

A Conversation with Taiko Master Kenny Endo

INNOVATION FROM TRADITION

Taiko master Kenny Endo, born and raised in Los Angeles, is the first non-Japanese national ever to have received a *natori* (stage name and master's license) in *hogaku hayashi*, Japanese classical drumming. Utilizing the traditional Japanese drum in innovative collaborations, his music blends *taiko* with rhythmic influences from around the world in original melodies and improvisation. In this exclusive feature, Endo discusses the history of *taiko* and his creative process as well as his collaboration with Stanford Taiko to develop a new piece that will be premiered at Stanford Lively Arts on February 23.

Lively Arts: Please tell us a bit about the origins of *taiko*.

Kenny Endo: The history of *taiko* is as rich and as varied as the history of Japan itself. In ancient times, *taiko* was considered such an integral part of village life that you could find it located in the heart of most towns and serving a variety of purposes. For example, the drum was used to drive away evil spirits and pests harmful to crops or to warn of fire or flood. Much of that has gone, but *taiko* still plays a vital role in Japanese culture. Today it is best known in its most recent incarnation of *kumi-daiko*.

The modern style of *taiko*, or *kumi-daiko*, is played using many drums and performers at the same time. Today, close to 5,000 *taiko* groups exist in Japan, and North America has about 200 groups. *Taiko* groups are all over the world. It's both a blossoming and an epidemic.

LA: What do you think happened to make it so popular?

KE: Well, the *taiko* sound is incredibly primal and immediate. Even babies respond to it strongly—they'll fall asleep to the waves of rhythm, perhaps because it reminds them of being in the womb. Also, you are hearing the spirit of the tree from which the drum is made, and you are feeling the deep resonant syncopations all the way down into your bones. As things become more modern and convenient, and as we become more removed from nature, those things have an appeal. I think that it speaks to a void within ourselves that modernization has created.

LA: How did you come to get involved in *taiko* and what experiences contributed to your art form as it is today?

KE: I've always been attracted to drums. At a young age I started playing classical percussion and jazz-fusion trap drums as well as studying *taiko* at Kinnara Taiko in Los Angeles. Then when I graduated from college, I came to the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, led by Seiichi Tanaka, to study for five years. At that time I was still play-

ing a jazz drum set, but I knew that I couldn't straddle the two art forms indefinitely. I had to make a decision between the two and pursue that one path rigorously.

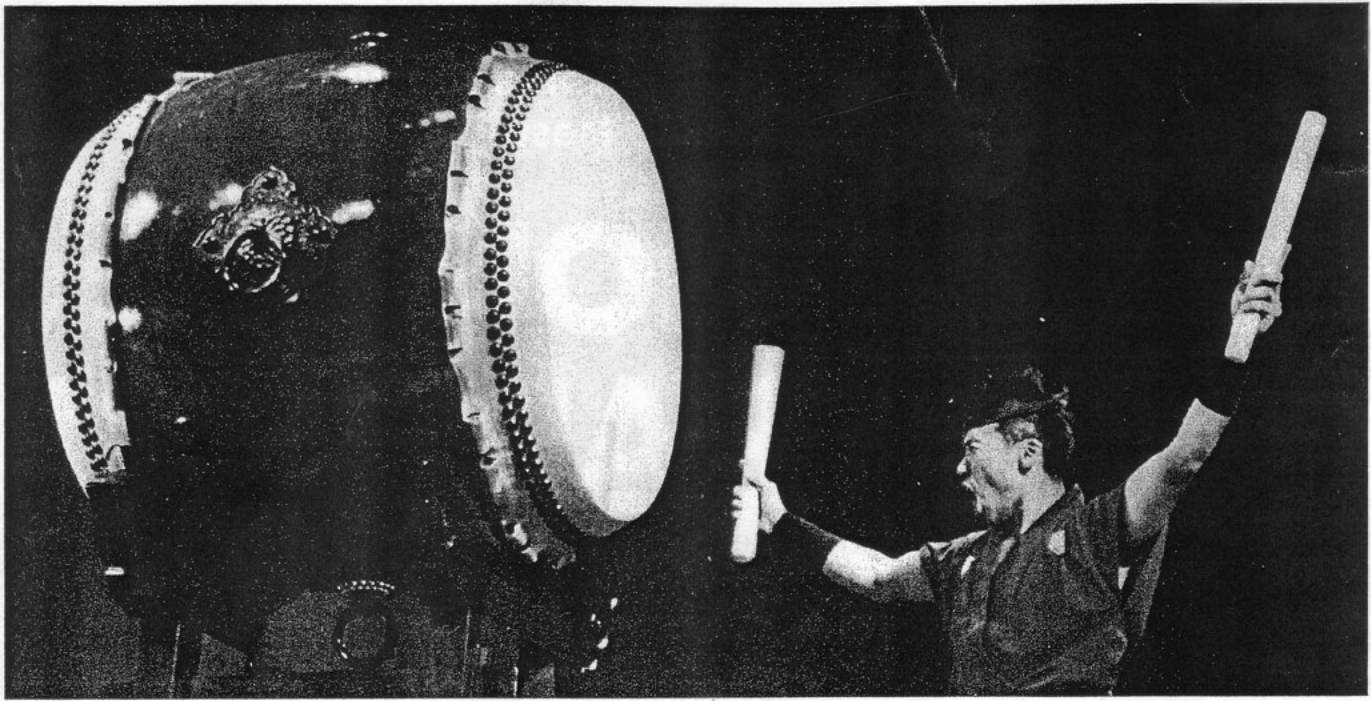
Eventually I decided that I needed to get in touch with my own roots, my own culture, my own language. So when it came to choosing between western- and eastern-style drumming, I decided to devote myself to the latter. I knew I had to go back to Japan to do so. I wanted to go to the source of *taiko*, understand my culture better, speak Japanese, and meet more of my relatives. I had intended to stay only for one year and I ended up staying for ten. I think that is because when I went to Japan I discovered the depth of *taiko's* roots and was enchanted by the centuries of tradition and experience that could inform my playing.

