

The European Taiko Conference 2019

Article by: Soo-Im Jansson, 2019-04-30



Photo: Courtesy of Lucy Thomas

The fourth European Taiko Conference was held in Germany in February 2019. The theme of the conference was “*Developing the Community, Developing the Art Form*” with focus on how to find your own voice through taiko. A world taiko conference will be held in Tokyo, Japan, in November 20th-23rd, 2020.

The fourth European Taiko Conference was held in Germany on 21-24 February with the theme “Developing the Community, Developing the Art Form”, focusing on how to find your own voice through taiko. The conference included workshops with international taiko artists and discussion sessions as well as informal individual group performances during the evenings, and celebratory taiko playing on the final day.

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 4th European Taiko Conference (ETC4) was held in Germany this year.

Yoshihiko Miyamoto, president of *Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten*, is the sponsor for all the ETC Conferences.



Photo: The official ETC4 conference booklet [1]

Opening Talks

During the opening talks, conference host Ilka Haase, 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, Ilka Haase presented who was at the conference:

- 81 delegates
- 6 workshop leaders
- 4 *Kagemusha Taiko* and Miyamoto/kaDON staff
- 4 volunteer staff
- 5 observers
- ... from 16 countries, representing a record of 55 different taiko groups and organisations.

The aim of all the ETC conferences is:

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

Conference host, Shoji Kameda, presented the main focus for the ETC4:

- Expressing yourself through taiko...
- Finding your own taiko voice...
- Innovation, a feature of taiko “tradition”
- Workshops help...

Shoji Kameda talked about taking the next step, doing the hard work of figuring out what you want to say with taiko; who you are and what your point of view is, and developing the skills to be able to share that with the world. Shoji Kameda also presented the 4 workshop leaders that would help us in this direction during the conference:

- PJ Hirabayashi
- Shogo Yoshii
- Fumi Tanakadate
- Jonathan Kirby

More information about the workshop leaders can be found at the official ETC4 web page:

<https://kagemusha.com/events/european-taiko-conference/4th-etc-2019/#Leaders>

In his opening talk, Yoshihiko Miyamoto talked about “Taiko, Diversity, and its cultural foundation” to help us find our own voice.

Beginning with a short history of taiko, when ensemble drumming began:

- 1960’s Daihachi Oguchi (*Osuwa Daiko*)
- 1970’s *Ondekoza / Kodo / Eitetsu Hayashi*

Even though taiko is a rather new artform, it has its roots in classic art forms involving taiko, that have co-existed over the centuries:

- Gagaku , 7th Century –
- Nogaku, 14th Century –
- Kabuki, 15th Century –
- Folk music and dance / Festival drumming

The concepts behind the folk music and dance are:

- Prayer
 - advance blessing, such as prayer for good harvest, prayer for good health
 - ancestor memorial service
- Community
 - a social system to gather all generations

Taiko has evolved from the basis of that taiko has been:

- a mean to appreciate the mother nature and human life
- expressed in diverse ways not in an uniform way

Yoshihiko Miyamoto concluded his talk with that taiko is one of the latest evolution of Japanese performing arts and it can evolve in a diverse way. We should treasure the diversity and find our own voice through taiko.



Jonathan Kirby introduced some thoughts for us by giving us some questions that we could ask ourselves, in his lecture.

He began with the following questions: We all do our best in taiko, but do we all achieve our full potential? How do we do our best and how do we get the most out of what we can from taiko wherever we are in our taiko journey?

Jonathan Kirby offered two things that can help us achieve our potential in taiko:

- Seeking feedback
- Developing our own voice

Feedback is important to guide us in the right direction, because it is difficult to be an expert in every area, such as skills in leadership, composing, teaching, and organizing. When we seek feedback, we should think about who to approach for feedback, and we need to be specific about what we want feedback on.

In order to develop our own voice, we need to ask ourselves questions such as:

- *How well do we use our voice?*
This in turn yields more questions that we can ask ourselves. How long do we take to say something? Will developing our technical skills and good kata help us to better use our voice to say something?
- *What are we using our voice to say?*
This again yields more underlying questions that we could ask ourselves. What is our taiko about? What is the purpose of our performance? Is it for us, or for the audience? Do we even want an audience? What are we saying and to whom?

Among the many questions we could ask ourselves, Jonathan offered two specific points on how we can develop our own voice:

- getting help with figuring out who we are and what we want to say,
- getting help with figuring out how to express ourselves, and how to tell our story.

