

The European Taiko Conference 2018

Article by: Soo-Im Jansson, 2018-05-11



Photo: Courtesy of Lucy Thomas

The third European Taiko Conference was held in Germany on 15-18 February 2018. The theme of the conference was “*Developing the Community, Developing the Art Form*” with focus on shared repertoire. The host country for the 4th European Taiko Conference was announced to be Germany. The 4th European Taiko Conference will be held on 21-24 February 2019.

The third European Taiko Conference was held in Germany on 15-18 February with the theme “Developing the Community, Developing the Art Form”, focusing on shared repertoire. The conference included workshops with international taiko artists and discussion sessions as well as individual group performances, and joint performances of the repertoire compositions shared by the workshop leaders at the conference.

Jonathan Kirby, founder of *Kagemusha Taiko*, was the person who took the initiative to plan and organize the very first European Taiko Conference (ETC) that was held in England in 2016. The 3rd European Taiko Conference (ETC3) was held in Germany this year.

Yoshihiko Miyamoto, president of *Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten* and sponsor for all the ETC conferences, gave a few tips on how to enjoy ETC3.

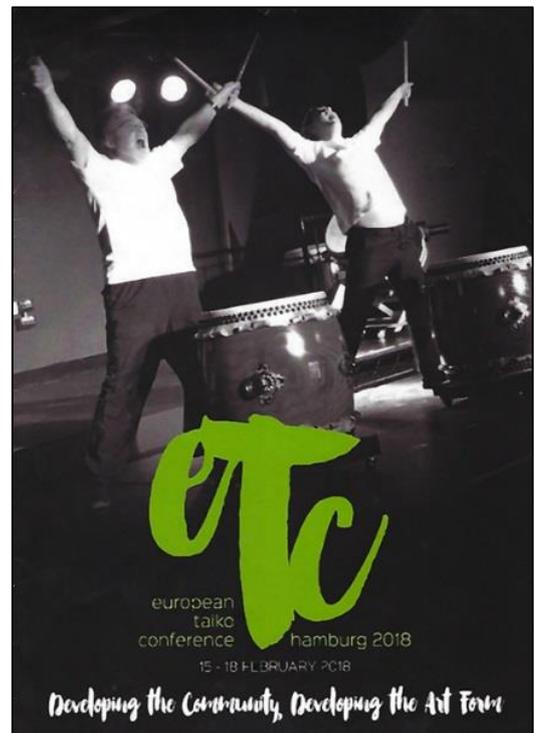


Photo: The official ETC3 conference booklet [1]

Opening Talks

During the opening talks, Jonathan Kirby introduced the purpose of the conference:

- created and organised by taiko players;
- with the participation of taiko players;
- for the benefit of taiko players.

In addition, Jonathan Kirby presented who was at the conference:

- 80 delegates
- 6 observers
- 10 workshop leaders and assistants
- 20 volunteers
- 4 *Kagemusha Taiko* & Miyamoto staff
- ... from 15 countries, representing 49 different taiko groups and organisations.

The aim of all the ETC conferences is:

- Developing the community...
- Developing the art form...

Jonathan Kirby talked about what this means. Developing the community is about creating connections between European taiko players and European taiko and the rest of the world. It is also about developing the community who are developing the art form. By being a community, we learn from each other and the developments that happen can be richer and more exciting.

Some of the benefits of a community are:

- Inspiration – motivation and energy
- Strength – resilience and connections
- Skills

Feedback from the previous ETC conferences, expressed a need for good take-aways from the conference. Therefore, this conference focused on providing shared repertoire. Every delegate learned two new taiko compositions; four new compositions in total.

Advantages of shared repertoire:

- You can take the repertoire back to your groups
- You can go to European taiko events and play shared repertoire together

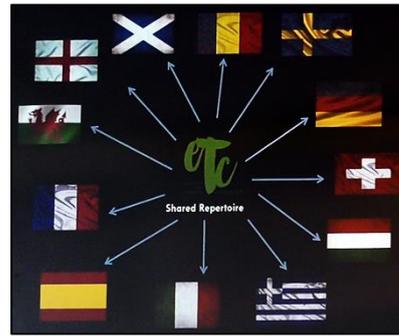


Photo:
The shared repertoire to share with your groups

Photo:
Play shared repertoire together at European taiko events



Karen Young, Founding Director of the Asian women's taiko group *The Genki Spark* based in Boston, USA, introduced her two workshop discussion sessions. These sessions were focusing on building community among the delegates in the conference, with structured activities in small groups where delegates could talk to each other so that they could learn from each others passions and experience of taiko.



Photo: Courtesy of Karen Young

In his opening talk, Yoshihiko Miyamoto said, “The development of the European Taiko has been very unique; different from Japan and different from North America. It’s an inspiration to the world taiko community.”

Yoshihiko Miyamoto also talked about four elements of Taiko as an art form:

- The early form of *Kumi-daiko* such as *Kodo*, *Osuwa*, and *Sukeroku*; those have been a very strong influence to the taiko community all over the world
- Festival drumming such as *Chichibu*, *Edo Bayashi*, and *Miyake*; *Kodo* brought some of the festival drumming to the stage
- Japanese classical art forms such as *Noh*, *Gagaku*, and *Kabuki*
- Western music such as classic, jazz, rock; Daihai Oguchi was originally a jazz drummer and *Kodo*’s master piece “*Monochrome*” was composed by a contemporary music composer

We should not fall into the “right or wrong” issue, Yoshihiko Miyamoto advised and concluded with some tips on how to enjoy ETC3.

Japanese things are not always really Japanese, because things are developed in the course of interaction, such as with some Japanese food.



Photo: The dishes are originally *not* from Japan

Ramen is originally from China and Curry originates from India.

Cultural interaction creates future by:

- Embracing diversity
- Fostering the evolution of taiko, this young art form
- Develop, like how the Japanese did with ramen and curry. However, please cook well... People love good food.

Some tips for our “Cooking”:

- Always nice to have basic skills
- Follow the instruction first (then improvise)
- Studying cultural background enriches your understanding
- Extract the goodness of the ingredients
- Good equipments help

Workshop Repertoire Performances

The ETC3 ended with workshop repertoire performances lead by the workshop leaders. All the delegates had an opportunity to perform the shared repertoire compositions that had been taught in the workshops:

- *Wa No Ichi* – by Kaoly Asano
<https://vimeo.com/259577135>
- *Swinging Slow and Fast* – by Masato Baba
<https://vimeo.com/259636046>
- *Worldwide Matsuri* – by Shoji Kameda
<https://vimeo.com/259582436>
- *Narushima* – by Katsuji Kondo
<https://vimeo.com/259594811>



Photo:
The ETC drum

Other Links

Slideshow from the 1st European Taiko Conference,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9j31bb92KU&feature=youtu.be>

3rd European Taiko Conference,
<https://kagemusha.com/events/european-taiko-conference/3rd-european-taiko-conference/>

Workshop Leaders – Interviews

Two sets of interviews concludes this article; the first set includes interviews with the workshop leaders and the second set includes interviews with the organizers and staff of ETC3, letting the interviews speak for themselves. I wish to truly thank everyone for giving me this wonderful opportunity and for taking their time to share their thoughts and stories.

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Kaoly Gocoo Asano

Kaoly Asano is based in Tokyo. She founded her group *GOCOO* and her school, known as *TAWOO Taiko Dojo* in 1997. *GOCOO* are known for their unique style, sometimes referred to as “groove taiko” or “tribal taiko”, breaking away from more traditional forms of taiko drumming. They are the first group to perform at a wide range of music festivals around the world. *GOCOO* have toured in Europe every year since 2003.

