

# Creating Tradition, One Beat at a Time

By D. H. Rosen

IN ancient Japan it was said that the boundaries of a village were defined by the furthest distance at which the sound of the *taiko*, the traditional Japanese drum, could be heard. Today the taiko can be heard all over Japan as well as in many other countries across the globe. Much of this veritable “taiko boom” is inarguably thanks to *Kodo*, one of Japan’s best known performing arts groups and the de facto taiko ambassadors to the world.

In 1971, a group of Japanese youth disillusioned with modern industrialized Japan gathered on Sado Island to carve out a new contemporary culture of their own. Their original idea was to establish an arts school designed to educate Japan’s youth on traditional performing arts and crafts that were quickly being forgotten. Approximately a dozen men and women living in an abandoned schoolhouse along Sado’s southern coast set about to study everything from taiko to Japanese traditional dance.

To raise money, the members would hold taiko performances, and slowly but surely these performances became the crux of the group’s activities. In order to prepare for the physical demands of the taiko, the group adopted a Spartan regimen that remains part of the *Kodo* living legend to this day: Up at 5 am for a 10 km jog, cooking, cleaning, tightening the drums and endless practice. The troupe began touring both domestically and abroad under the name *Ondeko-za*, the original incarnation of the group that would later be reborn under the name *Kodo*, which means both “heartbeat” and “children of the drum.” Today *Kodo* holds an average of 120 concerts annually for audiences around the globe, but few of the original members themselves would ever have guessed the ancient taiko would become such a phenomenon in the modern age.

Although the origins of taiko in Japan are unclear at best, it is believed that the musical instrument made its way to Japan via China with the introduction of Buddhism over a thousand years ago. It was not only used in religious ceremonies and for *gagaku* (court music), but also as a means of communication among villagers to warn of danger or call people together. The taiko also found a permanent place in the orchestras accompanying the

traditional arts of Noh and Kabuki theatre, as well as in regional festivals usually affiliated with Shinto shrines. Even today, most local shrines still house a taiko in the shed silently waiting for the next festival day.

It was not until after World War II that the taiko made its way out of the shrine and into the spotlight. Traditionally played as an accompaniment to the *shino-bue* (bamboo flute) or other musical instruments, post-war cultural pioneers in Japan were discovering the potential of the taiko as an instrument to be played on its own or in ensemble form. The first noted public performances of this so-called *kumi-daiko* style were at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, and then later at the EXPO 70 in Osaka.

Since then, *kumi-daiko* groups have sprouted up all over

Photo: Taro Nishita



The popular piece “Miyake.” *Kodo*’s activities include fundraising for the people of Miyake Island



“Monochrome” is one of *KODO*’s

Japan, as well as in North America where people of Japanese descent were also looking to the traditional drum as a means to explore their ethnic identity. The most famous contemporary *kumi-daiko* group is by far *Kodo*, whose very name is often used mistakenly as a synonym for taiko.

This puts *Kodo* in a unique and somewhat complicated position of being the caretakers of taiko tradition, an unenviable role which is guaranteed to bring its share of controversy. The music *Kodo* performs on stage can be broken into three categories: pieces written by composers specifically for *Kodo*, those written by *Kodo* members themselves, and adaptations of traditional art forms. For pieces that fall into the third category, *Kodo* is not interested in preserving tradition as much as interpreting it in a contemporary context. At the same time, they want

to make sure they respect the groups that practice the original forms.

“It worries me when groups practice – regional traditional performing arts – without the guidance or permission of the originators,” explains Kodo managing director Aoki Takao, a founding member of the group. “Kodo is very careful about this. Whether it is Miyake-style drumming or *Ondeko* (demon dancing), it is really important that our members are able to work with the local groups to understand and absorb the original meanings of the performances.”

Then there is the question of defining tradition itself, and determining who or what groups can claim “authenticity,” a matter that is becoming more and more difficult to address in today’s world of rapid change and cultural melding.

“The reality behind ‘traditional’ music is that it has

home base of Sado Island.

“EC is a meeting place for international artists to mix with local Sado people, and a chance for us to introduce the culture of our home, Sado Island, to the world,” explains Sugano Atsushi, the managing director of EC. “We do not only invite artists who have a strong background in their own traditional arts, but also try to reinterpret and create anew from tradition to appeal to contemporary audiences. We hope to call attention to traditional culture that is being lost through modernization and globalization.”

Today Kodo has over 50 members, both performers and staff, who take part in the communal lifestyle centered around the “Kodo Village” which was established in 1988. The Village is the embodiment of the original members’ dream of having a home base to study traditional arts and engage in artistic exchange. In addition to the Main Office Building, Rehearsal Hall, Residential Building,

Guesthouse, Workshop and Recording Studio, the group has also recently established a Cultural Center as a means for public outreach and educational activities.

What does the future hold for Kodo? In this, the group’s 25th anniversary year, Aoki is looking well beyond the next few years. “Yes, we are definitely thinking ahead,” says Aoki. “For example, we are planting *keyaki* (Japanese zelkova) trees in the Kodo Village to build future drums. It will take the trees hundreds of years to become big enough to make taiko, but I believe it is really important to think

beyond the scope of our own lifetimes and to think of what we have to do now to ensure the livelihood of people in the generations to come.”

Thus the seeds have been planted for future “children of the drum,” and with Kodo’s international renown, the group will most certainly be beating a rhythm for generations to come. One thing is certain: as long as there is Kodo, the sound of the taiko will always reach the ears of the world, reminding listeners of their membership in a global community much larger than the boundaries of a single Japanese village.\*

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Photo: Taro Nishita



most popular drum performances

Photo: Maiko Miyagawa



Earth Celebration is an international arts festival held on Sado Island

always changed with the times,” says Yamaguchi Motofumi, the troupe’s principal flautist and original artistic director. “People think of traditions as forms that have not changed for thousands of years, but this simply is not the case. Traditions are living things, they change from generation to generation. Some of the pieces that Kodo play, like *Yatai-bayashi* or *O-daiko*, are based on traditional compositions, but these are our own arrangements, our own interpretations.”

Through their ongoing “One Earth Tour,” Kodo seems to be building new traditions of their own, having played 2,800 widely acclaimed performances in 43 countries, from war-torn Croatia to Carnegie Hall in the United States. In 1988, the group began an annual international arts festival called Earth Celebration (EC) as a venue to invite artists they have met in their travels back to their

\*Note : More information on Kodo is available at their website <www.kodo.or.jp>