

Getting Started with Taiko

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How can one get started with taiko? Is it possible to practice without real Japanese drums? These are questions that I asked myself when I started to play taiko. There are several ways to get started.

How can one get started with taiko and do you have to have a Japanese taiko drum to be able to play taiko? No, you don't really need a taiko drum in order to play drum rhythms with choreographic movements.

For example, the Korean percussion group, *Drumcat*, plays with power and energy on drum barrels, snare drums and other percussion instruments, and *Trumbolaget – Sushi Taiko* plays lively rhythms on kongas drums with choreographic movements at a *Culture Night Festival* in Västerås, Sweden.

To Play Taiko

Taiko can be learned either on your own or with the support of a taiko group or both. Taiko workshops are also a great way to learn to play taiko. If there is an opportunity to go to a workshop lead by taiko players with long and solid knowledge of taiko, it truly is a wonderful learning experience. If you don't have access to any taiko group or taiko teacher, it is still possible to learn taiko on your own with the web resource called kaDON, which provides expert instructions on-line.

Taiko Facts

If you are interested in more facts about taiko, there are lots of video clips on YouTube with different documentaries about taiko, for instance *Japanology Plus*. There are also video clips on how taiko drums are made, such as how *Asano* drums are made or how to construct your own taiko drum.

There is also an informative web resource called *Taiko Source*, for those who wish to explore the taiko world even deeper. If you

are interested in exploring rhythms more thoroughly, there is also a documentary on rhythms, "How Music Works".

Links

Video Clips on the Internet (that was available at the time this article was published)

Drumcat:

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

Trumbolaget – Sushi Taiko:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUAz6zhiTy0>

Japanology Plus – Taiko Drums:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2giZZLdbdjw>

Technology – How Do They Do It (*Asano* taiko drums):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tREzw1Dp2s>

How Music Works with Howard Goodall – Rhythm:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZJPnAer7EM>

How to make your own taiko drum:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7M8mWs4jTA>

Webb Resources

kaDON: <http://kadon.com/>

Product: kaDON uchiwa clamp

<http://kadon.com/kadon-uchiwa-clamp/>

TaikoSource: <http://taikosource.com/>

Equipment – drum sticks (bachi)

To play drum rhythms, you need drum sticks and something to play on. Drum sticks can be easily found in music stores such as *4Sound* (in Sweden), but Japanese drum sticks are a bit harder to come by in Sweden.



Ordinary drum sticks, used for Western drums, are designed with a tapered end and a round ball-point top.



Taiko drum sticks are called *bachi* (which is pronounced *bat-chi*) in Japanese. There are lots of variations, but there are two *bachi* types that are very commonly used when playing on the larger taiko drums:

Straight *bachi*



Tapered *bachi*



It is possible to make your own taiko drum sticks by buying a long, evenly thick cylindrical wooden stick made of oak or maple. The stick should be about 2.0-2.5 centimeters thick and long enough to suffice for a pair of drumsticks. The length of the drum sticks are usually 40-42 centimeters long, but it is very common that the length of the drum sticks are customized to the player and the size of the drum that will be played. Use sandpaper to sand down the sharp edges at the ends of the drum sticks, to avoid any damage to whatever is going to be played on. If the same tonal sound is desired, a little more work is required, since the sound of the wooden stick can differ depending on where the wooden stick is cut off.

If Japanese drum sticks are desired (*bachi*), it is possible to import them from e.g. Europe, U.S.A. or Japan. It is sometimes even possible to buy drum sticks at a workshop.

Equipment – drum (taiko)

It's a pretty big investment to acquire Japanese taiko drums. It is recommended to start simple before buying a Japanese taiko drum.

You can consider buying a Japanese taiko drum, once you know for sure that you will continue to play taiko.

If you have a pair of drum sticks, you can play on used car tires to simulate the behavior of real drums. It can be an inexpensive way to be able to practice taiko. Car tires don't make much noise and you get a somewhat "natural bounce" after the drum stick hits the tire.