Source:

The official ETC3 conference booklet [1]

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

Kaoly Gocoo Asano: I founded a professional taiko band *GOCOO* and a taiko *dojo* [school] *TAWOO* in January of 1997. So it’s been 22 years that I’ve been active as a professional taiko player as well as a teacher providing a place for anyone to play taiko. I encountered taiko several years before that, about 25 or 26 years ago. I used to play in a different group. When the group disbanded at the end of 1996, I decided to start my own group and *dojo*.

At that time, I was an acupuncturist. I was a sickly child and couldn’t do many things like other children. When I got sick, my parents would take me to doctors, but they couldn’t help me get better. It forced me to listen to my body and figure out what was wrong. That eventually led me to Eastern medicine. So I studied Eastern medicine in my 20’s and became an acupuncturist. I opened a clinic and

had my own practice. Eastern medicine helped me deal with the problem of not being able to control my own body and to do the things I wanted to. By becoming an acupuncturist, I thought I would be able to help others become healthy and live a good life, their own life.

I think being sick or not sick, and being healthy and living well are two different things. I came to realize that acupuncture wasn’t enough to help people attain and live a full life and was struggling in search of an answer. That’s when a friend of mine, who was starting out a taiko group and looking for people to play with, asked me to join him. At the time I had no interest in taiko and hated playing music on my own, so I wanted to say no but couldn’t. So I went to practice one day. I held *bachi* [drum sticks] and stood in front of the taiko. It felt like I knew this place, as if I returned to this place. At that moment, I knew that was my role in this life – to play the taiko. It was as if I remembered everything and my taiko life started.



Photo:
Kaoly Gocoo Asano

SJ: *Could you tell me about the workshop and the song that we are learning at this ETC?*

Kaoly Gocoo Asano: I composed “*Wa No Ichi*” for a taiko group that was just starting out, because they asked me to. That was the very first song for this newly founded group. That’s the history of the song, but now we play it in our *dojo* as well. And I thought it would be a good piece to teach for the first time at ETC3 for everyone who learns it to take back home, make arrangements and play as their repertoire.

I wanted them to feel the music with their body and soul, see the same scenery and feel the story behind it. “*Wa no Ichi*” was the right piece to be able to share those things.

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

Kaoly Gocoo Asano: By coming to ETC, I’ve found out that there are so many people from so many countries who love taiko and continue to play despite numerous challenges. Knowing that there are comrades all over Europe who share the same purpose and passion has made me feel happy, encouraged and hopeful.

There are many female taiko players in Europe. Also Europe is at the stage of being ready and open to accept different styles and philosophies. Just like Japan, there is a preconception about taiko in Europe. But it feels like I’ve come at the right moment to teach my style that I have developed over the past 25 years. I feel that I can contribute to further developing the world of taiko in Europe.

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Shoji Kameda

Shoji Kameda is a Grammy nominated musician, composer and producer. He started playing taiko at the age of eight and has played continuously since. Collaborators with international artists have taken Shoji to Malaysia, Bali, French Guiana, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Shoji is a founding member of *On Ensemble* and the group’s primary creative force. In 2013 *On Ensemble* was invited to perform at the National Theater of Japan for their prestigious “*Nihon no Taiko*” series.

Source:
The official ETC3 conference booklet [1]

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

Shoji Kameda: I started playing taiko at the age of 8 and that was 34 years ago now. Originally it was something I was interested in and we had very good family friends. Maz’s parents were my first taiko teachers. They had been playing taiko for many years, so they had the knowledge. We had another friend who made taiko. My family and Maz’s family had young kids. So, Maz’s parents started the first childrens taiko group in the United States. That’s how I got started. From there it was just something that I just did growing up and then, when I went to the University, I got more involved in the artform. I really started to take ownership of my own involvement in it and then it just kind of grew from there.



Photo:
Shoji Kameda

SJ: *Could you tell me about the workshop and the song that we are learning at this ETC?*

Shoji Kameda: I wrote a new piece called “*Worldwide Matsuri*”. The idea behind this piece is based on the theme of a lot of these conferences. At the East Coast Taiko Conference (ECTC), we just had last weekend, the theme “Unity Through Diversity”. “*Taiko Without Borders*” is going to be the title of Jonathan Kirby’s newest book, and I think that sort of sentiment is what this European Taiko Conference is all about. So, I wrote this piece with that idea in mind. The idea is that we can take this community feeling that we have, that we have built in the taiko community, and if we all participate in it and we all take ownership of it, and we all put our energy towards this theme, we can create a worldwide *matsuri*.

I am going to be teaching this piece around the world. I have already started to do that at the East Coast Taiko Conference and here at the European Taiko Conference. We will make a *kaDON* course on it very soon. I am also going to be travelling throughout Europe and United States later on this year to teach more people this piece.

One of the things we are going to do is, we are going to do a video project to show people that, really, every time you pick up a *bachi*, you are connected to this whole world of taiko players that you might not even know. What we have done is, we have asked everybody to film themselves playing the piece. We have a web site where you can upload video clips. You can download the track and you listen to it and you film yourself like either *air-batching* or maybe playing it on a taiko or walking through the streets of London playing an imaginary taiko. The idea is that we really want to capture people where they live and with this spirit. Then we'll cut together all the video submissions that we get from around the world and we'll put it together in a collage in a music video so you can see how you are all connected to each other.

With that in mind, this piece will be available for people to learn and for people to play and teach, but it is going to come with some responsibility. One of the responsibilities is that, at least once a year, you perform this piece in a way that it's open, that invites other people to come in and play with your group or at this performance that you have or festival or taiko conference or something like this. The idea is that, if we all sort of contribute to this inviting and generous sort of feeling, we can really create a generous and open culture in the taiko community, which is something I'm really passionate about.

Then the idea is, that we will have a whole sort of list, like every year. Something like, "Oh, *Isshō Daiko* is going to play it there, and you can come and play in Los Angeles in June, and we're going to play in Taiko Palooza in July, and Taiko Spirit in August, and East Coast Taiko Conference..." and you will have

this whole list, so anybody in the taiko world can look at this and they could travel the world playing taiko with new friends that they haven't met yet.

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

Shoji Kameda: I really want to see this community grow and I want it to grow in a way that is open and generous. That is really what taiko has taught me. As an artist, it has taught me everything. It has taught me humility. It has taught me how to work on my craft. I met my wife through taiko, so it has given me a family. It has taught me about art. It has taught me about discipline. It has taught me about applying myself in different directions and it has really taught me to try to not just think of what I can get from taiko, but how I can give back to taiko and how I can give back to this community that does so much for me. That's what I really want to encourage as this community gets bigger and we involve more people and it becomes more diverse and it goes around the world. I want our values to be really strong and I think one of those values that we have in the taiko world is the spirit of generosity. Like, you [Soo-Im] invited me to Sweden. You opened up your house and you said, "Oh, come stay with us," and we learn from each other. There's so much support and generosity that you feel in the taiko world. I think that is really, really important. It is something that I want to make sure that we keep really strong and that we value it in the community and that we advocate for these values as this taiko world gets bigger and bigger.

I think this is something that could be very exciting. I think taiko has the potential to change the world, because it's about values, about culture, about community, it's about art, it's about music, it's about all these things that are really, really important to us as humans. It's something I have been thinking about a lot. When we spread it worldwide, it's creating a more positive future for all of us.

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Masato Baba

Masato Baba was born into a musical family and started playing taiko at the age of 6 under the tutelage of his parents and professional taiko players, Russel Baba and Jeanne Mercer of *Shasta Taiko*. After graduation of high school, Maz went to Hawaii to study taiko under taiko master, Kenny Endo, and then to Japan to further his studies.

