

A Few Facts About Taiko

Taiko is played all over the world and even though Japanese drums may be several thousand years old, taiko as an art form has only been around for about 60 years.

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, may have 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.



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, drums were used as sacred *Shinto* music and drums can also be found in *Buddhism*. [5]

Taiko as an art form originates from the jazz musician Daihachi Oguchi [1924-2008], when he founded *Osuwa Daiko* in 1953. In the 1960's, the group *Yushima Tenjin Sukeroku Daiko* was formed, which laid the foundation for the taiko ensemble playing style we have today, which is called *kumi-daiko*. *Kumi-daiko* also has traditional roots from *Gagaku* (royal court music from the 7th century), and Japanese festival music, as well as *Kabuki* theater and *Noh* Drama. [1] [5] [6]

Taiko has not only spread geographically, but has expanded artistically as well, from traditional festival drumming, to creating new styles of taiko and collaboration with other musical forms. [6]

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

gagaku (邦楽)

Gagaku is an imperial court music, which originated from the 7th century. *Gagaku* is the court music that goes beside the *bugaku* court dance

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.

nohgaku (能楽)

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

taiko (太鼓)

The word *taiko* means big 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.

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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[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.

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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.

