



## THE TAIKO JOURNEY

by Thomas Kelley  
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The Japanese art of drumming is generally referred to as “taiko,” which literally means “big drum.” It’s part of old folk traditions and festivals, as well as a crucial element in Japanese classical music. All Japanese grow up hearing taiko. But now its popularity is quickly spreading throughout the world as a new generation of taiko practitioners, many of them non-Japanese, are carrying its different rhythms into the global village.

Following this modern journey is Eric Chang, a young Chinese-American from Southern California. He first experienced live taiko while studying at the University of California, Los Angeles.

“Just seeing it live was just so amazing cause those drums, the sound is so deep,” he says. “You don’t just hear it, you know, you feel it with your body and down to your bones.”

Chang was instantly hooked. He joined UCLA’s Kyodo Taiko ensemble and eventually became one of its directors. After graduating, he decided to pursue taiko for life, leaving behind a more stable career as an engineer.

“The community that taiko has created and this new emerging music that is coming out of that community is very exciting to me and I can’t imagine not being a part of that somehow,” he says.

This new emerging sound is mostly attributable to group drumming and taiko’s endless versatility.

“Taiko can be as big as a minivan or as small as a coffee can,” Chang explains. “And there are different terms for different sizes and there’s also different terms for different body constructions. But taiko has also come to refer to the art of ‘kumidaiko,’ which is ensemble drumming.”

Kumidaiko began in Japan about fifty years ago and spread to the United States in 1963. It’s a visually exciting form of taiko, with several drummers performing on stage using big, expressive movements. There are now about two hundred kumidaiko groups in North America, with several also in Latin America, Europe and Asia.

But Japan is still the heart of the world taiko scene, with around five thousand groups. The most famous is the globetrotting Kodo ensemble, which runs a prestigious apprenticeship center on the small island of Sado.

Chang traveled there in the winter of 2003. He rode a ferry to the cold, remote island to try out for the apprenticeship. He wasn’t accepted, but he also wasn’t deterred.

“I thought that if I were lucky enough to play with Kodo for a few years that would be amazing,” he recalls. “At the same time, my reason for being an apprentice wasn’t to join Kodo. I just wanted that experience.”

Instead, Chang would get that experience when he won a fellowship to study with taiko master Kenny Endo in Hawaii. Endo, who studied in Japan for several years, emphasizes the importance of classical technique.

“There’s two concepts in Japanese drumming or Japanese music,” Endo says. “One is called ‘ma,’ which means the space between the notes. And the other one is ‘nori,’ which actually refers to the groove or swing in a given piece.”

Chang recently finished a five-week national tour as part of Kenny Endo’s Taiko Ensemble. They played traditional Japanese music as well as Endo’s original compositions, incorporating Jazz, Polynesian and Latin influences. Other American groups like LA’s On Ensemble fuse taiko with hip hop and electronic music.

Common to all of these fusions is the precision and dynamic range of taiko’s Japanese rhythms. And like many aspiring players, Chang still hopes to live closer to those rhythms in Japan.

“Because I like taiko so much, I feel it’s important to go to the source,” he says.

While some might assume being non-Japanese would exclude Chang from such an opportunity, Endo says that passion and perseverance are the true determining factors. Both he and Chang cite examples of foreigners learning from Japan’s greatest taiko masters. But the difficulty of living between cultures is not lost on Chang.

“I think it’s natural for people to ask me why don’t I play Chinese drums because I am Chinese,” he says. “And I ask myself the same question, but my answer to that is just that I like taiko. That’s why I’m doing it. And I feel that’s the only answer I need to give.”

Rather, Chang and Endo believe taiko has the ability to bring the world closer together.

“The possibility of creating art that goes beyond borders and goes beyond cultures, beyond nationalism, is another direction that this music has a possibility for,” Endo says.

Taiko drummers speak to one another and the audience in a complex interplay of tension and flow. It sounds like controlled chaos to novices, but listening more closely, there is a common purpose of mind and body that gives way to emotional connections.

“Performing in a group, there’s those rare moments when everything just kind of comes together,” Chang says. “And you’re aware of everybody else, and you’re aware of yourself, and what you’re doing, and you can just hear that unity and that clearness of the music come out.”

Chang says that’s why taiko players bang the drum. The longer they play taiko and the longer they play together, the easier it is to achieve fluidity. When everyone is in synch, one rhythm comes alive.

It’s not hard to hear a broader cultural message. Playing the same pattern in unison as a big group is very difficult. It reflects a changing world, and within the spaces between drummers, gives life a bigger, wider meaning.