In his thirty-three years of studying, performing, and teaching, Maz has become one of the most respected taiko players in North America. He currently serves as artistic director for *TAIKOPROJECT* and performs regularly with taiko-fusion group, *On Ensemble*.

Source:
The official ETC3 conference booklet [1]

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

Masato Baba: My taiko background goes back from when I was born. My mom and dad are taiko players, part of the first generation of taiko players in America. They both started with the *San Francisco Taiko Dojo* and they played for a few years. After they had me, they wanted to move to the country side, to raise me in a different environment than the city.

They left *San Francisco Taiko Dojo* and moved to Mount Shasta, California, which is the very northern part of California. They missed taiko so much that they started their own group. At that time, my family and Shoji were living there and we started a family, kid taiko group. I like to take credit for being, probably one of the first taiko kids group in America. It was just something that was part of my life, something I did two or three times a week.

I wanted to pursue it further, so Shoji and I moved to Hawaii and studied with Kenny Endo. I decided I liked it, so I went to Japan after I graduated College. I studied more taiko and *fue* in Japan. Then I moved back to Los Angeles to continue *Taikoproject* and *On Ensemble*.

Everybody always ask me why, but for me it wasn't really a choice. It was just there for me and fortunately for me I liked it and I continued playing it. It was just a way of life and I decided to keep playing and here I am, 34 years later.



Photo:
Masato Baba

SJ: *Could you tell me about the workshop and the song that we are learning at this ETC?*

Masato Baba: My song is called “*Swinging Slow and Fast*”, and it is based off the *naname*, the slanted drumming style. When Jonathan Kirby first approached me about coming out here, he said, “We like each workshop leader to teach a song.” I thought *naname* is one of my strong points and so I wanted to introduce something like that to the European taiko community.

For me it is a strong point in my artistry and I wanted to introduce some fun things to the community and also to challenge them with a different way of playing. It starts really slow, a very slow swing feeling to it, until it gets faster in terms of the underlying beat. The beat kind of changes within the same context. It is kind of hard to explain unless you see the song, but also adding some movement to it. With the slant style, you get a lot of different opportunities to use movement, so I wanted to try to add that in as well.

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

Masato Baba: I am very excited about taiko in general and the way it is spreading around the world. In 2014, my group *Taikoproject* hosted the World Taiko Gathering and I know there were a few European taiko groups that came and participated. We also had *Kagemusha* from Exeter, UK, perform in our *Taiko Nation* concert. I think that was of a good way to open up people's eyes to the world and what was happening in the world in the taiko scene.

What I really want to see, is each group owning their style or where they come from. I think a lot of people tend to get stuck in what is traditional taiko, but I think people need to embrace themselves and add their own influences to taiko, because taiko to me is very wide open as an art form. I am kind of looking for "what's the next thing" or this group from Germany should add something to it that's them. Not just "Oh, we have to pay attention and be respectful to taiko from Japan," but also adding those influences around your surroundings. I think that is important to feel comfortable with yourself as an artist just being yourself. Not trying to live up to something, but trying to have a good balance of that, I think.

I am starting to see a lot of that within the context of the European Taiko. It is my first time to the European Taiko Conference, but I have seen European Taiko before and also South American taiko. I just feel like they are starting to embrace their own cultures and adding their own influences. My taiko teacher, Kenny Endo, says... His dream is for taiko to be global and everybody plays it, just like the piano was one time only for one region but now everybody plays the piano. I hope that to be true and I believe the same philosophy that taiko should be out there for everyone to be able to access it. I just feel the community is strong right now and we need that sense of community to be able to come together and put something on like these taiko conferences, which is very good for everyone involved.

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Eiichi Saito

Eiichi Saito joined *Kodo* in 1982. Since then, he has been a featured performer on domestic and international tours, as well as in recordings and collaborations with artists of varying genres. For over three decades, he has captivated and invigorated audiences worldwide with his energetic performances.

In addition to his stage activities, Saito shares his passion for creative exchange by leading workshops that convey the power of taiko through self-discovery. Also for many years, he has been one of the instructors for Kodo Apprentice Centre, and teaches the basics of a professional taiko player to the apprentices that gathers from all over Japan and the world. We could even say that the performance basics of most current performers on *Kodo* have been trained by Saito.

*Source:
The official ETC3 conference booklet [1]*



Photo:
Eiichi Saito

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

Eiichi Saito: As a child, I had never seen or had any interest in taiko. I saw a concert that featured many artists and the last artist to perform was *Ondekoza*, which eventually became *Kodo*, but at the time it was *Ondekoza*. I was so inspired by their performance that, when I was in High School, I purchased a ticket to go

and see another one of their performances. I was very inspired by the fact that these performers were playing taiko and that's all they did for a living.

First time I saw *Ondekoza* was when I was in the second year of High School. And then again when I was in the third year of High School. Eventually, I had to think about College, but I decided I wanted to go to Sado Island, to join *Kodo*. When they said yes, I went to Sado Island after I finished High School. That was the first time I played taiko and I had never played taiko before going to Sado Island. So, my first impression was the fact that they were only playing taiko as their career and they were traveling all around the world just playing drums and that was what got me started with taiko.

SJ: *Could you tell me about the workshop and the song that we are learning at this ETC?*

Eiichi Saito: My first experience with ETC started last year in 2017. At the time, we had the privilege of having a very strong bond with the North American taiko groups. With the rapid growth of the European taiko groups, we as *Kodo*, felt that we wanted to start making new friends with the European taiko community. It just so happens to be at the same time ETC was happening, so we were kindly welcomed by Jonathan and the organizers to participate in ETC last year. Instead of me giving a workshop and teaching the European taiko community, it was more that we learned and met everybody and got introduced to this new community that was building.

First of all, I wasn't supposed to be teaching this song, because I am substituting the workshop leader Katsuji Kondo. Unfortunately, he could not fly over here and that's why I was given this opportunity again. It's not necessarily anybody who can teach this song, because that is not the whole point. This song, *Narushima* [sound of an island], was first created during *Kodo Juku*, a *Kodo* program that invites people to come to Sado and practice together for a few days. At the time, I was an assistant for *Kodo Juku* and Katsuji Kondo

was leading the camp. Because I was part of the process of creating the song, I felt that I was very suitable to teach this song to everybody as well.

I believe that the title was given afterwards by Katsuji san. *Kodo Juku* was held at Sado. So, whether it was the sound of the taiko or the sound of the wind or the island, who knows, but the more important thing is not the sound of the taiko, but the fact that everybody plays together.

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

Eiichi Saito: First of all, *Kodo* has this mentality and theory, wherever you can hear taiko within the circumference, diameter of how far the sound of taiko reaches, is community, our community. Physically speaking, the sound of drums can only reach to an extent, so we like to travel around the world to create small communities that will eventually tie together to make it a bigger connected community. Taiko is an instrument where it's non-verbal and if you play together you feel the same feeling together. So, we are hoping that spreading the taiko sound and spreading this community that we feel, will hopefully bring one peace on Earth. I believe that we have more and more new friends in Europe that are playing taiko with us now, and I am hoping that it will be faster for us to bring peace on Earth.

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Organizers and Staff of ETC3 – Interviews

Jonathan Kirby also talked about how ETC3 came about in his opening talk. It took 2 years of planning together with four local groups; *Yo Bachi Daiko*, *Kion Dojo*, *Tengu Daiko* and *Tama Daiko*.

