

## Online Instruction

Article by: Soo-Im Jansson, 2016-10-02

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*Not everyone have easily access to taiko teachers with extensive experience even though taiko is worldwide. Internet technology has made it possible for new approaches to taiko instruction that could facilitate learning when no expert instruction is available in the neighborhood. Eien Hunter-Ishikawa offers online instruction and I had the fortunate opportunity to interview him.*

The Japanese taiko drums are played around the world. Besides Japan, taiko drums are played on continents such as Asia, Europe, South and North America, and Australia. The taiko ensemble style we see today is relatively new and was first formed in the 1950s. Taiko drum as a musical instrument, however, has been around for several thousand years. [1]

Taiko is not only a musical instrument, but can also be regarded as a way to develop the body and mind, where many concepts that are connected to taiko practice have roots in traditional Japanese art forms and *zen* [4]. Unlike how a drum kit is used, taiko is usually played in a standing or sitting position with choreographed movements.

Although taiko now is so widely spread around the world, it is not always easy to find a taiko teacher with extensive experience in one's neighborhood. This was something that Kate Walker, who is doing research on taiko in the United Kingdom, revealed in her presentation of the first results of her study during the first Taiko Conference held in England.

With today's technology, however, courses over the Internet can be a complementary option even if they cannot replace direct instruction on site. Two members of Taiko Shin Kai have explored some courses offered over the Internet. It is possible to follow courses from e.g. *kadon.com* and it is also possible to take on individual courses online.

When we searched for online Internet courses, we found available courses offered by Eien Hunter-Ishikawa. After having taken several excellent lessons from him, we find online instruction very valuable, especially since expert instruction is currently not easily accessible in Sweden. During one of our lessons with Eien Hunter-Ishikawa, I had the fortunate opportunity to interview him.

*“We find on-line instruction very valuable, especially since expert instruction is currently not easily accessible in Sweden.”*

Eien Hunter-Ishikawa is a musician and educator based in Portland, Oregon, USA. He specializes in drum set, taiko, percussion, and *shinobue* (flute) and offers private lessons, online instruction,

and workshops. He earned his Master of Music at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and during that time, he performed and toured extensively as a member of the *Kenny Endo Taiko Ensemble*. He performs traditional Japanese music and jazz with his vibraphone & *shakuhachi* duet with Bruce Huebner, and he is a member of contemporary taiko quartet *On Ensemble* and continues to write new compositions for the group. Eien Hunter-Ishikawa has been awarded *Outstanding Musicianship Award* (Reno Jazz Festival, 2003), *Merit List*

for *Achievement in Performance* (University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2002), and *Outstanding Soloist Award* (Notre Dame Collegiate Jazz Festival, 2000). [6]

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

**Eien Hunter-Ishikawa (EH):** I was born in Saitama Prefecture in Japan and music was everywhere. My dad plays the *shinobue*, the Japanese horizontal bamboo flute, as a hobbyist. There were a lot of festivals in the area and there were a lot of artist types and musicians always around. So, since I can remember, I have been going to concerts and especially seeing taiko in festivals; regional ones as well as bigger ones in Japan, like the *Chichibu Yo-Matsuri*, the famous December night festival in Chichibu, which I lived pretty close to when I was growing up.

So I started around age two just playing and taking it all in. My first taiko teacher was Saburo Mochizuki [also known as Yutaka Ishizuka], who was one of the four original members of *Sukeroku Daiko*. He just happened to live nearby in Saitama, so he started a youth taiko drum ensemble and that's where I got more serious training, learning things like "Edo Bayashi" and "Nidan Uchi". A lot of the *Sukeroku Daiko* repertoire was taught to our youth group, so when I was a kid, learning from one of the best players in Japan, I was really lucky.

Also at the same time, during the 1980's, Kenny Endo was in Japan. Kenny was playing with *Sukeroku Daiko* during his ten-year stay, so that is how I knew Kenny from when I was a little kid. Much, much later, after getting my undergraduate and graduate music degrees, I ended up playing and reconnecting with Kenny in Hawaii. I played with him for seven years before moving on to my next thing. So it kind of came full circle in that way.

