

# Taiko drumming's rewards can be musical, physical, spiritual

BY LINDA LOMBARDI, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS OCTOBER 7, 2014



This April 2014 photo provided by Terry Buck shows Mark H. Rooney performing at Sakura Matsuri, in Washington D.C. "Taiko is full body drumming," says performer and teacher Rooney. Taiko, a style of ensemble drumming that takes its name from the Japanese word for "drum," isn't one of those elegant, restrained Japanese traditional arts. It's full of powerful, visually striking movement, and as befits its original purpose, it's loud. (AP Photo/Terry Buck)

When I started studying taiko, I expected it to be a musical challenge. As a former singer, guitarist and woodwind player, I often felt lost with nothing but a rhythm to hang on to. But what was more surprising was how tired and sore I felt.

"Taiko is full-body drumming," says performer and teacher Mark H. Rooney, who lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

Taiko, a style of ensemble drumming that takes its name from the Japanese word for "drum," isn't one of those elegant, restrained Japanese traditional arts. It's full of powerful, visually striking movement, and it's loud.

"It goes back over a thousand years in Japan, and as a lot of folk music does, it has some religious connotations," says Rooney, who studied in Japan and with prominent American performers. "Taiko historically was used in festivals to entertain or awaken the kami, the spirits."

Traditional taiko generally involves one drummer on one big drum, playing the same rhythm for hours on end. It's great for dancing in the streets, but not exactly something you'd want to sit and watch in a concert hall. In fact, what I study and what you'll see performed in the U.S. is actually a modern form that developed in Japan in the mid-20th century.

"What you see presented on stage might have its roots in tradition but largely is much more contemporary," says Rooney.

The first organized American taiko groups were in California, and at the start in the 1960s it was about more than just music.

"There was a little bit of protest, a sense of reclaiming cultural identity — we're talking only 20 years after Japanese-American internment," says Rooney, who is of Japanese heritage on his mother's side.

Now there are an estimated 300 groups across North America, and the music incorporates influences from jazz to Latin to hip-hop.

"A lot of taiko groups are rooted in Buddhist tradition, and there are people who get into because of their Buddhism," says Rooney.

Others, like me, discover it while pursuing a general interest in Japan: I was studying the language and stumbled across a performance at a festival in Los Angeles where I was looking to buy Japanese food and souvenirs.

Meghan Clyne of Palo Alto, California, first saw taiko in Japan, where she lived as a teenager, but didn't get a chance to play and appreciate the range of the form until she was living back to the U.S.

"What a lot of people don't realize, and what I didn't realize before I started playing, is the stunning breadth and depth of taiko," she says. "People think, 'It's just a drum.' But they don't realize how many different sounds and styles can come from one drum, and that there are in fact many drums, played in many different ways. And when you consider all the different mixes and matches of movement, sound, style, positioning, ensemble playing, etc., the possibilities are infinite."

As taiko has spread and developed, some players come to it purely as another form of world music, says Rooney.

The attraction might be to both the musical and physical aspects of taiko.

"I've spent my whole life doing some form of music and some form of movement," says Heather Mitchell-Buck of Frederick, Maryland, who had experience in yoga, dance, singing and a variety of musical instruments that never quite suited her. "Taiko just seems to be the perfect expression of both parts of my personality."

She had seen taiko on film but all the players seemed to be Japanese men, and it didn't occur to her that it was something she could do until she had an accidental encounter. "I spent a summer living in the Bay Area, and I was walking to get a cup of coffee and heard this sound coming from a warehouse," she says. "I looked in the door and the person leading the practice was an American woman."

The role of women in American taiko is definitely non-traditional. Women were excluded from festival drumming associated with shrines and temples, and even now there are Japanese ensembles in which women's role is limited to dancing, singing or playing other instruments.

In North America, however, "there are more women practicing taiko, and practicing the same kind of taiko," says Rooney.

Taiko is still uncommon enough that most opportunities to play are in performing groups ; a class like the one I take, which Rooney calls "recreational taiko," is comparatively rare.

Clyne, who has taken workshops all over the country, says the opportunities in her area are "pretty much geared toward pure beginners or people who are ready to be semi- or fully professional."

As a player who's more enthusiastic than talented, then, I'm lucky to have found a class where it's OK that I probably only really know three songs after three years of study. And after all, that was the traditional way.

"The groups weren't professional. They were just the locals that would get together a couple weeks a year," Rooney says. "They would only know the local rhythm that was passed down from generation to generation."

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