

Expanding the Taiko Knowledge

Article by: Soo-Im Jansson, 2018-01-24

When we play taiko there are so many aspects that we can dive into to expand our taiko knowledge. We may come to a point where we not only want to just play taiko, but wanting to know more about this art form. We may want to go in-depth on how the drums are made or the roots and history of taiko. Internet provides a whole landscape of information and one place to find information about taiko from an academic standpoint is TaikoSource.

We come in contact with taiko in various ways. Some may have seen live taiko performances and gotten inspired to play taiko. Some may have heard taiko from a music CD or watched a DVD with taiko. Others may have been to an event where taiko has been present in some way or another. Others may have read about taiko or heard about it from friends.

No matter what was our contact point, that made us start playing taiko, we also probably play taiko for various reasons. For me, I started playing taiko because it engaged my whole body, spirit and mind. I love the energy that is created when playing taiko and I love playing together with others and share the joy of playing. At some point however, I began to want to know more about taiko, not only learning how to play taiko. So, I began to search for books about taiko and looking for information about taiko on the Internet.

There is so much material that can be found on the Internet about taiko, but for someone who is just at the starting point of learning the art form, it may be hard to really know what source of information we may find useful. The Internet also provides You-Tube clips in such an abundance.

For me, it was also hard to find the books that could give me more thorough information other than that taiko came from Japan, that it means “big drum”, and that it is now basically being played all over the world. I finally found two books; one was entitled “The Way of Taiko” and the other book was entitled “Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion” [1] [2].

About two years ago, I also found an interview with the renowned taiko artist Kenny Endo. In this interview he explains that “you can’t break tradition if you do not know tradition” [3].

This prompted me to want to dig deeper and to learn more about the roots. As I continue to explore the artform, I realize that getting to know more about taiko can enrich my taiko journey and it can create a much deeper comprehension when performing taiko.

In my endeavor to expand my taiko knowledge, I came across the web site TaikoSource. Access to all the information found on this site is free for the community in order to learn more about the art form. TaikoSource is being managed by Benjamin Pachter and it has a focus on the scholastic side of taiko.

Benjamin Pachter is an educator, musician, and scholar who is interested in taiko performance both as a life-long drummer – he has degrees in Orchestral Percussion Performance – and as an academic. In 2013, he received his Ph.D. in ethnomusicology, writing his dissertation on the musical history of contemporary taiko performance in Japan and the United States. Presently, he’s interested in the development of performance practice, and repertoire, and the connections between older styles of Japanese music like matsuri-bayashi and hōgaku-hayashi and the modern taiko styles.

Source: <http://taikosource.com/about/>

I first met Benjamin Pachter at the very first European Taiko Conference in 2016, and in September 2017, I had the great opportunity to interview him via Skype about TaikoSource.

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



Photo: Courtesy of Benjamin Pachter

Benjamin Pachter: I began as an orchestral percussionist. My background, my initial music training was as an orchestral musician. So, I inevitably approach everything from a perspective of a percussionist, of a drummer, of a musician. While I was studying that in the University and in post graduate studies as well, I started performing pieces by Japanese Composers. Pieces written for Western orchestra or percussion ensemble, but pieces that were either utilizing taiko outright or utilizing what I found were later rhythms from Japanese festival music that was arranged for Western percussion.

So just by fate, and not really by anything I was trying to do, I was playing more and more of these pieces. And I became really interested in that, wanting to learn more about it, because I had never seen taiko. Maybe I had seen something on PBS in the public broadcasting network in the United States once upon a time, because they would occasionally play a concert by *Kodo*. But by and large it was not on my radar at all.

So, whenever I was approaching the end of my first graduate studies and then after I graduated from that, I started researching it, I started trying to find videos that I could about taiko, buying everything basically that *Kodo* had out there, starting to buy books on Japanese music and Japanese culture, because I was also interested in broader Japanese culture.

What drove me more than anything else was wanting to know more. It was not only to learn the musical side of things but also the context

behind this performance. Where do these drums come from? How are they being used and what is the connection to how I will be seeing them used on stage or how I will be seeing them used by Western composers? It's just this desire to learn more and more.

Eventually, I decided to go back to school to get my PhD in ethnomusicology for that very reason, to learn as much about taiko as I could. Not just about how to play the drums, but why they are being played, where they are being played, who is playing them. As a whole, learn as much as I could about them.