Interviews

Interviews with Yoshihiko Miyamoto, Atsushi Sugano, and Jonathan Kirby concludes this article, letting the interviews speak for themselves.

I wish to truly thank Yoshihiko Miyamoto, Atsushi Sugano, and Jonathan Kirby for giving me this wonderful opportunity and for taking their time to share their thoughts.

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Yoshihiko Miyamoto

Yoshihiko “Yoshi” Miyamoto is the eighth generation president of Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten, a renowned taiko and traditional instrument maker in Asakusa, Tokyo. Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten was established in 1861 and is the exclusive instrument maker for the Emperor of Japan. After graduating from Keio University with an Economics degree, Yoshi attained his masters degree in International Political Economy at the University of Warwick in UK, then joined his father in the business in 2001. Growing up in such an unique family business, Yoshi has been exposed to all types of classical Japanese art forms from a young age and has developed a deep understanding of the traditional Japanese aesthetic and philosophy. Yoshi has found creative ways to apply this aesthetic to our contemporary age creating new possibilities while advocating for the revival of Japanese traditions.

Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten has been a supporter of the North American taiko community since the inception of San Francisco Taiko Dojo in the 1960s. Yoshi has supported leading professional artists such as Kenny Endo and *On Ensemble*, as well as numerous taiko events and associations including the North American Taiko Conference, UK Taiko Festival and the Taiko Community Alliance. Because of his connection to UK, it’s been Yoshi’s personal mission to give back and contribute to the growth of the European taiko community, and has played an integral role in support of the European Taiko Conference.

In keeping with this spirit of support, Miyamoto has launched “kaDON.com” in 2014 – an online platform that provides high quality instructions and repertoires in English for taiko and fue players around the world.

Soo-Im Jansson: *Could you tell me little about what you do in the world of taiko?*

Yoshihiko Miyamoto: I am the President of Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten which manufactures drums. We are based in Asakusa, Tokyo. We also manufacture taiko for various traditional art forms like *gagaku* court music, *noh*, *kabuki*, as well as folk music and dance. Also, we manufacture a lot of festival instruments, such as *mikoshi*, which is a miniature shrine that is carried around during a festival, as well as big decorated floats on which musicians play drums, flutes and other instruments. In addition, I also run taiko schools in Asakusa and Yokohama, which is in Kanagawa prefecture. Along with that, our US branch is kaDON, which is an online platform that provides quality lessons online. Through kaDON, we try to connect people throughout the world and create a global taiko community.



Photo:
Yoshihiko Miyamoto
Courtesy of:
Miyamoto Unosuke
Shoten

SJ: *You are also one of the major sponsors for the European taiko conferences? What made you decide to be a sponsor?*

Yoshihiko Miyamoto: First off, the simple fact is that I did my master’s degree in the UK, so it has been my dream to give back to Europe in some way. I met Jonathan Kirby, I think it was in 2005, and I found it quite interesting that there was someone in the UK trying to spread

taiko. I kept in touch with him and decided to support the UK Taiko Festival in 2010 or 2011. In the course of our communication, we talked about the European Taiko Conference and thus, it was only natural for me to support the European Taiko Conference when it started.

I think the second reason why I am supporting the European Taiko Conference is because I see great potential in it. Taiko originates from Japan, performed by Japanese people, and it went across the Pacific to the United States where a lot of Japanese-Americans reside. These folks created their own style of taiko as an art form, which was an interesting development. Gradually, we started to see a lot of non-Japanese people enjoy playing taiko and now it even goes farther across the Atlantic to Europe. I think it is a great aspiration for taiko to become an art form that anyone can partake in, just as anybody can play Latin percussion or Western guitar. It’s becoming universal. For me, it is a very meaningful challenge to support the European taiko community, so that taiko becomes more widely-accepted and performed by people of all backgrounds.

And of course, the final reason for deciding to be a sponsor for European taiko conferences is that it gives me an excellent excuse to visit Europe often [laughs].

