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AMANOJAKU

THE TAIKO GROUP PROVIDES A MEDIUM FOR JAPANESE TO BOTH RECONNECT WITH AND REINVENT THEIR TRADITIONS

BY DAN GRUNERBAUM

"UNTIL RECENTLY, TAIKO WASN'T SOMETHING YOU WOULD GO TO A CONCERT TO SEE," says young drummer Isaka Kagayama. Sometimes it's worth stating the obvious, and because this fact gets to the heart of the matter when it comes to contemporary taiko troupes, there's value in considering it.

As traditional festivals like *bon odori* come to mean less and less in an increasingly urbanized Japan, a number of taiko groups and soloists have emerged to reinvent the experience for concert-going audiences. From the legendary Kado's commune-like favor to Leonard Do's avant-garde experiments, they have pursued a variety of approaches.

Amano Jaku, founded in 1986 by the formidable Yochi Watanabe, seeks to preserve the essence of taiko even as it presents it on the concert stage. "A lot of taiko groups now try to do something new, like playing with rock bands," observes young member Isaka Kagayama in an interview at the Metropolis office. "That's supposed to be modern, but it's not going to make taiko last forever. It might be interesting for ten minutes, but not 10,000 years. Taiko has been part of festivals for hundreds of years, we're trying to create that kind of eternal music."

The roots of Amano Jaku, named for a mischievous imp of Japanese folklore, lie in Do's *bon odori* festivals, so the group sets up its drums on stage in a traditional arrangement. In its compositions, it will also, for instance, use kabuki-inspired phantasies to evoke iconic Japanese imagery such as a cicada's song or breaking waves. Other aspects of traditional Japanese culture also provide material for new compositions. "Sumo drumming has a unique rhythm not found in rock or Latin," explains Kagayama. "We want to capture traditional nuances and make them something new."

As taiko reinvents itself, it's also offering a means for many young Japanese people to reconnect with their culture. Kagayama, for example, was born in San Francisco to a Japanese-American father and Japanese mother, and educated at international schools in Japan. Now 24, he joined Amano Jaku when he was 8 years old and became a national *odoko* champion in 2000. A fluent English speaker, he acts as the group's interpreter and English PR man.

The group has also helped expatriate Japanese to better understand their roots. As part of its tours to over 40 nations, Amano Jaku has conducted workshops that are particularly popular with descendants of Japanese immigrants. This summer, the troupe went on a month-long tour of Brazil at the invitation of the Brazilian Association of Taiko, which was established in 2003 to instruct youths in the musical form.

Events are planned in Brazil in 2008 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Japanese immigration to the country, including a large-scale taiko performance. Aside from technique, leader Watanabe says a taiko performer needs to have "spirit and manners." The classes, attended by hundreds of third- and fourth-generation Japanese Brazilians, saw Watanabe teaching basic Japanese etiquette such as how to bow and sit on the floor, Japanese-style.

Along with taiko's modernization has been the arrival of numerous women to its ranks, once the exclusive preserve of men. Two of Amano Jaku's co-founders, Hiromi Ogawa and Mayumi Kawana, are leaders of a generation of female taiko pioneers. Some of their compositions are Amano Jaku trademarks, and the spectacle of them performing the complex *strycopation* is exhilarating.

Planned to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Amano Jaku's founding, the upcoming concert will feature the premiere of two pieces, "Inori, Negai, Kaitai" (Prayer, Yearning, Good Fortune), a portrayal of parental love, and "Goishida no Taiko" (The Colors of Taiko), in which five of the group's seven players showcase their individual talents on the massive *odoko*. Nerima Bunka Center, Dec 19. See concert listings (jazz/world) for details. ■




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