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Kaze No Daichi Taiko:
Converging Thoughts Colliding Sounds

It was my goal to compose a concert of music using Japanese kumi daiko as the vehicle of expression. In my original project proposal I had a number of pieces that would have featured several performers from a variety of musical and visual/performative fields. I ended up presenting a short performance of three originally composed pieces, two for Kaze no daichi taiko and one as a collaborative piece for solo chu daiko and marching snare drum with my colleague Travis Valdez. While I was composing, one of the questions I sought to answer was whether or not, as a white American, I could present this project in a way that was not appropriating Japanese or Japanese American culture. After completing the project, I have reasons why I do not believe that I was being appropriative, but in my research I have also come to a conclusion about the initial question being asked, a point I will come to at the end of the paper. In this paper I will explain my influences and thought processes about the individually composed pieces and in these descriptions I will come to answer to the claims I am making.

Before I get into an explanation of the individual pieces I would like to give a brief history of kumi daiko, specifically pointing to major points of intersections in which taiko has come into contact with music from another culture. Right from the start the drums of religious and festival Japan were integrated with outside influences in the inception of kumi daiko. The ensemble style of playing was first developed by Daihachi Oguchi, a Japanese drum set player who performed popular music such as jazz, tango, and Hawaiian music all around Japan. After being given a scroll and discovering the Shinto festival rhythms of the taiko drums, but realizing they were slow and somewhat boring to him, he decided to combine multiple sized drums to create trap kits, and eventually arranged pieces for a group of drummers, effectively creating

kumi daiko. After his success of starting Osuwa Daiko, a group based out of postwar reconstruction and an expanding domestic tourism in the 50's, many groups followed. Including Osuwa Daiko, Shawn Bender posits the “big four” kumi daiko groups from Japan who helped to establish the art form for what it was; Sukeroku Daiko, who developed during the flourishing period of Tokyo's festival culture, Ondekoza, who arose during a reappraisal of folk culture in the 70's, and KODO, who out of Ondekoza, absorbed the international perspective Japan was gaining with their rise in economic power in the 80's and 90's.¹ From here, the taiko made their way to America thanks to Seiichi Tanaka, who formed the San Francisco Taiko Dojo in 1968, with groups establishing themselves in San Jose, New York, and other urban cities around America with large Asian-American populations, often finding a home in the Buddhist temples of America.²

Since then taiko has spread to Europe, Australia, and South America taking on unique characteristics of everywhere it goes. KODO has incorporated the rhythms and sounds of Brazil in their piece “Berimbau Jam” from their 2001 album *Mondo Head*, Kagemusha Taiko from Exeter, UK performs a piece that is inspired by the jig-like rhythms of Morris dancing called Whirligig, that uses the English folk music as a vehicle to trace a Celtic knot as one performers move around the drums to play. Taikoproject, based in Los Angeles, has added hip-hop elements into their performances and compositions, like on the song “Expanding” from their 2010 album *Surrounding Suns*. Perhaps though the best example of musical blending comes from the members of On Ensemble, who collectively incorporate rock and jazz drum set, turntablism and electronic music, Mongolian throat singing, gamelan, and when in collaboration with Patrick

¹ Shawn Morgan Bender, *Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 48.

² Paul J. Yoon, “‘She’s Really Become Japanese Now!’: Taiko Drumming and Asian American Identifications,” *American Music* 19, no. 4 (Winter, 2001), 422.

Graham, frame drums from around the world. Shoji Kameda, core member of On Ensemble has championed the sounds of the gamelan on more than one occasion, noticeably in the pieces “Silverback” and “Gamelgong” from *Ume In The Middle* (2009) and *Bizarre Heroes* (2013) respectively. Kameda has also recently composed a piece for the online taiko resource website KaDon called “Lion Chant” that combines rhythms from the Japanese Edo Bayashi lion dance music with Balinese kecak, a vocal gamelan style. Amidst all the inclusion of a variety of world music, one of the biggest collaborative efforts for the taiko community has been the electronic music market. Aside from On Ensemble, KODO has released a series of remix albums *Sai-so: The Remix Project* and *Ibuki Remixed* and San Jose Taiko has hosted a series of concerts in collaboration with DJ collective The Bangerz in which the groups add their sound to each others original repertoire.³ This history points to a cosmopolitanism that is reminiscent of jazz and its ability to absorb culture.

