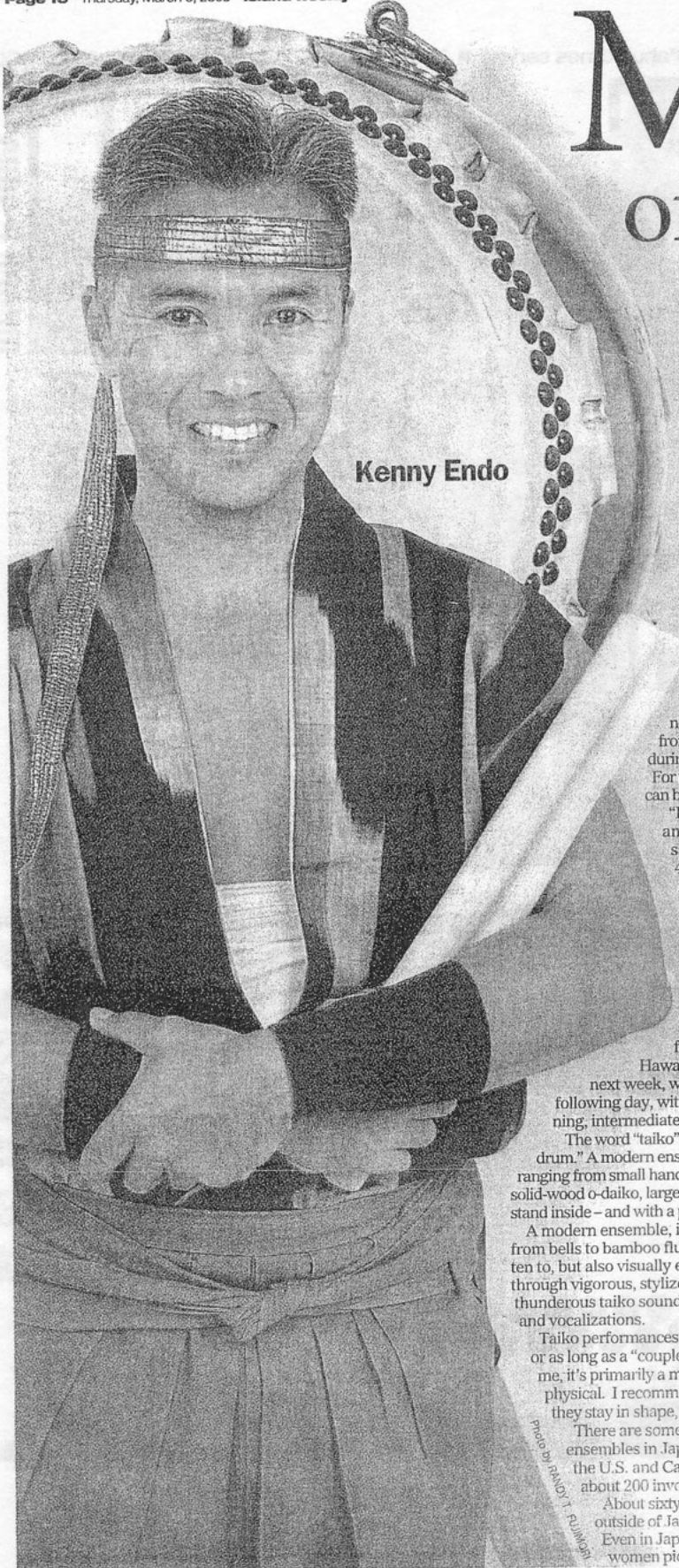


# Music of the Gods



Kenny Endo

Thrilling to see and hear, taiko drumming continues to catch on. Next week, Kenny Endo shares the stage with top Japanese artists during the Cherry Blossom Festival

The booming Japanese art of taiko drumming will hit Blaisdell Concert Hall like rolling thunder next Saturday, when masters from Hawaii and Japan perform during the Cherry Blossom Festival. For the uninitiated, a taiko concert can be spellbinding, organizers say. "It's a very powerful visual and auditory experience," says Honolulu's Kenny Endo, 49, one of the world's leading drummers, who says he was hooked for life when he saw a performance while a student at the University of California.

"You could feel it in your whole body," he recalls. "I knew I wanted to do it." For those similarly affected at the 5th Annual Hawaii International Taiko Festival

next week, workshops will be offered the following day, with classes available to beginning, intermediate and advanced drummers.

The word "taiko" translates literally to "fat drum." A modern ensemble can include drums ranging from small hand-held instruments to the huge, solid-wood o-daiko, large enough for a grown man to stand inside - and with a price tag up to \$100,000.

A modern ensemble, including various instruments from bells to bamboo flutes, is not only thrilling to listen to, but also visually exciting as drummers move through vigorous, stylized dance-like routines. The thunderous taiko sound is integrated with rhythms and vocalizations.

Taiko performances can be as short as 15 minutes, or as long as a "couple of hours," says Endo. "For me, it's primarily a musical art, but it is also very physical. I recommend to all of my students that they stay in shape, whether they jog or swim."

There are some 5,000 contemporary taiko ensembles in Japan, and growing interest in the U.S. and Canada where there are now about 200 involved, says Endo.

About sixty percent of taiko enthusiasts outside of Japan are women, he adds.

Even in Japan, there are nearly as many women picking up drumsticks - or bachi.

"This hasn't necessarily been true in the past," he says. "In fact, if you get into real traditional art like kabuki theatre, it's still mostly male. But this kumi-daiko art is fairly new so it's not bound by tradition."

With ancient roots, probably in China or Korea, taiko was used as early as the fifth century as a battlefield instrument to intimidate the enemy and to issue commands. In refined cultural settings later, the sound of rolling thunder emanating from the taiko became associated with the gods and religious rites.

A guest performance next Saturday by Tao, a young and vibrant taiko group from Kyushu's Oita Prefecture that utilizes Las Vegas-style staging, is among highlights of the taiko festival.

The Honolulu Symphony's head tympani player, Stuart Chafetz - who is the conductor and music director for the Maui Symphony - will also join Endo for a collaborative piece during the concert.

A third-generation Japanese-American born and raised in Los Angeles, Endo says he was attracted to music as a child.

"I was fascinated by the drums," he says. "Parades would go by and I would always run outside to see them."

As an adult, he traveled to Japan in 1980 intent on studying taiko for a year or two, but wound up staying ten, says Endo.

"The more I stayed, the more I realized how much I didn't know," he says.

He learned different taiko genres before returning to the United States and settling in Hawaii in 1990 with his wife, Chizuko, also a taiko drummer. Their sons, Miles and Zenya, now 15 and 13, are also drummers - Miles once performed on Sesame Street.

The first "foreigner" to achieve a master's 'natori' status in the classical form of taiko in Japan, Endo performs between 50 and 100 times a year, spending half his time on the road with his shows, workshops and collaborations. In January, he will tour Europe.

With three CDs and soundtrack credit for Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now," Endo performs internationally as a soloist, with ensembles and in collaboration with artists such as Keola Beamer and Paul Jackson.

Recent career highlights include receiving the state's highest award recognizing achievement in the performing arts - the Individual Artist Award from the state Foundation on Culture and the Arts. Other honors include an American Composer's Forum Award and a residency at the Lincoln Center Institute.

One of Hawaii's longest running ethnic celebrations, the annual Cherry Blossom Festival is sponsored by the Honolulu Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce. The Pageant and Festival Ball are scheduled the following week, on Saturday March 22, at the Sheraton Waikiki.

Photo by RANDY T. FUJIMORI