

Endo, Agatsuma Bring Modern Style to Ancient Instruments

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Two musical legends performed together for the first time on [Japan Society](#)'s stage June 5. Taiko master Kenny Endo and shamisen virtuoso Hiromitsu Agatsuma treated the audience to a special concert.

A performer, composer, and instructor, [Endo](#) is a leading force in percussion and is probably the main reason Westerners know anything about taiko. He has blended the traditions of ancient classical drumming with other genres, making taiko a global instrument. [Agatsuma](#) began playing the tsugaru-shamisen at a young age, winning several competitions before taking the instrument to new heights with the hard rock band MUSASHI.



Hiromitsu Agatsuma (left) and

Kenny Endo after their concert at Japan Society

At Japan Society Endo and Agatsuma each performed solo sets before playing together. The program was a mix of traditional folklore songs and original compositions that ranged from quiet and introspective to driving and pulsating.

During a brief artists' talk led by Japan Society Artistic Director Yoko Shioya, the pair revealed that they were both considered outsiders while learning their respective instruments. Endo, who grew up on the West Coast, encountered difficulties when he first moved to Japan to study taiko because he looked Japanese but couldn't speak the language fluently. Fortunately for him – and the world's music lovers – he found the right teachers, and what he thought would be two years of study in Japan turned into a decade-long stay.

Surprisingly, Ibaraki Prefecture native Agatsuma became an outsider in his own country when he chose to learn the tsugaru-shamisen, whose style was developed in Aomori Prefecture in Northern Japan. He may not have been able to speak the local dialect, but he proved he could play the beloved regional instrument with an aggressively skilled style. Like Endo, Agatsuma has Western influences, as evidenced by the pair's playful "Smoke on the Water"-esque encore and Agatsuma's Stone Roses T-shirt he sported at the informal reception following the concert.

Endo and Agatsuma both showed the Japan Society audience that you can have a deep appreciation for ancient traditions while giving it modern touches.



Agatsuma with Japanese singer Akiko Yano