I had the opportunity to interview the following ETC3 staff:

- Lucy Thomas (*Kagemusha Taiko*), one of the main organizers
- Erik Ruigrok (*Tengu Daiko*), host
- Oliver Boldt (*Yo Bachi Daiko*), host

- Ingmar Kikat (*Kion Dojo*), host
- Oliver Reichelt (*Tama Daiko*), host
- Kate Walker (*Tsuchigumo Daiko*), researcher
- Oliver Kirby (*Kagemusha Taiko*), early morning taiko drills

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Lucy Thomas

Lucy Thomas has been playing taiko for nearly 8 years, taking workshops with *Kagemusha Taiko* before joining *Tano Taiko* in September 2011. A committee member since 2013. Lucy continues to have an active role in leading and teaching the group. Also in 2013, Lucy joined the staff of *Kagemusha Taiko Company*.

In 2014, Lucy became a performing member of *Kagemusha Taiko Group* subsequently performing in Japan, USA and across the UK. Lucy has assisted in managing the past three UK Taiko festivals, as well as all three European Taiko Conferences. Lucy has participated in workshops with top taiko professionals from Japan and USA.

Source:

Courtesy of Lucy Thomas



Photo:
Lucy Thomas

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

Lucy Thomas: I discovered taiko in 2010. I had never heard it before and had never seen it. And I saw drumming by the river in Exeter,

where I live in the UK. I said, “That’s amazing,” and my friend said, “That’s taiko.” So, a couple of weeks later, I Googled, to see if there was anything close by that I could do a class. *Kagemusha Taiko* came up as a local group because they’re based in Exeter. I did some workshops, and then did some courses. Then, in 2011, I joined *Tano Taiko*, which is the company’s community group and then just kept playing.

I then became aware that it was much more than just playing in a group. There were so many other things I got involved with, because *Kagemusha Taiko* also hosts the UK Taiko Festival. After my first UK Taiko Festival, I was like, “This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.” So, I started to work for *Kagemusha Taiko* in 2013 and do a whole range of things. I teach, I help run our taiko centre, I help with the performing groups, and managing events we’re doing. Taiko has sort of been my life really since 2013.

SJ: *At this ETC, you are one of the people behind the huge organization that goes into this. Could you tell me a little about your role and your amazing work here?*

Lucy Thomas: The conference is a lot of work, but I do enjoy it. The past two conferences, I was in charge of drum logistics, managing the volunteers, liaising with the venue, liaising with all the delegates, so it was quite big. This year, it has been great, because we have the four groups in Hamburg. So my main roles this time have been dealing with all the bookings for the conference of the delegates who wanted to come and dealing with all accommodation bookings and setting all of that up, and also being the main liaison for delegates, if they have any questions. Running the check-in when the delegates arrived and doing all of that, and all the admin that goes on behind the conference, the workshop registers so that we know that the right people are in the right room, the lanyards, sorting out the t-shirts. And we drove here, and that was a big deal. Jonathan and I had to drive 18 hours in our van and then we have the drive back!

SJ: *Having organized three ETC, how has the ETC evolved?*

Lucy Thomas: The first year, me and Jonathan said, “Okay, let’s see what happens.” From the first conference, you learn different things. For the second one, we made a few changes, incorporating drills, but we only did one morning of drills [at ETC2]. And at the end of the conference last year people wanted more drumming, so this year we listened. So yes, each conference has been slightly different, but it is evolving. We also respect peoples feedback within reason. Sometimes, you can’t please everyone, you can’t make everyone happy, but if we get consistent feedback about something that we can change, then we will try and do it. For example, if people aren’t happy because there wasn’t a certain type of cheese for breakfast, that’s not really our concern, but if people are saying, “We want to do more drumming,” then okay, it’s about listening to people and using that feedback, to then feed into the next conference.

SJ: *As this is the third conference, what do you think about the future for these conferences?*

Lucy Thomas: I don’t know. It’s difficult because people are always asking, “What’s next, what’s next?” Sometimes you just kind of have to be in the moment and enjoy what’s going on and have a peripheral awareness of what people are thinking and reading the room. In terms of, “Do you people want another one? Maybe three is enough? You don’t know.” So, you kind of have to be in the moment and then take stock once the dust has settled. *

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

Lucy Thomas: I love it. With taiko growing as it is, at events like this, my favorite thing is to walk around and see people talking and people making new friends. And then you see on Facebook, where people that met in the conference, or any kind of taiko event, they visited that group or those two groups have done something together. I think it’s great. I think people can learn a lot from each other.

It’s important to always have a perspective of where you are and what your group is doing. And events like ETC are a great way of doing that, because you can get very stuck in your own stuff, but if you go out and meet other people you realize there is a world beyond your studio or your *dojo*, I think it’s very important.

*) *This interview took place before the official announcement and Lucy wanted to keep the next conference a surprise.*

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Erik Ruigrok

Erik Ruigrok originally from the Netherlands, Erik has been a member of *Tengu Daiko* since 2001, and group leader since 2005. Erik has learned how challenging it is to keep a group of completely different people together, while *Tengu Daiko* has performed in several European countries.

Source:

The official ETC conference booklet (2016) [2]

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

Erik Ruigrok: My taiko background dates back from 2001, no I must say: the beginning of 2002, just after *Tengu Daiko* was founded by Ilka Haase in October 2001. She was doing Japanese at the time as a student and so did I. She had just returned from a 1½ year stay in Japan to make her taiko knowledge more profound. She had been studying Japanese and her Master thesis was about taiko. In Japan, she found a very good group and rehearsed and even performed with them. Ilka is very talented and she learned very fast. After her 1½ years in Japan, she came back totally enthusiastic for taiko and she immediately wanted to continue with it, even without any drums and without any people. Well, concerning the people, for her, the most obvious was to try at the University, so she put up an ad at the Japanology department saying, “I am going to begin a Japanese taiko group. Who is going to

join me?" Fortunately, in the beginning there were several students of Japanology that wanted to take part. In the meantime, she also found a Japanese shop keeper who had a shop with Japanese food and who organized parties, a catering service. He happened to have one very decent taiko drum and two *shime*, and one other *shime* borrowed from someone else.

The number of people who joined the group was about 10 or 12, so there were only four who could play on the taiko, and the others had to play on car tires, which was a big problem, because once you hit a car tire you got a black bachi and you cannot hit a clean, beautiful taiko anymore! We always had to take care there and be alert! Then, after some months, I joined the club. I couldn't start from the beginning, because I had some college during the rehearsal time. In the next semester, there was no problem, so I had time on Wednesday afternoons. Wednesdays have always been our rehearsal days between 5 and 8 p.m. and it is still now.

From the first moment on, I was really fascinated with it. I had never done anything with drumming. I knew that I kind of had a feeling for rhythm and for music, but I had never tried it out. I started to play with them and I remember my first appearance there; Ingmar, who was already a part of the group, came to me and said, "Well, it's not the first time you have been drumming, is it?" It actually was the first time, so that was a big compliment for me, of course! For me, it was clear that I would stay in this group for longer, because I liked what happened.



Photo:
Erik Ruigrok

SJ: *You are one of the four hosts for ETC3. What is it like being a host for the ETC3?*

Erik Ruigrok: That was very interesting. After the first year, I think it was in Exeter, Jonathan Kirby asked us if there would be any possibility for us, group leaders from Hamburg, to be the hosts. Already two years ago, we started looking for a location, which we found here in the Sunderhof and it was all quite a challenge of course. It was the first time for Jonathan to give the organisation out of his hands and he didn't exactly know what he could expect and we did not know what we could expect. In the beginning he said that we would have to do everything, but then Jonathan thought it would be wiser to keep the organisation to *Kagemusha Taiko* and to let us just host the ETC3. This meant, finding the location, finding volunteers to help out during the conference, organizing the drums and also the cooperation between the Sunderhof and the ETC and every aspect that has to do with it, such as setting up a shuttle to the train station, informing the neighbours that it might be loud, etcetera.