Touching on a different issue within the topic of identity in taiko there is a history of this performance style being used to re-inscribe masculinity to the male figure after the desecration and subsequent occupation of Japan by America, which effeminized the Japanese male as a subject, who pales in comparison to the white male who is, “taller, more physically imposing, and more powerful.”⁴ It was this newly repressed attitude towards Japanese bodies as inferior, which helped to ignite the athleticism by which the aforementioned “Big Four” used in their performances. This physical tightly choreographed movement is also seen as one of the grounding particulars to Japanese culture. Because the stance and positioning of the drums, the typical Japanese body is seen as the ideal, and to some even an important aesthetic.⁵ This

³ "San Jose Taiko | SJT X Bangerz in Concert," San Jose Taiko, <http://taiko.org/bangerz/>.

⁴ Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 119.

⁵ Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 120.

masculine driven physicality has even come across as violent, as Ondekoza is noted for their use of kata, athleticism, and strength as a metaphorical battleground wherein they must defeat their previous American occupiers, now audience members assumed to hold feminine stereotypes of Japanese men, from the stage.⁶ This representation, which seeks to turn the tables on the postwar opinion of Japanese males, is but one example of the philosophy that taiko groups, typically from Japan, promote. In America this has been less the case, and a general pan-Asian sentiment has taken hold as one of the primary functions for the American kumi daiko community. This focus on the Asian-American experience rather than specifically that of Japanese Americans is an important distinction and when the San Jose Taiko Group was formed in 1973, the members explicitly identified themselves as an Asian American group, something not recognized by Tanaka-sensei and the San Francisco Taiko Dojo. Alongside this marking of solidarity by SJJTG, New York's Soh Daiko has nearly for all of its history been a mixed-identity group, welcoming Asian Americans from many East Asian backgrounds into the group, while also allowing Anglo Americans to perform as members throughout the group's history.⁷ This pan-Asian aesthetic has led to problems in a generational gap, where the history of imperialism pushed on other Asian cultures by the Japanese has led grandparents and parents of performing members who are not culturally Japanese to comment on the Japanese-ness of the dress and presentation as solely reminiscent of one culture involved, while still feeling a sense of excitement in finding an art form by which the effeminate Asian man and subservient Asian woman stereotypes can be combated.⁸

⁶ Paul J. Yoon, "Asian Masculinities and Parodic Possibility in Odaiko Solos and Filmic Representations," *Asian Music* 40, no. 1 (2009): 105.

⁷ Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 423.

⁸ Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 424.

It is this issue that makes me wonder as a white performer, should I be worried about this feeling imperialistic? Linda Alcoff has pointed out that, “Especially in a consumer society, the core of white privilege is the ability to consume anything, anyone, anywhere...”⁹ so there are definitely considerations of me using my position of privilege to consume taiko for my own agenda. Alcoff explains that a speaker’s social location has a significant impact on the claims being made, while also arguing that privileged locations of speech are dangerous because of the ability to speak for or on behalf of less privileged persons.¹⁰ Some might argue that as a student at a university, I am in a position of power of learning taiko that is inauthentic. This issue can be argued against based on the history of taiko within the collegiate realm. One of the biggest chunks of the North American taiko community is found in universities across the United States. In 1990, the first collegiate taiko group, UCLA’s Kyodo Taiko was founded, followed by Stanford Taiko and UC Irvine’s Jodaiko soon after. Since then, the prevalence of taiko in the higher education system has been the fastest growing phenomenon in the taiko community at large.¹¹ When a former member of Soh Daiko, Paul Yoon, found himself in Bowling Green, Ohio as a faculty member of Bowling Green State University’s Ethnomusicology department, one of the first things he worked to do was start a kumi daiko group at the university. Using tires covered in packaging tape, until a grant for a set of thirty gallon wine barrels and calf skin could be purchased and taiko drums built by the ensemble, Yoon taught the group of interested students under the name Hayabusa Taiko, Japanese for “falcon”, a nod to the University mascot. After a few years of instruction, a group of students who wanted to challenge themselves

⁹ Linda Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” *Hypatia* 13 (August 1998): pg 25.