Car Tires
Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cheap • don't make much noise • somewhat "natural bounce"
Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no distinguishing rim strike sounds • drum sticks may get stained; avoid using your finest <i>bachi</i>



A drum pad can be used to increase the natural feel of a drum. There is a so called *RealFeel*-pad. The *RealFeel*-pad feels almost like playing on a real drum with a discreet sound. The pad has a wooden frame for the rim strikes, but it is not always easy to manage the rim strikes if the pad is lying flat on a table for example. It is also simple to take the pad with you. It can be difficult for beginners to play dynamically, that is, it can be more difficult to play and hear the difference between hard and soft strikes.

RealFeel-pad
Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discreet sound • feels almost like playing on a real drum • distinguishable rim strikes • easy to carry with you • <i>bachi</i> can be used without problems
Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it can be difficult for beginners to play dynamically, that is, it can be more difficult to play and hear the difference between hard and soft strikes • managing the rim strikes can be a bit difficult



An even closer feel to playing a taiko is using an "ordinary" drum, e.g. a "tom-tom". A real drum is noisier and the rim of the drum is often made of steel which may damage the *bachi*.

"Ordinary" Drum
Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> almost feels like playing on a taiko drum, but with a different sound
Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> very noisy a steel rim may damage the <i>bachi</i>



Uchiwa-drums can be a cheaper alternative to the large taiko drums. The drum can be used as a practice drum and it is not as loud as e.g. a *nagado-chudaiko* taiko drum. It is still loud, though. It is attached with a clamp on a cymbal stand, which makes it possible to stand and play the drum in the same way as playing on a taiko drum.

The link below contains a video clip that demonstrates more thoroughly how an *uchiwa*-drum without handle can be used in several different ways.

Uchiwadaiko without handle
<http://kadon.com/kadon-uchiwa-clamp/>

<i>Uchiwa</i> -drum
Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> takes little place and is easy to carry can be used in performances and not just as an exercise drum cheaper than a large taiko drum
Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> very loud some metal-like rim strike sounds



When purchasing a taiko drum, there are many different kinds of drums to choose from, ranging from rope-tightened drums (e.g. *shimedaiko*) to the flat drums and the drums that are shaped like barrels with drum heads held by tacks. The cost depends on the quality of the drum and how the drum is manufactured. A constructed drum is cheaper than a drum that has been hollowed out from a single piece of wood. The latter has better sound than the constructed drums. It is also practical to

consider the accessories that may be needed for the drum, such as a stand for the drum and a drum bag to protect the drum when transporting it.

It is also worth thinking about how and where the drum should be stored. A taiko drum with cow skin must be stored in a dry place and not in direct sunlight. The drum skin is affected by the weather and should not be played outdoors when it's raining, since the humidity makes the cow hide soft and brittle.

It can be good to take your time when buying a taiko drum. It is an instrument that you most probably would like to buy with care. If you have the opportunity to visit a music store that sells taiko drums, it can be very helpful to see and experience them in reality.



nagado-chudaiko



okedo-daiko

These are just some of the variations that you can try. There are undoubtedly many other options and there may certainly be an option that suits your own needs and ambitions.

Links

Some examples on music stores and web shops

4Sound (Sweden):

<http://www.4sound.se/>

Trommelbau (Uelzen, Germany):

http://www.simonsen-holzart.de/taiko_taikobau.html

Taiko Center Online Shop (Kyoto, Japan):

<http://www.taiko-center.co.jp/english/netshoptop.html>

Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten (Tokyo, Japan):

<http://www.miyamoto-unosuke.co.jp/english/index.html>

kaDON Store (USA):

<https://squareup.com/store/kadon>

Asano Taiko U.S. Store (California, USA):

<https://asano.us/store>

Asano Taiko (Fukudome in Hakusan City, Japan):

<http://www.asano.jp/en/>

Glossary

bachi (撥) – drum sticks

chudaiko (中太鼓) – medium size taiko drum

nagado (長胴) – long taiko drum body

okedodaiko (桶胴太鼓) – barrel drum

shimedaiko () – rope-tightened drum

taiko (太鼓) – drum, big drum

uchiwadaiko (うちわ太鼓) – fan drum

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.