My role has been entirely with drum organizing. It started with making a list of all the drums that the four groups in Hamburg had available and making labels for everything, every one of the 115 drums, drum stands and drum bags. Besides that, I had to organize the transport of the drums that were shipped from Hamburg to the Sunderhof, and see to it that every drum and drum stand would return to its original place.

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

Erik Ruigrok: Of course, this growth is positive. In my opinion, everyone who is doing the same art form is welcome, I don't see any rivalry. Even the fact that it might mean that *Tengu Daiko* would have less performances because of more competitors doesn't scare me. I am very open to that, and apart from that, we are not really depending on gigs. Especially, I welcome the idea of the ETC to actively make friends among people in different countries and spread the word and make it all as open as possible.

Actually, in recent years in Germany there has been a very strict movement of a number of fanatic taiko players who thought they could decide what was taiko and what was not, and which group played classically enough and which group did not. And only the classically playing taiko groups could enter in this so called foundation. This was not a positive development because instead of tearing down walls as we do at ETC, they wanted to build up walls; no one could come to their group uninvitedly, no one should read their music and they preferred to have no guests because they might spy on what happened in their group. That is a very pathetic attitude, I'm afraid. But I think the movement calmed down, and now I see that people from the groups that originally were into it also come to the ETC. And that is a very good development, I think.

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Oliver Boldt

After having played taiko for some years, Oliver Boldt founded *Yo Bachi Daiko* together with Katja Nill. Oliver Boldt has a background in African drumming. In November 2017 the group premiered their full night show called "Momentum".

Source:

The official ETC3 conference booklet [1]

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

Oliver Boldt: I started with African drumming in 1996 and Ilka Haase, who actually started the taiko movement in Hamburg, was part of this African drumming class. In 1998 Ilka had brought a taiko teacher from the middle of Germany to Hamburg. She needed 10 people to attend in order to pay him. Of course, she asked other drummers. So, most of the people came from the African drumming scene and I was one of them. I said that I only wanted to do this single workshop and would never show up again, but this workshop was so demanding and it was really great, so I just came back when she made the next workshop. Yes, that was the very beginning. So for the next

few years, I think until 2004, I did African drumming as well as taiko drumming, before I just focused on taiko drumming. So I started taiko drumming just by occasion. I just tried it.

I think I saw *Kodo* the year before in 1997. There was a drumming festival in Hamburg when they played. I enjoyed it a lot. I found it very exotic because I was living in this African drumming world. Very interesting, very fascinating, but I did not consider to do this myself, because I was happy with what I was doing, but the first workshop changed it. So playing with *bachi*, because African drumming is mainly hand drums, playing while standing in a low stance, that had some impact on me. So I wanted to do it again.

SJ: *You are one of the four hosts for ETC3. What is it like being a host for the ETC3?*

Oliver Boldt: It's amazing, because I was at last ETC, ECT2, and with my wife Katja we also went to the UK Taiko Festival. At this time, there weren't any festivals or gatherings here in Germany, so it was an experience that we just knew from the UK. We really admired what Jonathan Kirby had achieved in the UK. I never thought about doing this myself, but when Jonathan came to Hamburg two years ago and asked us if we would host an ETC, I found it very interesting. I just thought it could be a really good experience working with them. Never in my life have I organized a conference. Maybe it's lot of work. It's unpaid, so it is definitely not for the money. I thought, "Yeah, let's do it."



Photo:
Oliver Boldt

So, the last weeks, I was pretty busy preparing everything. We had a vague idea how things could be and could go, but in the beginning, you don't know about all the details. When you start thinking, details come up, and then you think about the details and more details come up. Yes, it was a lot of work, but I enjoyed it.

I was in charge of anything related to the Sunderhof and the Sunderhof staff. Of course, there were many uncertainties such as, are the rooms big enough?, is it too loud from the outside?, will there be complaints? I felt a little bit unsafe, because in the UK, I always had a great experience and of course, I wanted to, as a host, provide the same experience to the guests here. So I was really motivated. Now, my impression is that everyone is happy so it was worth all the time.

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

Oliver Boldt: That's a good question, because you know there's a term "taiko boom", there's a book "Taiko Boom" and what some people say is, actually I don't have the numbers, but some people are saying that maybe we are past boom. So maybe in Japan it is going down a little bit. Here in Europe, it is going up, I think. I mean now in May of this year, I have been playing taiko for 20 years, so I have some idea about the growth of taiko here in Germany: For a couple of years it's growing and then there's a more of a stagnation and then there's a growth again. So it's not just straight going up. I just think the last years were amazing.

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Ingmar Kikat

Ingmar Kikat joined Ilka Haase's new group in Hamburg – *Tengu Daiko* in 2001. 3 years later, went to Japan and joined the *Tawoo Dojo* founded by Kaoly Asano leader of Gocoo. Returned to Germany at end of 2005 to found own group, *Taikoon*, and own school *Kion Dojo*. Still going strong 10 years later.

Source:

The official ETC conference booklet (2016) [2]

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

Ingmar Kikat: I actually started learning percussion and drums when I was about 10 years old and I played in all kinds of ensembles and bands and youth orchestras. My mother was a opera singer and singing teacher. So, my family was very into music a lot. I always wanted to do music professionally when I was a kid. Then, when I was 18, I had a chance to go to Japan for the first time, to Asia in general with a youth percussion group. That was the first time I saw taiko in Japan or taiko in general. We played several concerts there together with local taiko groups and that made a big impression on me. I remember that, but I didn't start playing taiko after that.

Japan in general just fascinated me and it was a really big, interesting journey for me. I found out I could study Japanology at the University after school. I didn't start to study music because, obviously, I wasn't at the right level for the audition at the music University at the time. So, I moved to Hamburg and started studying Japanology. There, I got to know Ilka Haase, and she had just come back from Japan and wanted to continue playing taiko in Germany. She had played with a group in Osaka and then she just called out to the other students, "Who wants to play some taiko?" and for me it was natural since I played drums and wanted to try taiko of course. So that was my start with taiko and the beginning of *Tengu Daiko*, the group.



Photo:
Ingmar Kikat

I was really fascinated by everything that was in taiko and belonged to it, and what was different in it of what I did before, as a soloist, or with a band or in an orchestra. I enjoyed that a lot, but taiko had much more into it and was very interesting for me. So, my interest in Japanology of old Japanese literature went down and my interest in taiko went up. Then at one point, after a few years, I said, “I want to really learn more taiko and play more taiko.” So, I went to Japan. I became a member of *Tawoo Dojo* of *Gocoo* and learned that kind of style. After about 16 months, I returned to Germany and started my new school that’s *Kion Dojo*.

SJ: *The style that you play, can you tell me a little bit about that?*

Ingmar Kikat: The *Gocoo* style can only be played by *Gocoo* in a sense, and *Gocoo* is a group of its own. So, we play our own *Kion* style which has lots of influence from *Gocoo* and their *Tawoo Dojo*. We play a lot of pieces from *Tawoo Dojo*, but I have also started teaching more of my own pieces. We try to find our own expression, sort of say “German, Hamburg” taiko, because we’re not Japanese and we don’t want to try to look exactly like *Gocoo* or *Tawoo*. They have a completely different cultural background. Although my wife is Japanese, I like to travel to Japan a lot, still it is not that we try to be too Japanese. This way of playing taiko isn’t traditional anyways.