¹⁰ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking For Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-92): 7.

¹¹ “Stanford Taiko,” Stanford Taiko, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/stanfordtaiko/cgi-bin/history.php>

musically and get more performance opportunities started the student organization Kaze No Daichi Taiko, which translates to “Land of Wind” or “Windy Plains”, again making a reference to the hometown of the University. Because of this history of collegiate taiko and BGSU taiko’s place in that history I think it would be inappropriate to try and make the claim that we are in a position of power due to our affiliation with an institution of higher education. Whether or not I as a performer and composer am appropriating kumi daiko is a different question though, and through an analysis of my compositions I worked on for this project I would like to make the claim that I am merely moving the art form through the same paradigms and trends it has already found itself currently.

Starting with the first piece on the program, “In darkness, sit, light finds you” I will briefly describe my inspiration for each piece and give an analysis on why I believe it to be an accurate representation of where taiko is at the moment. I composed “In darkness” as a way to work with Kaze No Daichi on interlocking patterns, as the whole piece is only four rhythms, which are paired, and sectioned together. My main inspiration for the two interlocking rhythms that are used in the bulk of the piece (rhythms A and B) comes from my experience playing in the gangsa section of Kusuma Sari, BGSU’s Balinese gamelan gong kebyar. In the gamelan, the small keyboard instruments *premade* and *kantilan* will elaborate on the main theme of the piece by splitting melodies in half. This creates two rhythmically dependent parts, which are called *kotekan*. The point of the two separate lines is to become an indistinguishable solo line, while the other two rhythms (1 and 2) act as an interlude between various combinations of rhythms A and B. At the end of the piece I wanted to combine all four rhythms and move rhythms 1 and 2 between groups of players while the rest of the ensemble played combinations of rhythms A and B, in a move to represent organization within chaos. For me “In darkness” is more of a thought

piece than it is a well-staged performance piece and I would like to continue developing ways in which the two kotekan rhythms can be passed back and forth, weaving in between playing the interlocking rhythms and playing each of the rhythms in unison as an ensemble. Like many compositions in the taiko community today, the sound of Bali has inspired new playing techniques and the sound of interlocking rhythms has permeated kumi daiko, and I am glad to have had the opportunity to add my take on this interesting music tradition and blend it with the sound of the taiko drums.

The second piece I created was a collaborative piece for marching snare with Travis Valdez, BGSU marching band alumni. We titled the piece, “great day to be a good day to be a great day to be... (infinite loop)” and it was inspired by the efforts of Bring Your Own Style, a group of musicians who use the snare drum as a means of expression, but who frequently collaborate with a variety of percussionists including drum set and other marching percussion players but also with a tap dancer in recent history. Taiko has been a part of the marching world before thanks to groups like The Cavaliers 2008 show *Samurai*, where the front ensemble plays taiko drums, and Music City Mystique whose 2011 show *Mantra* saw the group dressed like monks and features a player on what I have been told by a friend and member of the Winter Guard International community was a trampoline, which was used as an odaiko. One defining feature of BYOS is their use of music to provide a cypher track over which they create and perform their compositions. Using that, Travis and I decided write a piece around the music from Kendrick Lamar’s song “Complexion (A Zulu Love)” from his album *To Pimp A Butterfly*, a song where the hip-hop artist speaks from the point of a view of a slave who loves his master’s daughter and is trying to point out the indifference he has about the color of her skin in his decision to fall for her. While the program notes discuss a person’s (my) position in the hip-hop/

black community, I think the conversation is analogous to my position in the Asian American community as a taiko player. As Alcoff has pointed out, my goal is not to speak for the Asian American community as to what it is like to be a person of color, but rather to show an appreciation for the cultural aesthetics that make taiko a unique art form.