SJ: *Could you share with us any reflections that you have of the European taiko conferences?*

Yoshihiko Miyamoto: So much has changed in the past four years. The first year was like a Star Trek encounter, you know, the first encounter to other human beings playing taiko. So, it was a sheer joy to meet the same kind of people. I think the growth has been very smooth since then, to become a community and to seek more concrete and detailed targets, such as common repertoire in Europe. In addition, the skill level of the community has improved drastically. It’s been amazingly smooth. I think that is, at least, partially because of Jonathan Kirby curating this European Taiko Conference. European Taiko Conference is not only an event to gather and meet people, but also to foster the development

of taiko in Europe in a meaningful way, so Jonathan Kirby is always thinking about what is needed next. It's been working pretty well.

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

Yoshihiko Miyamoto: In that respect, it is simply great to see more and more people playing taiko and getting to meet new people through taiko. I believe taiko can be a very powerful social phenomenon that somehow can unite people regardless of their differences. Now that the world is having some trouble, such as the refugees and disparities with people in having and not having, as well as gender issues and so on, I think taiko has the good potential to show that people can appreciate the diversity, and that people can accept each other and respect one another. Not only is it an art form, taiko is a means to foster this sort of understanding between different people. I think that is what taiko can potentially do and thus, I am always thinking about that respect in mind.

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Jonathan Kirby

Jonathan Kirby has been performing and teaching taiko professionally in the U.K. since 1998. He has written several English-language guides to learning and teaching taiko, including "Taiko for Schools" which was published in 2018, accompanied by a set of online videos. 2018 also saw the publication of "The Way of the Drum – Taiko without Borders" which tells the 20-year story of the development of taiko in the UK and proposes how the art form might expand further.

As founder and artistic director of *Kagemusha Taiko*, he has personally trained over 200 members of his own junior and adult groups, composing original repertoire and developing new training material on the way. The adult Kagemusha Taiko have performed in theatres and concert halls across the country and abroad. This includes a series of joint concerts with the late Grand Master Oguchi Daihachi, founder of the first modern taiko group, in what were the only U.K. performances of his long career.

Kagemusha Junior Taiko have earned themselves a national reputation for performance excellence, appearing several times in the Music for Youth School Proms. In 2005, they were invited to perform in Tokyo by the Nippon Taiko Foundation.

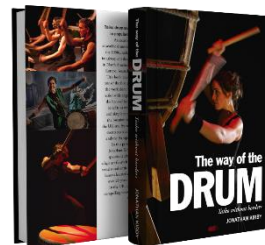
Jonathan Kirby is also director of the annual U.K. Taiko Festival which he launched in 2005. The Festival attracts adult and youth groups from across the country and has a growing reputation nationally and internationally. In 2016, He created the first European Taiko Conference and he will direct the 4th European Taiko Conference in Hamburg, Germany, in February 2019.

Source: The Japan Society, U.K. [2]

Soo-Im Jansson: Could you tell me little about what you do in the world of taiko?

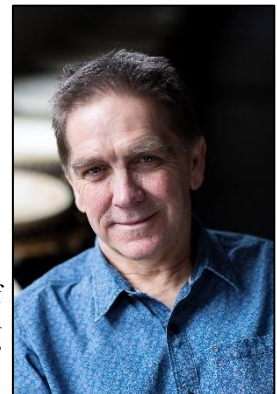
Jonathan Kirby: I am the Artistic Director of *Kagemusha Taiko*. I direct the UK Taiko Festival and I also created and curate the European Taiko Conference.

SJ: You have published a book recently entitled "The Way of the Drum". Could you tell me a little about your new book?



Photos:

Jonathan Kirby is the author of "The Way of The Drum – Taiko without Borders"
Courtesy of: *Kagemusha Taiko*



Jonathan Kirby: "The Way of the Drum – Taiko Without Borders" is my story of my journey through taiko. It includes the lessons that I've learned from it and why I think that taiko is important – why taiko is a good thing to have in the world. It also describes some of the problems I had on the way, the difficulties, the challenges, as well as the rewards. It is really there as, I hope, a kind of helping hand for people who want to start or develop or improve their own taiko groups and taiko organizations, parti-

cularly in Europe, because the European experience is very different from the experience of playing taiko in Japan or North America.

SJ: There has now been three European taiko conferences and now we are here at the fourth European taiko conference (ETC4). Could you share with us any reflections that you have through these conferences?

