

Taiko with a symphonic tempo



ClubSCENE

By Gary Chun

SPECIAL TO THE ADVERTISER

Kenny Endo's name long has been synonymous with the rhythmic artistry of *taiko* drumming and its deep, resonant syncopations.

Despite performances with various ensembles here, in Japan and on the Mainland, and special projects, his drumming has not been featured with an orchestra.

Until now.

Endo and the Honolulu Symphony, conducted by Samuel Wong, will premiere "Let Freedom Ring," a composition by Endo's friend, composer and UH music professor Takeo Kudo.

Kudo, drawing upon his impressions of hard-working, dutiful Japanese Americans interned during World War II, uses the organic sound of the *taiko* and other Japanese percussion within a Western orchestral framework to illustrate their yearning for freedom.

Kudo talked to internees for inspiration, and heard the story of UH *koto* teacher Kay Minami's father, who while interned made a *shakuachi* (bamboo flute) out of a bedpost.

"One thing that was constantly brought up in those conversations was that the hardest thing was for them to be idle," said Kudo. "So my idea behind the composition is to illustrate the passage of time in these camps, with the *taiko* representing the human yearning to be free."

Musical motifs and phrases from "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" (its last phrase being the piece's title) are contrasted with bits of "Kimigayo," the Japanese national anthem, to signify the internees' divided feelings.

"I first met Dr. Kudo in 1990, when I moved here from my home base in Tokyo," said Endo, who was born and raised in Los Angeles. "I wanted to go back to grad school and was lucky enough to get grants from both the East-West Center and the UH music department. I didn't have a degree in music back then, so he helped in tutoring me.

"Leaving Japan was a hard decision, because it takes a long time to get established there, although I still go back there occasionally to both perform and study."

Symphony representatives approached Endo a few years ago to ask if he knew of any existing work for *taiko* and orchestra.

"When I mentioned this to Dr. Kudo, he was enthusiastic enough to write the piece himself without a commission from the symphony," he said. "My part in the piece is totally written out but there will be a couple of short cadenzas in there where I'll be able to improvise."

He'll play three instruments from the three genres of Japanese traditional drumming: the *kotsuzumi* (hourglass-shaped drum), the *shime-daiko* (small *taiko* drum played horizontally in a sitting position) and the large *taiko*.

Rehearsals began Wednesday, but even with that late a start, Endo is well set. During his formative years, he played percussion in intermediate and high school. Five years ago, he established a school of traditional Japanese drumming, the Taiko Center of the Pacific.

He also has two CDs: "Eternal Energy," originally released in '95, and his recent "Hibiki" (meaning "resonance"), performing with his Tokyo ensemble.

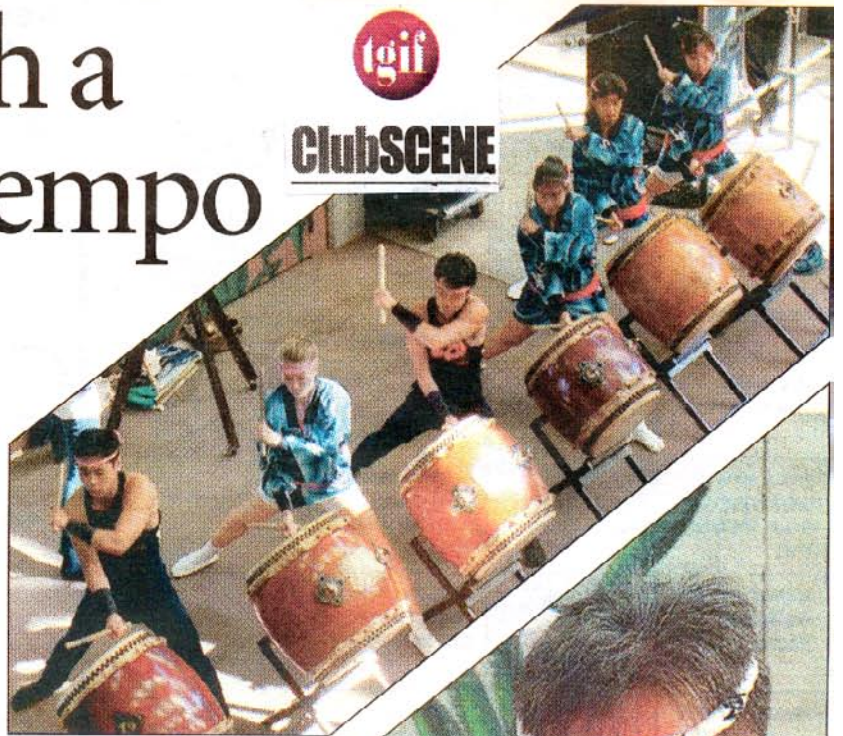
Last January, he was one of the featured performers at the Pepsi corporate celebration on the Big Island, sharing a two-day bill with The Rolling Stones, Ray Charles and the cast of "Lord of the Dance." Endo said he and Honolulu Symphony percussionists performed a short overture piece on closing night with guest Latin and African musicians.