From there I kind of entered what I call this rabbit hole that I can never escape from. Because, as anyone who plays taiko knows, playing these drums, playing taiko can lead you in so many different paths and that is what I discovered. Whether it is *kumi-daiko* or whether it is group performance or it's solo taiko performance or it's the traditions that inform those, whether it's *matsuri-bayashi* or *hogaku-hayashi*. Or if we talk specifically about *Noh-bayashi* or *Kabuki-bayashi*. Or all these many other things, I just became more and more fascinated by the depth of what this drum can occupy and that lead me into a PhD in ethnomusicology and in the end, TaikoSource was evolved.

SJ: *How and why was the TaikoSource created?*

Benjamin Pachter: TaikoSource was evolved first from a web site that we had that was trying to address a lack of communication and information on the Internet. That, at the time, this was in 2011, was seem to be lacking. Of course, after we started that, we created a Taiko Forum, we created a wiki-style web site as well, but then Facebook communities kind of really took hold and we re-examine of what we were doing and at the same time I was examining all the materials I had gathered as a graduate student, as a PhD student and then now as a scholar in seeing what can I do with that. Because, inevitably all this came back to me wanting to know more and I am sure that there are other people who wanted to know more as well. So how could we take advantage of the Internet and the changing way that

people are sharing information and learning and apply that to the taiko world. So TaikoSource was eventually coming out of that. It was taking things from taiko forum that proved to be popular, particularly in the wiki stage. The type of articles that we were seeing people respond to and building upon that while growing.

So, myself and Wendy Jedlička, the other person who is responsible for TaikoSource, decided to take it on. And I took on the more scholastic side of things, the articles, the glossary, and Wendy works on the song database and the graphic elements. So, we're trying to make everything open source and that's been one of the major elements from the start. It's about just the free propagation of information. Especially now that I've moved out of the academic realm, I am not looking to be a professor anymore. I don't need to publish things in order to keep a job. So TaikoSource has become more and more of a way for me to continue my academic research, my scholastic research and give me a meeting that I hope will benefit performers around the world.

SJ: *What exactly is TaikoSource? Can you elaborate?*

Benjamin Pachter: TaikoSource we kind of envisioned as an information hub. It's a place for people to visit to find information about taiko performance in its many facets. The catch phrase we have on there is "Documenting the past, present, and future of taiko performance". So, that is a continually evolving thing, but in the end, the idea is that it's just an information hub. It's a place to go to learn more about taiko performance. Right now, that is focused more in the realm of contemporary taiko performances, *kumi-daiko*, solo taiko, those different elements, because that's the foundation of research I had at the point, but really the idea is just to show what's happening in taiko, what has happened, what is currently happening and provide a way for English speaking visitors to learn more about taiko.

SJ: *Can anyone contribute to TaikoSource?*

Benjamin Pachter: I've gone back and forth about that at times, because in the end I am

attempting to approach this from an academic scholastic perspective. That it is not just the free open contribution of materials. We tried that with Taiko Forum and it didn't work. We found that anybody could contribute, but nobody was contributing, it still was a select few. So, the model at the moment at least, is that it's Wendy and myself that have contributed everything, and if I for the scholastic articles side of things determine, "Oh there's something interesting out there" or somebody approaches me with a topic, I'll take a look at it and determine whether it's something that would fit within the current model of what we're doing or the sort of things I would like to do. Because I am trying to keep certain standards in place and we have certain templates we use, especially with the articles and the information we are looking to provide. I still approach it as an academic. And I want to make sure that there are a certain amount of standards that I hold myself to as everything else I hold to as well. So, it's not that it's exclusive to just the two of us, it just so happens that in my experience open calls for anyone to contribute aren't amazingly successful.

SJ: *The TaikoSource is a proud partner of TCA. What is TCA?*

Benjamin Pachter: The Taiko Community Alliance [TCA], is an organization that was founded in 2012, primarily to continue on the legacy of the North American Taiko Conference [NATC], which has been to this point, the largest gathering of taiko performers in the world.

North American Taiko Conference used to primarily be under the auspices of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center [JACCC] in Los Angeles. But as things have evolved and the communities have evolved, as the conferences have evolved, as the JACCC has evolved, it was decided to split apart and TCA was formed primarily as a way to continue supporting NATC. But from that foundation we've grown to a broader organization to help support the continued growth of taiko. The emphasis is primarily in North America, but that's not necessarily... we're not a North America only organization, but it so happens

that the majority of our members are in North America and NATC is a North American taiko conference, so we tend to focus a little bit on North American activities.

My involvement came into play because I already had TaikoSource at that point and because of my background in education and programming, I became involved in the programming committee. And through that, TaikoSource is partner to help do different projects. We co-sponsored different seminars, some different offerings, both webinars and as well as video series, we helped co-sponsor those.