Jonathan Kirby: Sure. The first Conference was a big gamble. We didn't know what would happen, but I think we were lucky, and at the right time. There was an obvious latent enthusiasm or desire to get together. When I invited people to the first conference, people didn't really know what it was going to be or what it would be like, but we had 64 delegates from all over Europe who came. All signed up not knowing what it would be and they turned up. It was the first time that people had got together and connected and realized, "I'm not on my own... There are other people doing this kind of thing... Wow, isn't it great to get together and share our ideas, share our dreams, share our difficulties and therefore make them easier to solve... as well as having a good time playing together and learning from some experts." That was the first Conference. It was really the one that broke the ice, or maybe to use a different analogy, it was like taking a brick out of a dam, because there was a lot of built up water – a lot of built up demand – and when we took that brick out, the dam burst. Suddenly connections were made across Europe and lots of things started happening.

When we did the second, it was partly because the first one was so great that everyone wanted to do another Conference. It was like a proof of concept, "Yes. It wasn't an accident, there are some good things happening here. People really do like to get together for shared workshops, conversations and playing together." It gave an opportunity for people to come who had not been to the first conference. Those were the first two Conferences.

The third Conference was a development, because what had appeared was that people needed a common language. They said that they wanted a common language in taiko. I thought

the best thing to do would be to have some shared repertoire. I found some workshop leaders and got them to commit to teaching an entire piece in two sessions, so that in Europe there would be some shared repertoire that we could all play when we went to each other's events. That was the third Conference, focused on developing that common language.

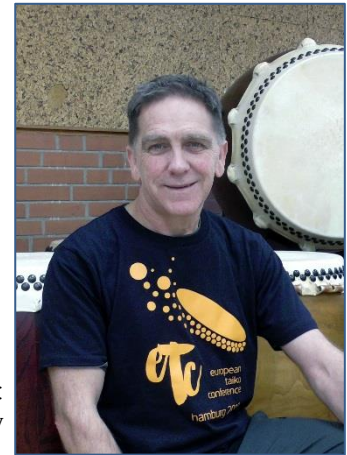


Photo:
Jonathan Kirby

The fourth Conference is really about how to find your own voice. It is okay playing somebody else's repertoire, and most of the groups have to, because finding a composer is tough. And after all, orchestras don't play their own material, they play compositions by Mozart or Beethoven and the like. So playing someone else's repertoire is great, and that's fine, but the original taiko groups all created their own thing and that's a big part of the excitement. I think we need to be doing this in Europe and it is exciting to see when it is happening. Of course, it doesn't happen by accident. You have got to have the right kind of ideas, skills and knowledge of your processes for making it happen. This time, at the fourth Conference, it is all about:

- developing some technical skills so that you can express yourself more articulately...
- developing some personal skills so that you can open up and express yourself as a human being in the context of a group and be not afraid to take feedback and to give feedback to others...
- developing your thoughts and then some mechanisms for developing individual and group creativity so that your own taiko can be created

I think that would be the high point of European taiko – when all groups are playing their own material and not having to take things from other places.

SJ: What are your thoughts on the future of the European Taiko Conferences? Have we now kind of reached a high point with this conference?

Jonathan Kirby: Everything is a high point! Everyday is a high point! Tomorrow will be a high point as well. I don't want to look back and say that there was a Golden Age. No, we have got to look at how we make the future brighter. Will there be another European Taiko Conference? I don't know. Just because there have been four, doesn't mean to say that there should be five. The real questions for me are, "What do people need and what do European taiko players need? What do they want? What could be done to help develop the community and develop the art form?" Will there be another Conference, well maybe, but I'm hoping that this time people will tell us whether they think it's necessary, because you can get together and play, you can get together and socialize, you can get together and have drinking games and all the rest, and you can do all that without a making it a conference. There are other events where these things happen, whether it's Kion Sai, Taikopalooza, UK Taiko Festival, Humber Taiko Festival or any number of other events. There are more and more of them happening around Europe. So, is there really a need for another Conference? I'm certainly not going to say, "Well, I have done four, I will go and do another," because that's the wrong way of looking at it. What do people need? What do people want?