**SJ:** *What does taiko mean for you?*

**EH:** Taiko to me is something that I've known my whole life. To me, taiko is music. It didn't occur to me, I didn't know until very, very much later on, that I could make a living as a musician. This is all the way up until the very end of high school. I was thinking of going into science or something like that, but I had the opportunity to go to a very good percussion camp in Michigan. There was no taiko there, but it helped me realize that I wanted to go to music school and do this.

After going through music school for percussion, is when I reconnected with Kenny and went to Hawaii to play with him. It was more of an overall idea that I could play music for a living and I was already doing that with percussion and drum set. Along with those instruments, I wanted to reincorporate taiko. I had to study it on a more serious level as an adult to become a professional, and that just became part of my professional world. So taiko means music and it's also my passion and it's also my profession. I also like to teach, so all these things came together as one lifestyle.

**SJ:** *You offer taiko lessons over the Internet. Could you tell me something about what you teach and how it works?*

**EH:** I teach anything that I can offer, but a lot of things that people request are often things like drum set lessons, and it could be something more specific like small taiko playing or



Photo: Courtesy of Eien Hunter-Ishikawa

*atarigane* playing or *shinobue* playing. Instruction in some of these topics may be hard to find in your local area. The real strength of on-line instruction is that it makes this material available wherever you are as long as you have an Internet connection and a computer to use. It could be pre-taped video lessons too, but a lot of what I do is one-on-one private lessons in real time through Skype or other applications. I also teach composition as well as help students learn repertoire, or it might be something more specific like covering *Edo Bayashi* [festival music of Old Tokyo]. Anything that I can offer I teach on-line and I will also be working on some recorded video lessons in the future, but for now it's mainly one-on-one live lessons through Skype.

*SJ: What do you think of this new medium, using Internet and related technology, to teach taiko?*

*EH:* I think it can work really well. I've heard a lot of comments where people might not quite be comfortable with the idea; they haven't tried it yet and I always say, 'try one lesson to see if it works for you.' It's kind of a new concept for most people to learn through a screen and some things change and some things we lose, like it's not possible yet with current technology to play together in unison. So we lose that, but a lot can be done through demonstration, explanation, feedback, and most importantly I give assignments to work on between lessons. This should happen in any kind of ongoing private lesson situation because most of the work is done in the time between lessons.

So, it is really about a getting guidance and instruction that match the goal of the student, trying to make sure there's a program developed. Then the next lesson involves going through what was practiced, how it went, and try to always fine-tune so that the goals of the students are always met. That's really the most important part of the lessons. Not necessarily playing together all the time, although that can also be really good. Ideally

the lesson is always happens live in the same room, that's still the best to me, but because there might be specific things that people are looking for, sometimes the only way to get this kind of instruction is online. And since the technology is there, I think it's great.

*SJ: What are your thoughts on the world-wide taiko community?*

*EH:* I think it's great. Anything that happens naturally and organically, I'm all for. I think some music genres or different instrument communities will grow a certain way and some will grow a different way. Some are very far progressed; let's take an example like Latin percussion, something like that is very far progressed where it has really become a mainstream thing. Japanese taiko is still growing, depending on where you are. In some places it's very well-known and everybody knows what it is, they've seen it. There are other places where people have no idea – they have never seen it, they don't know the word and they don't know anything about it or where it comes from. So, I'm looking forward to a time where more and more people around the world know what taiko is and can appreciate it.

For me, as a professional, I would like to see more concerts programmed and more serious instruction being offered, with teachers being invited to more places to help raise the level of awareness, the quality of instruction, and level of artistry overall, which is very challenging. In the early stages when people are just finding out what taiko is and maybe starting up in small communities in remote areas, it is really hard to go from just discovery to high level instruction and full house audiences in a concert hall; it's really hard to go from zero to that level. Compared to a place like San Francisco where you can have a taiko festival and fill an entire giant concert hall with an audience. So I am looking forward to seeing the growth of taiko all over the world and also getting people to appreciate the art form more and more.