LA: What was it like to study *taiko* in Japan as, essentially, a foreigner?

KE: The teachers were very strict with me! For example, at the start of one particular lesson, I was presented with a drum that was not put together and the teacher said, "You want to play this drum, but do you know how to tune this drum?" When I replied that I didn't, he said, "Watch very carefully, I am going to show you." Then he showed me a very complicated process, which involved lashing and intricate knots. I vividly remember sitting on my knees—very uncomfortable for westerners—and trying to absorb the information through the pain. Of course I couldn't remember the process at the next lesson and had to be shown again. One might think he was being strict, but can you have a teacher follow you around to concerts to tune your drum? Obviously not.

LA: How has your playing evolved over the years?

KE: I think that I've adapted my playing technique to reflect my body's abilities. For example, when I was younger I did more physical playing and my compositions reflected that. Now I'm trying to push *taiko* as more of a musical instrument, not just a



spectacle. A lot of the time *kumi-daiko* can be seen as only something that is loud, but the instrument has a quieter, more reflective musical side, as well.

LA: Your work has been compared to strong sensory images—like walking through a desert at night. What themes do your compositions typically explore?

KE: I definitely use *taiko* to speak about larger issues. Although there are no words, the sounds can evoke imagery. This is something that I learned from Kabuki theater. Kabuki uses *taiko* to evoke large abstract concepts like weather, geography, and feeling. For example, the *taiko* can create the quiet sound of wind, which is often used to effect a feeling of tension in, for example, a sword fight. That is just one example, and there are many: there is rain, there is snow, there is the sound of mountains, and the sound of ghosts.

LA: You will be performing a new work at Lively Arts. Can you tell us how the piece came about and how the student group Stanford Taiko is featured in the piece?

KE: The new piece, *Constant Circle of Change*, was commissioned as a part of a residency with Stanford Taiko. I came to Stanford with the core idea of change, but not a finished piece. Instead of just teaching a piece, I wanted to capture and showcase the strengths of Stanford Taiko as well as challenge the students to do something new. So what you are going to hear is a piece that is personal and specific to the current members of Stanford Taiko, but that also speaks of a larger, more universal theme.

The name of the piece, *Constant Circle of Change*, has several meanings, the most obvious of which is the makeup of the student group Stanford Taiko. I have been involved with the group for more than 10 years, and I have seen it constantly, but gradually, change, because the group turns over every four years. Stanford Taiko is always evolving and always changing—the members, the makeup, and the feeling of the group—it's interesting. The piece itself will musically express that. The first section will be a quieter, more musical drumming section. The middle section features two melodic instruments: a cello played by a member of Stanford Taiko

and a 17-string bass *koto* (Japanese harp or zither) played by a member of my ensemble. The third section will be a little bit more lively, with 10 to 12 Stanford Taiko members playing, along with a couple of my members. So, the piece will be constantly changing, but there will be a certain consistency, as well.

LA: Talk about what it's like for students practicing/learning *taiko*.

KE: Music is one of the best examples of an activity that, done correctly, fully engages the mind, the body, and the spirit. Coming to a sustained harmony of all three of these elements happens only through rigorous training. When I am with a *taiko* player who is learning a new technique or exercise I can almost hear them thinking about how to do it, figuring out all the technical elements, and I'm trying to get them to a point where they can feel it rather than think about it. It's definitely a challenge to stop the inner conversation (no matter what your level of experience) so you can really let the energy, the music, and the spirit of the music flow through you. We are really vessels for this energy and need to get out of its way in order for it to be expressed.

LA: Your new work also seems to reflect the ways you see *taiko* growing and evolving. Why does that particular idea have such resonance with you?

KE: Today I use *taiko* in ways that are outside the two paradigms of traditional and accompaniment forms—for instance, with orchestras or with dance groups or theater groups.

In my music, I believe in using tradition as a basis for innovation. One of my teachers once told me you can't break the tradition if you don't know the tradition. So, while a lot of people think of the traditional arts as being very strict and restrictive, for me it has actually opened up a whole new world. Being exposed to the richness of the music and the traditions gave me a whole new, richer palette to work from. ■

Please see page 43 for information on Kenny Endo's performance on February 23, 2007.

Photo: Page 41: Kenny Endo.