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

Jonathan Kirby: I think it's good to build connections rather than walls. I think it's good for people to get together and share ideas. I've learned so much by visiting other taiko groups, by taking workshops with lots of different taiko teachers. Sometimes I find something that speaks to me. Sometimes I say find something that doesn't. Just because it's taiko, it doesn't

mean it's always great – or rather it doesn't mean that it's to my taste. There's taiko I love and there's other taiko that I find a little bit boring at times, actually. It may be perfectly good, but it's a question of taste. I think the more people can experience different kinds of taiko and not regard taiko as one fixed thing, then the more people will find, "Ah, it's OK to be creative and do different things." I showed a video on Thursday night of a Japanese group from 2002, which included two women playing at the front, who were basically going what you might call "bat-shit crazy"! They were having a great time, but they were completely unlike the archetypal image of a Japanese woman, demure and controlled and so on. They were just really going for it! And they were brilliant technically as well; they were great taiko players. That video completely changed my perspective on what taiko is like in Japan, because I had had the sense like, "Maybe it ought to be like this or maybe it ought to be like that?" No, no, no! Taiko can be how you like! So, I think the more taiko there is, the more variety, the more people will be able to make their own choices. I think it's a shame if we all play taiko that's from Japan, because we're from Europe. What's our story? We need to find a way of telling our story.

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Atsushi Sugano

Atsushi Sugano joined *Kodo* in 1982 after receiving his masters in economics at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has spearheaded and organized projects both domestic and foreign, and has traveled with the performing group to over 36 nations around the world. In 1988, Atsushi was instrumental in the formation of the first "Earth Celebration," *Kodo's* international arts festival on Sado Island, now in its 32nd year. Currently he is the Managing Director of *Kodo Cultural Foundation*, board member of *Kodo's* American non-profit company, *Kodo Arts Sphere America (KASA)*, and committee chair of the World Taiko Conference being held in 2020.

Soo-Im Jansson: *Could you tell me little about what you do in the world of taiko?*

Atsushi Sugano: I am the Managing Director of the Kodo Cultural Foundation. I've been involved in taiko business about 36 years.

SJ: *I've heard that a World Taiko Conference in Japan next year is in the planning stages. Could you tell me a little about that?*

Atsushi Sugano: Yes, it is the first taiko conference ever happening in Japan. I have been involved in the development of the North American Taiko Conference in its early days. Also, there has been the European Taiko Conference every year [since 2016]. Taiko was started in Japan, so why not have the conference in Japan? The year 2020, which is the year in which Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics will take place, is a good year to host the first World Taiko Conference in Tokyo, Japan.

SJ: *What is the aim for this conference?*

Atsushi Sugano: For the Japanese taiko people, they don't have much chance to see the taiko phenomenon in the world. Sometimes Japanese people tend to focus by themselves rather than getting something outside, so we want to give them an opportunity to see different kind of style of drumming and the development of taiko in the world. For the foreign participants, we want to give them the chance to meet with Japanese taiko players and also to show the history and background of the taiko culture in general. That is the purpose for the gathering.

Taiko was debuted to the world with the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 in the cultural events. After more than 50 years, Olympics comes back to Tokyo, and taiko as an art form is now shared everywhere in the world. So, we want to revisit the history of the development of taiko and we would like to introduce that taiko is not only the benefit of the performer and the audience, but also now we are finding the power of taiko can be shared among the general public. Taiko can also benefit people that have some difficulty in their lives or the elder people who are struggling with physical and mental health.

Taiko can be a contributing factor to those people.

For the conference, we will try to create an opportunity for the taiko players to revisit or be reminded that taiko is not just for yourself, but for everyone in the society. So that is something that we also will bring up and talk about at the conference.

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

Atsushi Sugano: I think taiko has created a mean of communication. In the ancient times, there was not only the communication between human beings, but to some extent communicating with the spirit. Taiko is a mean of communications, so this global development of taiko is really extending the borders between people and their cultural backgrounds of their regions. I think now, the crossing over cultural borders is most important and I think taiko will act as an important role in this stage. So, I am excited about how the development of taiko in the world can, not only create a bridge between taiko players, but also create a bridge between all human beings.



Photo:
Atsushi Sugano

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The Next Taiko Conference

The World Taiko Conference:

Date: 20th-23rd November, 2020

Location: National Olympic Memorial Youth Center, Tokyo, Japan

For more information please visit:

WTCTokyo@gmail.com.

A Word from the Author

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

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References

- [1] Kagemusha Taiko (2019). *Official European Taiko Conference Booklet*. Exeter, U.K.
- [2] The Japan Society. Kirby, Jonathan. London, U.K.
<http://www.japansociety.org.U.K./4528/kirbyjonathan/>, link visited 2019-03-14

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 Cultural Foundation
https://www.kodo.or.jp/en/fnd_en
- kaDON
<http://kadon.com>

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 community training and workshops in Stockholm and Uppsala for children and adults.

