we get down to it and if someone can't teach us these things, we have to learn them ourselves, making all the hard and sometimes painful mistakes in the process.

We first met Isabel Romeo Biedma at ETC1 and then again the following year at ETC2. We invited her to Sweden and got to know her very well and the inspiring friendship we now have with her, has enriched our taiko

experience tremendously; something we want to share through this article.

Soo-Im has also had the wonderful opportunity to interview Isabel about things to think about when starting up a taiko group.

Photo:
Isabel Romeo Biedma

Photographer:
Denise Vestin,
www.denizen.se



Isabel Romeo Biedma's biography:
<http://isabelromeotaiko.com/...Bio-Oct2017.pdf>

Soo-Im Jansson (SJ): *Could you tell me a little about your taiko background and why you started playing taiko?*

Isabel Romeo Biedma: I began playing taiko in 2007, as I went to Japan to work as a dancer. Preparing for the trip, I watched a documentary that showed *Kodo* people playing. That sound, those moves, that energy, went right into my heart. "What is that!? I wanna try!" I thought. So, when I got to Japan, I looked for where it would be possible.

I lived in a rural area in Mie prefecture (close to *Ise* shrine, which is a very important place for Japanese people). There was a community taiko group that wanted to connect with foreigners, so every year they offered some spots. Members had their lives, their jobs, and gathered once a week to play taiko. Gigs were at community events, like a festival at an old person's house or the opening of a local softball tournament, things like that, local and cozy. It was really nice. This group had been play-

ing for like 40 years. The drums were great, really, really good. We practiced every week for three hours. So that was the beginning of my taiko journey, the first time that I played and my group of origin: *Ago Kaijin Daiko*, from Ago bay.

Then in *Ise* city, there was a professional taiko group called *Shin-on Daiko* (members are not the ones now) that performed every weekend. They were really powerful, 3 women and 4 men. I went to see them as often as I could. Each day, they would play 3 or 4 times, each time around 10 min and different songs. So, I would see their performance, then walk around, come back for their next performance... I liked it so much and learned so much. They were really nice people. I asked if they could train me, but they just trained their group members. But they said, "Hey, come when you want," and we became friends (we still keep in touch!). My Japanese wasn't that good and they didn't speak any English, but we did our best.

While in Japan, I also attended two workshops: one was a 4-day intensive with *Miyake Taiko's* Tsumura family and the other with *Amanojaku* in Tokyo. So that's how I started with taiko!

SJ: What is your experience in how it is to practice taiko in Japan and what benefits are there to learn taiko in Japan?

Isabel Romeo Biedma: The way I began to learn, through the community group, is one of the best I think, because people played without any pressure on them. We played happily, celebrating life at each practice. Besides taiko, we shared other great life moments, like barbecue and Japanese cooking, going together to a professional group performance, and other Japanese culture activities (*Ikebana*, tea ceremony, *Bunraku*...) In that group, it was more about the feeling and connecting to the rhythms and the joy.

For me, that's the most important thing, the feeling of the song or style you are playing. Technique and so on, there are so many different ways. Different *senseis* will tell you different things, each of them correct and im-

portant. You may even change the way you play through your taiko journey. But the feeling of it you get literally sweating in Japan, studying there, seeing people play, walking around, eating there, goes straight to your heart forever. Then when you return home, you understand much better the connection and respect for Nature through a drum, the value of the drum makers and players before you (professional and amateur), styles and songs that have been passed on generations, the benefits of taiko at so many levels.

And specially for those who do something totally different, who want to innovate either in playing or making drums, going to the roots, it's crucial.

I recommend going to the origins of this art form at least once in your life.

SJ: Having the experience of having been part of several taiko groups, in which two that you have started up, could you tell me a little about that?

Isabel Romeo Biedma: My experience with that is three kinds of experiences. First, my group in Japan, where I was just a student and a player. I did not partake in any decision making. I did what I was told to and I learned so much from it. I was so free. You know, I just had to say yes. "Do you want to do this?" - "Yes." "Can you do this?" - "Yes."

The second group, *Seiwa Taiko*, I co-founded it when I went back to Spain. It was a community assembly-like group, with no leader and the difficult thing was that we didn't have either clearly assigned roles or mission. We had really good experiences, and also very difficult and confusing ones. I also learned a lot.

Then I started my group, the one I lead: *Issho Daiko*, and that is a different experience because I am in charge of – and responsible for – many more things: keeping up a good place for practice, providing most of the drums, materials for class, special teachers, other inspiring experiences, group dynamics, and most of the contacts for gigs. We talk about things, proposals and ideas, and I make the final decisions.