## Links

### *Eien Hunter-Ishikawa*

Drumset – Taiko - Percussion

<http://www.eienhunterishikawa.com/>

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## A brief history of taiko

The history of taiko can be viewed from two aspects; the mythological perspective and the archaeological finds that have been found.

The mythological story is based on the traditional Japanese legend in the chronicle *Nihon Shoki*, dated from around 800 B.C. [3]. The legend tells of a shrewd Goddess by the name *Ame-no-Uzume*, also known as *Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto*, who brought out the sun goddess *Amaterasu* from a cave by dancing on an overturned barrel. According to the legend, *Ame-no-Uzume* created the very first taiko drum and its music. [1] [5]

The earliest archeological find was found in *Sawa*, *Gunma* prefecture, Japan: a *Haniwa*-figure that is holding some kind of drum and hitting it with a drumstick. The find is dated to 600-700 A.D. [2] [5] It is considered the earliest evidence that drums were being used in Japan.

During the Kamakura period (about 1330-1570), the taiko drum came to be used in *Noh* drama, and later the *Kabuki* theater in the Edo period (about 1600-1860). In a religious context, the taiko drum was used as sacred *Shinto* music and it can also be found in *Buddhism*. [5]

During the 1950s there was a shift where the taiko drum became more than a solo instrument. Daihachi Oguchi (1924 – 2008) was a Japanese jazz musician that revolutionized taiko as an ensemble instrument. He let the

diverse taiko drums, in form and sizes, take the roll of a Western drum kit with its various drums and cymbals. The difference was that it was different people who played on these taiko drums in addition to choreographed body movements. [1] [5]

Pioneering groups:

- In the 1950's Daihachi Oguchi founded the very first taiko ensemble called *Osuwa Daiko* [1].
- 1960's: *Yushima Tenjin Sukeroku Daiko* was formed and laid the foundation of the taiko style we now call *kumi-daiko* [5].
- 1970's *Ondekoza/Kodo* was formed. [1].
- 1968: *San Francisco Taiko Dojo* in USA was the first taiko group to be formed outside Japan. [5]

## Glossary

*atarigane* (当たり鉦)

A hand-held brass gong also known as just *kane* or *chanchiki*.

*Chichibu Yomatsuri* (秩父夜祭)

The *Chichibu Night Festival* is a festival of the *Chichibu Shrine* in Chichibu City, Saitama Prefecture. It is held every year on December 2nd and 3rd.

*Edo Bayashi* (江戸囃子)

A festival music style from old Tokyo (<http://taikosource.com/tag/edo-bayashi/>)

*kumi-daiko* (組太鼓)

*Kumi-daiko* describes the ensemble-style playing.

*Nidan Uchi* (二段打ち)

A contemporary musical repertoire piece (<http://taikosource.com/articles/nidan-uchi-yodan-uchi/>)

*shinobue* (篠笛)

Also called *takebue* (竹笛), is a Japanese transverse bamboo flute or *fue* (笛) that has a high-pitched sound and is commonly used in Japanese festival music.

*shakuhachi* (尺八)

The *shakuhachi* is a Japanese end-blown flute, traditionally made of bamboo.

*taiko* (太鼓)

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

*zen* (禅)

The Japanese word *zen* is a transliteration of the Chinese word *chan* or *chana*, which in turn is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, and the word *dhyana* means meditation. *Zen* is strongly associated with *zen Buddhism*, in which meditation is a central part of *zen Buddhists* practice.

**References**

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- [3] Ottosson, I., & Ekholm, T. (2007). *Japans Historia*. Lund, Sweden: Historiska Media.
- [4] Varian, H. (2013). *The Way of Taiko*. California, USA: Stone Bridge Press.
- [5] Vogel, B. (2009). *Transmission and Performance of Taiko in Edo Bayashi, Hachijo, and Modern Kumi-daiko Styles*. Texas, USA: Rice University.
- [6] *Eien Hunter-Ishikawa – Biography*. <http://www.eienhunterishikawa.com/home/>, link visited 2015-10-02.

**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.