For a long time, we were the only group outside of Japan, playing this kind of taiko. There’s another dojo, another *Gocoo* member named Yuko, who started it in Hokkaido in Sapporo. So, in Japan there’s two places and another member who went to Brazil and is also teaching there. But there is only just in a few places, right now at the moment. Maybe this will change after this ETC. Very possible, who knows?

SJ: *You are one of the four hosts for ETC3. What is it like being a host for the ETC3?*

Ingmar Kikat: It’s everything. It was a lot of work to prepare. Tons of e-mails going back and forth between Hamburg and Exeter, and

Jonathan and Lucy, me and the other hosts here in Hamburg. Like there were two or three really crazy weeks where I had in my inbox, like 10-15 new e-mails related to ETC3 every day. Besides all the other work I do, I had to also do that work, but it was a joy because Jonathan and Lucy are so well organized and they are very clear in their communication and they don’t bother you with any unnecessary things. I learned quite a lot from that and it was great fun to do in the end.

I worked with the volunteers who are essential for the ETC, so that the delegates can really focus on the conference. We had about 16 volunteers plus additional helpers from four different taiko groups, *Yo Bachi Daiko*, *Tama Daiko*, *Tengu Daiko* and *Kion Dojo*.

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

Ingmar Kikat: I think it is really great. If I just look at Europe, I think many groups are in need of some good teaching and some good pieces, because we don’t have any long tradition of taiko like in Japan or the US. So, ETC is just the perfect place to start setting a seed for new pieces and new ideas and new connections between players. It’s just such a good place for that. I am really proud that we could establish this ETC in Europe, thanks to especially Jonathan. I think we still have a long path in front of us, it’s just the beginning right now. If you think of all the American conferences that they have been doing for such a long time. I think the European community will be influenced, so that it will look completely different in ten years than it is now, thanks to the ETC and to other activities that are going on. But I think the first ETC was an important part in getting things rolling.

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Oliver Reichelt

Oliver Reichelt started taiko in 2002 as an early member of *Tengu Daiko*, leaving to form his own group and school in 2006, having played over 100 gigs. *Tama Dojo* has had Japanese teachers, including Katsuji Kondo, Mizuho

Zako and Yoshiyuki Kimura. Developing all potentials in Spirit, Soul and Body is their aim.

Source:

The official ETC conference booklet (2016) [2]

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

Oliver Reichelt: I started in Hamburg with Ilka and I started taiko with Ilka because Ilka came back from Japan having drummed there, and wrote down at the University “Next Wednesday, we start taiko.” I was there with other leaders from Hamburg, at that moment, they weren’t drumming, with Ingmar, with Erik. We were in the same class, so Ilka got us all. Before I had started taiko, I had done Japanese archery, tea ceremony and several other things. So my approach to drumming came from that. And when I had grown a little bit in taiko drumming, I noticed that my needs were different than most other peoples needs. Whenever we were deciding what to do, I said, “I would like to do this,” and the others would say, “We would like to do that,” so I had to come up with my own way of doing it, which lead to me doing it for myself and that was when I founded *Tama Daiko*.



Photo:
Oliver Reichelt

SJ: *You are one of the four hosts for ETC3. What is it like being a host for the ETC3?*

Oliver Reichelt: There’s no workshop on how to host, but Jonathan coached us a bit of what he was doing. We were all different people and different approaches to that. It’s not the

preparations, the hosting is more when the delegates are here, you have to respond to the needs of the people. I realized this while ETC was already going on. So, hosting for me then was seeing everybody and trying to find out, “What do they need now? Is there something I can provide at that moment?”

I was sharing responsibilities for drums. So, when we prepared, we listed all the drums and I did the lists that were divided by workshops and divided by groups. And Erik did the lists of which car we transport things. Our plans also got changed, like a workshop leader comes in and says, “Oh, can I have a *shime* drum?” or something. And Shoji on the other side said, “Oh, I got so many *shime* drums, can I have a *nagado*?” So that worked perfectly, since we just switched that. So those were the two rooms I was in charge of at that time, so stuff like that happened and we did that.

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

Oliver Reichelt: I have two views on that. One is, of course, that we are having so much fun here. It’s a joy too meet all of you. It’s a joy playing in this setting together and I appreciate the quality that is coming to light under these circumstances. I also see a lot of growth in the taiko community globally as well as in Japan, because I go to Japan a lot. Quality is not the main concern for most of these people. They want quality teachers, but they don’t want to be told that they have to evolve much. And so, I see there’s room for improvement on how to bring people to a level where they can appreciate a conference like this one.

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Kate Walker

Kate Walker became a member of *Tsuchigumo Daiko* in 2016. Prior to this, she had taken a range of taiko workshops and courses while focusing on her performance skills in various forms of Turkish percussion and flamenco dancing. She is a part-time PhD student in Music at the University of Sheffield, researching taiko drumming in the UK.

Source:

Courtesy of Kate Walker

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

Kate Walker: I first played taiko in 2013. I attended a series of evening classes in Edinburgh, and developed from there. I had first seen taiko in Edinburgh many years before when I was in school and I was learning Western percussion at the time. Like almost everyone who sees it, I just loved it. So, when the opportunity came to study it, I did so. Now I am a member of *Tsuchigumo Daiko* in Glasgow. I have been playing with them for almost two years.

When I started to study taiko as a player, I realized that there's really so much happening and there's very little research conducted on taiko. Research is an interesting process because normally everything is attributed to the individual researcher or a small research team. So, somebody publishes a book or a journal article or a report and it's all attributed to that individual person or research group. I view my research with the taiko community quite differently as I've adopted an applied approach. In other words, I am trying to support the development of taiko in Europe through my research and have done so since the outset. I am a taiko player first and a researcher second, with the idea of helping the taiko community here in Europe to develop.



Photo:
Kate Walker

SJ: *Could you elaborate on what you are researching?*

Kate Walker: My topic is how players in the UK build communities of practice. This is

where people who have a shared interest in something come together in order to get better at it. You've heard me say taiko players in the UK, and here we are at a European taiko conference. I realized very, very quickly in my research that taiko players in the UK don't only talk to each other. They talk to taiko players who are far more geographically spread out. So, across Europe, the United States, Australia ... This community of practice is truly global and it's facilitated by events such as the European Taiko Conference, Taiko Palooza, the UK Taiko Festival, the North American Taiko Conference, but it's also facilitated by practices online, particularly via community Facebook groups. So, I look at how taiko in the UK is evolving through players' engagement in these communities of practice.

SJ: *How can the taiko community benefit from this research?*

Kate Walker: Taiko in Europe is evolving very, very quickly. It looks quite different in some ways to when we attended the first European Taiko Conference. Now, there are a lot of international links that have been established that go beyond people simply talking to each other; players collaborate internationally in many ways. That has come about because the people who do this have made efforts to understand how these connections can benefit everyone.

I think the taiko community can benefit from this research because I try to help the community understand its challenges and understand what is shared amongst the members. So, for example, what the shared goals are, what the shared challenges are, and where we can support each other effectively. What strikes me is that I'm incredibly lucky as a researcher to work with the taiko community. For instance, at the second European Taiko Conference the evaluation response rate was 92%. A colleague at my University who read a piece of writing I'd produced commented on the methodology. He wrote to me and he said, "Oh, and you made a typo, I think you mean 9% response rate," which would be about right for this kind of work. I had to write back and say, "No, 96%." I think the fact that

people are so gracious and willing to share and be so open and contribute, is indicative of the people who make up the community, but also indicative of how much people want to see taiko grow. It's so special in people's lives and they want to see it develop further. I hope my research allows that to happen.