Our vision and mission are clear; if you like them, you may stay, but if you don't, if they don't fit you, then you don't have to be here. So, it is much easier to know where we are headed to. In *Issho Daiko*, most people are community-group driven but some aim to become taiko professionals. That demands different layers of training. We are discovering the path as we walk it, and it's enthralling.

SJ: What is your group's mission and what does your group do?

Isabel Romeo Biedma: *Issho* means together. The mission of *Issho Daiko* is to share the energy and joy of taiko, respecting that each of us are different and together: united in diversity. Our repertoire also relates to that. We play varied styles of taiko, some more traditional and some contemporary.

For example, we play *Hokuriku* style and *Hachijo* style which are traditional and include a lot of improvisation, so once you get into the feeling, you can put yourself into it. We use varied drums, and varied songs with varied spirits. The aim is to show varied ways of connecting to the drum and connecting to yourself, to your mates and to the audience.

The pillars of our group are: Joy, Inclusion, Work and being Humble. Values include Ambition, in terms of becoming the best version of ourselves, even challenging our limits, Courage to do so, and Patience.

We need to be humble, because we need to know what we can do and what we cannot yet do. If we record our practice and watch the recording together, we have to be humble and recognize what is working and what is not, or needs to be worked on more. And we must work, really put work into it. With patience and joy, always joy.

About inclusion: We support each other, that's what life is about. We are a team. Everybody do their best and we learn together, trying to meet each one's needs (some may need extra classes at a certain point). We assign the roles in the pieces according to everyone's ability. If you want to get to some point, work for it, I'll give you the tools and be by your side. And now that the group is growing members,

we are beginning to have the chance of *senpai-kohai* (members more experienced helping the newer ones).

SJ: Do you have any advice on what you should especially think about when starting up a taiko group?

Isabel Romeo Biedma: *Have a clear goal.* I think that's the most important thing, the mission and the vision. Even if you change it later, you need to know where you want to go, so you can move in that way. With a clear goal, other people can join you. If not, misunderstandings will happen and they can turn to be destructive. There are times when misunderstandings happen anyway, but with clear goals it is much easier to refer back to them and even build them stronger.

Be very patient, because there are so many things that go along the path in a different way, or speed, than we would like.

Connect with others, with other taiko players that are running other groups to get support from their experiences; read or even write taiko related posts to stay connected. When you start a group, there are so many things that you didn't know were going to happen, that you may feel alone. But you are not. Many groups starting up share the same difficulties, so talk to people that have gone through things and learn from other groups' successes and mistakes.

One more thing, above all said before: always, always *keep connected to the joy of playing*. When you are running a group, there can be so many things that can make you lose the joy, disconnect from the reason why you are there. Always, always go back to playing, because it's for the joy of it, for feeling it and sharing it, that you are doing all that.

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

Isabel Romeo Biedma: We are living a fantastic moment of connection and thus growth at a worldwide level. Since around 3 years ago, the growth has been exponential. Now there are Internet forums, gatherings, events, joint performances, taiko trips and workshops at

local, regional, national and international levels. Reference webs, classes through Internet, available in any part of the world. It's our time to decide how we want our community to be. And I'm really happy to see it grow as inclusive, compassionate, hard-working and fun!

Links

The link to Isabel Romeo Taiko:
<http://isabelromeotaiko.com/>

Glossary

bunraku (文楽)

Bunraku is a form of traditional Japanese puppet theatre from the early 17th century.

dōjō (道場)

Dōjō literally means “place of the way” and in the West the word is associated with the training place for martial arts. The word can also refer to a formal training place for practicing other forms of Japanese arts.

Ikebana (生け花)

Ikebana is a Japanese art form of flower arrangement.

Hachijō style (八丈)

The *Hachijō* style of playing originates from the Hachijo Island (further reading: <https://estoestaiko.com/2015/09/07/why-hachijo-jima/>)

Hokuriku style (北陸)

The *Hokuriku* style of playing originates from the Hokuriku region in Japan and the region was a center for taiko music in the pioneering years of modern taiko ensemble style of playing (so called *kumi-daiko*).

Senpai (先輩) and *kōhai* (後輩)

The *senpai-kohai* describes an informal hierarchical interpersonal relationship in which a *senpai* is senior to the *kohai* in regards to experience, level or age.

Sensei (先生)

Sensei is a term that literally means a “person who comes before”. In general usage, it means “teacher”.

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 courses and workshops in Stockholm and Uppsala for children and adults.