He also shares a continuing project with pianist Bailey Matsuuda and the world music group Cabaseke.

"We haven't done anything over the last several years, although we went to Japan a couple of times earlier on," Endo said. "I still perform with one of the members, Seguin, and his Sun Drum group sometimes at their regular gigs at Anna Bannana's."

In the meantime, Endo will concentrate on "Let Freedom Ring."

"It's a great honor to work with both the symphony and Dr. Kudo," he said. "I consider it a real challenge and I hope I'll do justice to his work."



"Let Freedom Ring" with Kenny Endo

A Honolulu Symphony production; conducted by Samuel Wong

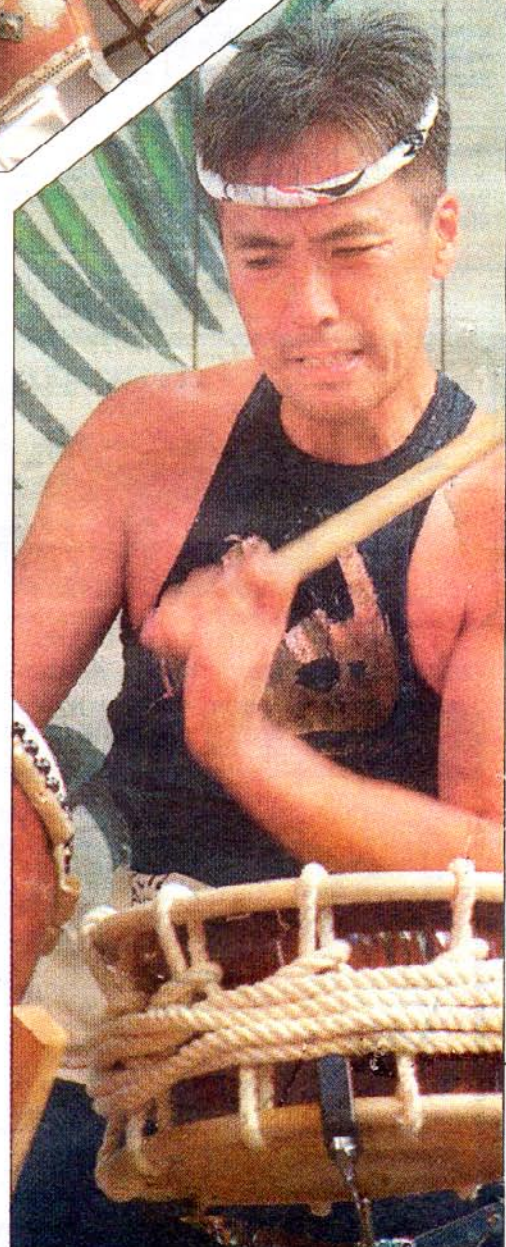
4 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Blaisdell Concert Hall

\$50 \$15

538-8863

Also: Endo's *taiko* classes begin Jan. 12 at the Kapiolani Community College chapel, Diamond Head campus. 737-7236.



Kenny Endo (seen here with his ensemble last month at Ward Warehouse) will play three Japanese drums as a guest performer with the Honolulu Symphony — in a work evoking the experience of Japanese-Americans interned during the war.

Photographs by JEFF WIDENER • The Honolulu Advertiser