SJ: *How can the data that you share in your reports be used?*

Kate Walker: I think it can be used in a couple of ways since I focus on communities of practice, and I tend to look at occasions such as European Taiko Conference when people come together. So, what I hope is that people who are considering running events may use this data to understand what people want when they come to such events. The European Taiko Conference is a very, very well organized event and not everyone belongs to a professional company that is able to do this degree of organization and planning. Still, I think what we learn from the evaluations of these kind of events is still what people want, what they think can be improved and what's meaningful to them, and I hope organizers of other events can use these big themes if relevant.

The other thing that I know, because I have heard feedback, is that my research is used to support the development of taiko in local communities. People have told me that they've used some of the information when applying for grants. These are grants from public bodies, namely arts councils – arts organizations that distribute public funding to help artistic activities take place in local communities. To me, this is the best use of the data because it's enabling community members to grow taiko in their local areas. So, things like demographic information, who plays taiko, how much do they spend and how much time do they spend on it. I am always thrilled when people write to me and say, "We got the money to do this," because it means data – which funding bodies so often want to see – is actually allowing taiko to grow here in Europe.

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

Kate Walker: I am aware of groups and players on all continents. I think this is hugely exciting. Although we all share challenges in humanity, taiko, in my opinion, works best when it meets the needs of the people who play it. That means that it doesn't necessarily look the same in all corners of the world. So, for instance, in North America, *naname* is very, very popular, and here [in Europe] it's less so. It can boil down to the styles that people play, it can boil down to how it's used. For instance, in the UK, we have groups that use taiko to work with children with special educational needs and disabilities. For me, it is important that taiko grows and spreads, but I hope that people make music with taiko that is meaningful to them, is meaningful to their communities and is really locally relevant both musically and socially.

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Oliver Kirby

Oliver Kirby, who has been playing taiko since 1999, is a senior member of *Kagemusha Taiko Group*, performing in Europe, USA and Japan. He is also one of the company's principal teachers, leading corporate workshops as well as in schools and at specialist taiko training events. Oliver also has experience of teaching and performing professionally in USA, with both *Portland Taiko* in Oregon and *Taikoproject* in Los Angeles.

Source:

The official ETC conference booklet (2016) [2]

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

Oliver Kirby: I have been playing taiko from quite a young age. I got started... I realize, the more people I talk to, about how they came across taiko, especially in Europe, people tend to have a big story about how they came across it the first time. Like, "I was at a local festival, and I was sort of just walking around when I heard this noise and I had to check it out and it was this amazing thing," and it was this big, single experience that they could pinpoint, like, that was the time. Or, "a friend said we should

go and see this group called *Kodo*, and I had no idea what it was, but it was amazing.” I never really had that, because my father set up a taiko organization and the first group he created was an after school group at a local primary, elementary school, which my siblings and I attended. So, I started doing taiko as an after school class at the age of nine. To be completely honest, it was just because it was that thing that my dad did and I was kind of going just because, “yeah, why wouldn’t I?” My sister and I, we both went and a neighbor, who is our friend, went. It was just kind of getting people together to be in a group. That was my reason to start playing. It wasn’t because anything sort of like inspiring moment or anything like that. It was more of a thing that my dad did.

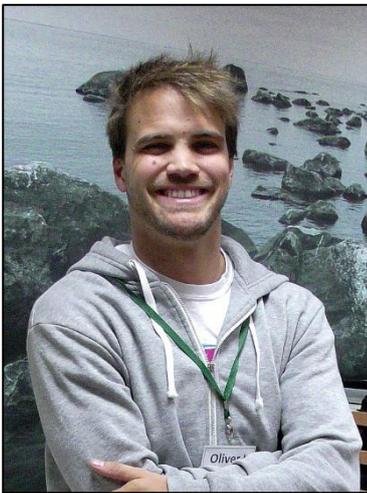


Photo:
Oliver Kirby

He had come across it seeing *San Jose Taiko* and began training with them. The first time I ever saw taiko was seeing *San Jose Taiko* in concert. I remember enjoying it and stuff but I was quite young. So when I saw them, I did not make the connection that I would like to do that. I grew up with the *Kagemusha Junior Taiko* program as it sort of developed, as it sort of evolved. I was growing up throughout that process. By the time I reached 18, it had grown to quite a significant junior program of about 3 different levels of groups and about 50-60 kids.

18 was the big turning point for me, because that was the first time that I went to the US to experience some taiko there. I had been to Japan a couple of times to play there. So I had seen and experienced and played alongside “other international” forms of taiko, but at 18 it was my first time I went to the States to not

just to seek out different environment for taiko, but to seek out different learning environments. To actually go there and learn and put myself in a new kind of situation. And that was the start of my work with Michelle Fujii who was, at the time, the artistic director of *Portland Taiko* in Oregon. I trained with them, I toured with them, and did some teaching work with them, and I repeated that process for the next couple of years going over there for the whole summer and did intensive training and stuff. That was a massive development in my taiko playing.

It was at that point I realized, 1) how big the world of taiko was and 2) I started to get a sense of the true scope of the possibilities of the art form which are enormous and in relation to that how very, very, very early on I was in my taiko experience. Having gone as an 18-year old, arriving there like, “I’m hot shit, would you guys like to see what I can do?” thinking I was kind of standing on the top of the world, and it was crashing down to reality, but rightly so. It was a big, big turning point for me as a taiko player and for me as a person for sure.

I’ve since kept up ties with US based groups and players so I still sort of have contact with them and do occasional work with them as well as carrying on my work with *Kagemusha Taiko*. For a few different periods I have worked professionally with *Kagemusha Taiko*. I have been employed by the company in a teaching capacity primarily, as well as performing. I have also done educational work for other taiko groups. I have done compositions for *Kagemusha Taiko* and for other taiko groups as well. Yeah, lot’s of stuff.

SJ: *Speaking of compositions, at the first European Taiko Conference in 2016, you taught “Stepping Stones” at a workshop. How did “Stepping Stones” come about?*

Oliver Kirby: “*Stepping Stones*” I wrote immediately after getting back from the US for the first time. I think I wanted to channel some of the kind of spirit that I picked up when being in the US. Then I think I was a little bit emboldened to just create something. I hadn’t written any piece for taiko before and I think

at a sudden moment I thought I just need to get that done, I need to sort that out. I saw a kind of an easy way in to doing it. It is a bit intimidating, because the group plays compositions by Jonathan and I think he is a very, very good taiko composer. I think that's been one of the consistent strengths the group has had from the very beginning stages. He writes very good diverse, interesting pieces. So, it can be a little bit intimidating purely because those other pieces exist, to sort of go to the composition table and trying to create something yourself. It's like, "Why do I need to if we got all of these great pieces?", but we were putting a show together and we needed an encore piece, and that was the way in for me, and it was kind of "It's just an encore piece" and I'll just throw this in together.

Literally, the piece was designed in terms of the drum requirements and stuff around the last piece of the set so it be easy to play it after that. I specifically said, "This is just an encore piece and not like the main piece," I was kind of hiding behind that title. I wrote it very quickly, actually. It was one of those things where it kind of came together in about a day. I just sort of threw this idea together, it's got a melody pattern and a riff. We started playing it and for I guess at least 3 or 4 years it was just a *Kagemusha* piece. I first wrote it in 2009 and for the first few years it was just played by us.