Given the fact that I am on these committees, I also help at the North American Taiko Conference behind the scenes for documentation and such. On our side, of course on the TaikoSource side, we're interested in seeing how taiko develops. And in North America, the continued future of TCA is going to be essential to the growth of this community. And our missions overlap in the end. We're looking to support the taiko community and help it grow and it only seems a natural fit that we can kind of help each other in the process.

SJ: *You were also involved with the NATC this year. Could you tell us a little about that?*

Benjamin Pachter: This past year, I was in charge of photography and videography at the conference, and that's a continuation of something that I have done for a number of years of multiple conferences. And I have documented almost every East Coast Taiko Conference, which is one of the regional conferences on the East coast of the United States, which happens every February. I have served as a videographer and photographer for every conference, except for the first conference in 2011, I believe was the first conference. Since then, I have been present for every conference doing photo and video work. And at the 2015 North American Taiko Conference in Las Vegas, I was the videographer for that. And I've done the European Taiko Conference, the first one last year in 2016, doing photography and videography. So, this is an extension of all that.

In the end, stemming from my desire to make sure that there is a document of these things. Not just for sharing to the people who are participating but also for historical purposes, so we can know who is there, what they did, what was discussed, what was performed. So, 10, 20 years down the line, hopefully people can go and look back at this and it can be an educational tool for people in the future.

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

Benjamin Pachter: I am continually amazed by the new places where taiko are popping up. The idea of a global taiko community, of course, is not new. If we look at the history of taiko around the world, of course in the 50's, 60's and 70's, it was just Japan and the United States. But as early on as in the mid 1980's, there were taiko groups in the UK and in Germany. So the idea of a global taiko community, I am very happy that now there is a sense of the global taiko community.

I think, and I have no other perspective than what I have read and talked to people, that there have always been little pockets of taiko around the world. There's taiko in the United States and North America, taiko in Japan, taiko in UK, taiko in Germany and so forth and so forth, and now with the advent of the Internet, we're seeing all these different pockets of communities grow and thus larger communities developing. Whether it's taiko in Europe, not just taiko in the individual countries, but these broader senses, because we are very connected. But a lot of times most performers in all of these different countries have studied from the same people. They may not be playing the same pieces, but they may have a solid common performance practice or influences or people that they look up to. And now with Facebook and Skype and so many other different forms of social media, we are now being able to recognize these commonalities.

I think there's nothing but good things that could come out of this. Because more than anything else taiko's ability, these drums'

ability to bring people together are amazing. And now we can bring people together not just out of local scale, but an international scale as well. And I am always excited to see whenever people are travelling around the world and meeting with other taiko people and these bonds are just growing deeper. It's an amazing and exciting time for taiko performance, I think.

Internet Resource

TaikoSource
<http://taikosource.com/>

References

Book References

- [1] Bender, S. (2012). *Taiko Boom - Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion*. California, USA: University of California Press
- [2] Varian, H. (2013). *The Way of Taiko*. California, USA: Stone Bridge Press

Link Reference

- [3] The Art of Life (2014). *Moving to the Beat of the Taiko Drum - Kenny Endo*, ThinkTech Hawaii
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSLBN5ukBxw>, link visited 2016-03-04 and 2018-01-24

Other Links

- Taiko Community Alliance
<https://taikocommunityalliance.org/>
- North American Taiko Conference
<https://natc.taikocommunityalliance.org/>
<https://natc.taikocommunityalliance.org/about/>
- East Coast Taiko Conference
<https://ectc2018.com/>
<https://ectc2018.com/about/>
- European Taiko Conference
<http://eurotaiko.org/>

Glossary

hayashi (囃子)

Hayashi means Japanese orchestra, band, accompaniment.

hōgaku (邦楽)

Hōgaku is Japanese music, especially traditional Japanese music.

hōgaku-hayashi (邦楽囃子)

Hōgaku-hayashi is *hōgaku* ensembles.

kabuki (歌舞伎)

Kabuki is a classical Japanese dance drama from the 17th century.

kumi-daiko (組太鼓)

Kumi-daiko describes the ensemble-style playing.

matsuri (祭り)

Matsuri is the Japanese word for festival, feast, and the music that accompanies the festival is called *matsuri-bayashi*.

matsuri-bayashi (祭囃子)

Matsuri-bayashi is festival music, festival ensembles

nohgaku (能楽)

Nohgaku or just *noh* is a classical Japanese musical drama from the 14th century.

noh-bayashi (能楽囃子)

Noh-bayashi is *noh* music, *noh* ensembles

kabuki-bayashi (歌舞伎囃子)

kabuki-bayashi is *kabuki* music, *kabuki* ensembles

taiko (太鼓)

Taiko is the Japanese word for drum. In the west, it is also used to describe the art form. 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 courses and workshops in Stockholm and Uppsala for children and adults.