There are many ways in which I believe I can show an understanding and appreciation for the art form, and one of those ways is by holding certain retentions, both musically and in actions, that ground the ensemble as one that comes from Japan. Kaze starts and ends their rehearsals by bowing in a towards each other, rather than to the leader (as SFTD does towards Tanaka-sensei), a retention specific to Yoon's experience in Soh Daiko, which he describes as attempting to emphasize the respect and equality that each member shows to each other, while also being an example of a moment of recognized "non-Japanese" based on the American ideal of equality.¹² By following this retention of bowing towards each other as a sign of equality, and uttering the Japanese phrases, “どうぞよろしくおねがいします *douzo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*” at the beginning of rehearsal (taught as translating to “please treat me kindly” but literally translating to a formal expression of “nice to meet you”), and “どもありがとうございます *domo arigato gozaimasu*” (“thank you very much”) at the end of a rehearsal bowing in and out is also used as a time to let go of anxieties and stresses that might wander in we can create a means of expelling negative energy, which coupled with the bowing and sitting in a traditional seiza position, articulates a distinctly Buddhist aesthetic, again grounding the ensemble in particularly Japanese retentions, possibly legitimizing the position of representation this ensemble holds as specifically an American kumi daiko group. A focus on the way of playing is also important in my opinion, and the use of form, or kata in Japanese, as the means to

¹² Yoon, “She’s Really Become Japanese Now!” 423.

perform is something that I stress when we play. Sitting in a lunge stance and playing the drums across the body is something we work on everyday in practice while we work on rhythms. If we were to be sitting at the drums or standing upright, much like a Western classical percussionist, I think there would be issues of using the drums not to play taiko, but just to use the drums. By respecting, learning about, and trying to enact these practices that help to influence kumi daiko and the way we play taiko music, I hope to be seen as someone who appreciates and is a practitioner of the music.

For my final piece, I look at another important retention of taiko music and that is an understanding of its own history in a musical context. My piece “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants” is one that I wrote as a way to combine visual and musical aspects of a number of Kaze No Daichi’s members who were around to teach me before they left and I stepped in as the ensembles director. The reason I wanted to do this was because of a conversation I had with Isaku Kageyama, professional taiko player who has performed with Japanese group Amanojaku and who has released multiple solo albums that blend rock and roll and jazz with taiko, and who also has worked with Ghanaian master drummer Winchester Nii Tete on pieces that mix the music of Japan’s Edo Bayashi festival with the sounds of kplonga and lunga drums from West Africa. While we were talking about how he composes new works for kumi daiko, he mentioned that he often tries to find ideas from traditional Japanese court or folk music. While we were passing time looking at various musical contexts that taiko has been a part of before kumi daiko, he mentioned that to be taken seriously in the taiko world, one should spend time in Japan studying the classical arts and festival traditions, such as Noh and Kabuki theatre as well as the rhythms from a variety of folk festivals like Edo and Matsuri Bayashi. I very much hope to do that one day, but thought about how Kaze has its own history and context, very removed from

the rest of the taiko community. Much of the repertoire of Kaze has been composed by members within in, none of who have any background in taiko before their experience in Bowling Green. While this has led to interesting compositions that have focused on other ideas brought in, it has not lent anyone a foresight into traditional Japanese music, except by being twice removed as an influence from Paul Yoon, who then influenced members who have joined since Yoon's departure from BG. As someone who does not have any connection to Yoon's taiko in the area, I tried to take aspects of compositions from within Kaze's repertoire. The reason I wrote for both naname and beta playing styles (side stand and floor stand respectively) was because of a piece that member Ronnie Hill had composed based on the story of Okami, a wolf, in Japanese folklore. The very movement based sections were based on a variety of movements that Tifah Street had written into her compositions, and the rhythms in the piece are a combination of originally composed music and quotes from a number of pieces by Adam Liddle and Jake Richman.

It is for these reasons that I hope to promote taiko and Japanese culture, rather than be seen as someone appropriating these instruments and sounds. By keeping an adherence to the history, context, and practices of taiko as an art form, but while also promoting the cosmopolitan way in which kumi daiko has accepted a sound pallet from a number of global music and popular music traditions, I would like to argue that I am just one more person in this vast community that spans the globe now. However, understanding my position of identity, I must also realize that I cannot make the call of whether or not the taiko I present is authentic, but instead must do everything I can in concordance with the Japanese and Japanese American community to be allowed to participate within this culture.

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