Then I kind of had the thought to start teaching it, because people thought it was cool and fun and wondered if I could consider teaching that piece, and it's great because it's quite simple, not very much to it, you can teach it in a workshop. You can give people a good idea of the piece in one workshop. I had been really inspired by the work other people had done with taiko compositions, to just write stuff and then let it out into the community saying, "Here you go, anyone can do this. Anyone can do whatever they want with this piece." I think that is incredibly empowering and for me, that resonates a lot more with me than people who say, "I got this composition. As an officially registered teacher of this composition, I can teach it to you for a reasonable fee, and then you will

be, if I deem you good enough, you will then be allowed to play that piece. You are not allowed to teach it, but you can play it." You know, all those kind of rules and regulations around compositions. I understand why people have it, but I just find it a lot more inspiring to be... if you got the disposition to just say, "Here's the material," and if you want to play it really badly and arrange it really badly and call it "*Stepping Stones*" and say it was written by Oliver Kirby, I've got no problem with that at all. That is what I think from kind of beginning how I felt about it. I was only just a little bit hesitant of it, because I couldn't really believe that people would want to play the piece, but actually it has proved to be very popular. It is now played by... I don't know how many groups, but at least a few dozen I think, from what people tell me anyway.

SJ: *At the 2nd European Taiko Conference, and now during this 3rd European Taiko Conference, you are doing taiko drills in the mornings. Could you talk a little about your drills?*

Oliver Kirby: I think the concept of drills can be a little bit off-putting to people. I think even the word drills has kind of a military association and that kind of thing, but I think they can be very useful. Especially in an environment like this where it ends up being very content focused. The workshops are quite... they tend to be, especially at this ETC, ETC3, where it's composition focused for all the workshops. It means the people that are turning up, it's a lot of content being put on them. Then when it comes to any sort of performances that might happen, they are very content focused as well, because it is about playing a composition and all that kind of thing.

I think there's a lot of value in being able to just facilitate playing happening, just for the sake of playing. As well as, obviously, being really a great way to improve yourself as a taiko player. Drills can be hugely valuable in that regard, because again, as soon as you're not playing a piece, you're "just" playing drills. I think it is easier sometimes to just focus on the mechanics on how you're hitting the drum and the way you're standing and the way you're

holding yourself and the way you're moving and all that kind of stuff. As soon as you're doing that in a context of a piece, you can still focus on all that stuff, but it just got an extra layer of complication, because it's all through the medium of playing this piece. So, you're also, as well as all that stuff, thinking about: How does the piece sound? What is the feel of the piece? How's everyone else in the piece doing as well as myself? Does everyone know their parts? How does this part go again? All of that stuff. As for drills, they can be whatever kind of vibe. You can really make them hard core, heavy power drills, or you can make them fun, game-like drills and more loose and expressive. It just means it can be a bit of an easier way of stripping back some of the other stuff that can sometimes burden us a little bit as players and have fun and improve our fundamentals.

In the context of ETC it's about doing that, giving extra chances to play, together as well. This morning we had at least 10 different countries represented, and 20 different groups probably, in this room. That's pretty amazing. Just to have the opportunity for those people to play alongside each other, what they are playing is kind of almost irrelevant. Just the fact that this is happening is incredible, so the drills again facilitate that.

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

Oliver Kirby: I think it is a massively positive thing. I come from a group and from a set of principles which say that the growth of taiko can only be a good thing. More people playing is just brilliant. I think that's universally a positive thing. I think people get very worried, and I can totally understand why that would happen, people would get very worried about what the art form looks like if you just apply exponential growth to it. If you just got more and more people playing it, does it get diluted? Would we lose the kind of purity? It's all very sticky that kind of issue area, because what is pure? What is the art form in its truest sense? I think there is that famous adage that "tradition is just innovation that sticks." Taiko's tradition is to take Japanese classical music elements

and have a jazz drummer rummage them up and give out these parts out among his friends and everything all in post war Japan. What tradition is, is a moot point. I think you have to trust that, with the growth of taiko, people will seek out those answers.

I think if you look at the growth of anything, when more and more people are involved in it, yes a lot of people will only be involved in it in a very superficial level, and they won't have an idea of the bigger thing that they happen into. But if you got a hundred people that are doing something, maybe 10 percent of them will be into it to that extent and will go explore more. And maybe 5 percent of those people will get advanced training from the top level people, and then 1 percent of those people will become a kind of purveyor of the art form, who can then inspire other people. To increase your chances of having that sort of level of commitment to the art form, as a percentage, as a proportion of people, you need loads of people to be involved in it.

In the US, the number of people that have been at a University and played in a US taiko group, like a US University taiko group, will be thousands now from when the first groups started and everything, and most of them will have a good couple of years at College playing it and probably never play taiko again. But then some of those people are like Kris Bergstrom, who came across it for the first time at the University and has been a professional taiko player for a long time and is an incredible practitioner of the art form and gives an enormous amount to the community, and no one would question his acumen or his taiko credentials or anything like that. You only create that opportunity by expanding out to as many people as possible and reaching out. It's about inclusivity rather than making it an exclusive endeavor.

The irony is, that people who want to protect what they think taiko is, and say you can only do it on these terms, that is what will... it won't kill the art form, but it will stunt its growth massively. It can't grow beyond that if you limit the intake to it, because a lot of people that would do amazing things for the art form won't even start, if you make those the rules.

You're shutting the door to an enormous chunk of the population, if you get really prescriptive about what taiko is and what it should be. So, ironically, people who do that, because out the love for the art form and for how they feel about it, they are actually majorly stunting its growth and maybe they know that and would like to do that, I don't know, but for me, I just think if for no other reason, 1) taiko is amazing, so everyone should do it, so you should encourage that, 2) and then a practical benefit of that, is that you are going to get people who are going to be very, very good practitioners of the art form and will be amazing flag bearers for the art form in its development going forward and for the future, and you want as many people as you can get if you want the art form to grow, and you get that by being inclusive.

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The Next European Taiko Conference

The 4th European Taiko Conference:

Date: 21-24th February, 2019

Location: the Sunderhof, Hamburg, Germany

For more information please visit:

www.eurotaiko.org.

A Word from the Author

This article is my way of contributing and thanking the taiko community. Thank you all very, very much.

* * *

References

[1] Kagemusha Taiko (2018). *Official European Taiko Conference Booklet*. Exeter, U.K.

[2] Kagemusha Taiko (2016). *Official European Taiko Conference Booklet*. Exeter, U.K.



Photo: The official ETC conference booklet (2016)

Links

European Taiko Conference

<https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanTaikoConference/>

Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten

<https://www.miyamoto-unosuke.co.jp/english/>

Kagemusha Taiko

<http://kagemusha.com/>

Kodo

http://www.kodo.or.jp/index_en.html

The Genki Spark

<http://www.thegenkispark.org/index.html>

GOCOO

<http://www.gocoo.de/>

On Ensemble

<http://onensemble.org/>

TAIKOPROJECT

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

Glossary

air-batching

A term used to describe using drum sticks without hitting any drum, just practicing playing on an imaginary drum in the air.

bachi (桴 or 枹)

Bachi is taiko drumsticks and they come in various sizes.

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.

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.

Edo Bayashi (江戸囃子)

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

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.

matsuri (祭り)

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

miyake

Traditional festival drumming from Miyake Island.

(<https://estoestaiko.com/2015/07/10/miyake-kodos-continued-arrangement-of-regional-drumming-styles/>)

nagado (長胴)

Nagado means a long taiko drum body

nohgaku (能楽)

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

naname (斜め)

Naname means “slanted” or “diagonal” and the word describes how the drum is positioned in a slanted angle.

Shimedaiko (締太鼓)

Shimedaiko or *shime* is a rope-tightened drum and it’s often very high pitched.

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.

taiko (太鼓)

The word *taiko* means “big drum” or “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.

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.

