

the KODŌ beat

鼓童

Impressions of European Tour '01

This report is based on a conversation with tour manger Takashi Akamine.

On this tour we played England, Wales, Germany, Austria, Norway, Finland and Estonia. This was Kodo's first visit to the last four of those countries.

Because we had a couple of days off in Norway, we held a seminar on Norwegian culture before leaving. We heard about the Viking culture and saw slides from various museums and galleries. We try to do a bit of prep before visiting somewhere for the first time.

In Norway we were honoured to appear at the anniversary concert celebrating the centennial of the Nobel Peace Prize. We were the first Japanese performers to appear at a Nobel Concert.

I was very impressed with the calmness of the Norwegian people. One day we went on our own to see the viking ship museum in the suburbs of Oslo. Eiichi pulled out a map and asked the driver if this was the right bus. The driver proceeded to pull out his glasses, and with people still lined up behind us he carefully examined his map. Not one of the people still waiting to board made a murmur of complaint. That calm made me feel a touch envious. The same held true for the atmosphere at the awards concert. There was a pervading sense of professional calm that made the performers relax. Normally one's experience with TV appearances isn't much fun, usually high-tension and short-tempered. This was a wonderful collaboration though. The performance was at the Spectrum Hall, which seats about 6,000 people. There was a stage for the MCs, one for the orchestra and one



On stage at the Nobel Concert. photo by Taro Nishita

for the various bands. Norwegians had heard of Kodo it seems, but as they had yet to see us there was great curiosity. During our rehearsal work ground to a halt as the production staff and crew dropped everything and sat in the empty seats to listen. It made us feel very good.

There were 13 acts, from rock to opera including, *Wyclef Jean*, formally of the *Fugees*, opera soprano *Barbara Hendricks*, Australian singer *Natalie Imbruglia*, Norwegian pop group *A-ha*, American pop singer *Anastacia*, Brazilian singer and dancer *Daniela Mercury*. Senegalese vocalist *Youssou N'Dour* and oh yeah, what's his name, *Paul McCartney*. *Meryl Streep* and *Liam Neeson* were the masters of ceremony.

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Before our rehearsal the two of them were all over the taiko and during our run-through they were weaving and boogying along with the drums.

The performance went very well. Everyone played 2 numbers. We were the 3rd act in the 2nd half. Yohikazu began with about 3 minutes of *Odaiko* and then we played *Zoku* for about 6 minutes. The concert finished with Paul McCartney. For an encore everyone came on stage for *Let it Be*. Singing along we all held up our *bachi* and lanterns and waved them back and forth. Great fun.

After the show Yoshikazu and I went to meet HRH the Crown Prince of Norway. We went to a room with the other performers and met Paul McCartney there too. He saw Yoshikazu and clapping said '*Konnichiwa*', (hello) and '*Ossu*' (slang male greeting). What a laugh. Then he said 'Bravo!' and shook Yoshikazu's hand.

For me personally, the really great thrill was meeting Meryl Streep. She is simply my favourite actress. I was excited all day with the prospect of seeing her. I used to make a point of showing her movies to the Kodo apprentices. I went up to her during the reception and told her what an honour it was for us to appear on stage with her, and told her about screening her films to the apprentices. She put her hand to her chest and said 'Oh it's an honour'. She told me to be sure to let her know the next time we are in New York. I couldn't resist asking her if I could take her picture to which she said 'Let's take one together! Here Liam, Take it will you?' She handed the camera to the renowned Irish actor who obligingly snapped away.

There were only artists at the party, no press, so everyone was relaxed. Wycliffe Jean was one of the bands. The champagne was really flowing. At a break in the music Yoshikazu announced from one of the stages, 'I'm going to sing a happy Japanese song' and broke into the very moving *Kiyari*. Kodo members joined in from around the hall. It was a big hit. Norway was wonderful start to finish.

One surprise on this tour was that the number of taiko groups in Europe seems to have mushroomed, many of whose members came to our shows. There are about 10 in Britain and groups in Dusseldorf and

Frankfurt. Unlike North America, many of these groups seem to have few or no Japanese or Nisei members. It made me realize how deeply the taiko boom has permeated world culture.

For me Estonia was especially memorable. Tallinn is a medieval town built of stone and seemed right out of a fairy tale. Tartu was a closed city during the Soviet era so you could still feel people looking at us on the street with great curiosity. There was a guy outside the theatre with a paper stuck to his head and I asked him what it said. 'Spare Ticket?' he told me. He found one by the way.

When the audience came in the first big surprise was how dressed-up they were. The children included. The ladies in gowns and some men in tails. We really didn't know how they would react to our performance, nor was the local promoter, whose concern was palpable. Tickets amounted to about a 10th of the average monthly salary. The hall had an 800 seat capacity but they had sold 950 tickets. The aisles were crammed with seats. Normally I am after promoters for extra complimentary tickets. Here the promoter was asking me for them! This was a first. I had 5 'comps' and he was incredibly grateful when I handed them over. During the show I went up to the balcony. As the sight lines were bad, people were standing and craning their necks towards the stage, moving to the rhythms. There was tremendous energy there. When the show ended there was a great standing ovation, to the relief of us all. We were told that they might see standing ovations only 3 times a year. After the show people just hung around the lobby not wanting to go home. I saw two young girls whom I had seen dancing in the balcony who obviously couldn't afford the CDs which they looked at longingly. I had one last one in my pocket that I was going to give to someone who didn't show up, so I gave it to them instead. They were so thrilled and said 'Thank You! Can I hug you?' There was a kind of simple purity in their reaction and in that of the entire audience. It occurred to me that I hadn't sensed anything like it since about 15 years ago in East Germany. I hope that along with the new freedoms they have gained this purity isn't something they must necessarily leave behind.

Kodo Close-up:

Sachiko Abe, player

The 20th in a series of profiles of individual Kodo members.

Sachiko was born and grew up in Nerima in the northern suburbs of Tokyo. Her father worked for a moving company and her mother worked from home as a freelance typist. She has a brother 1 year older who works as a carpenter. An average student, she was shy and scarcely uttered a word at school. She played the soprano and alto recorder for the 6 years of elementary school. In middle school she became very involved with the track club and those two and a half years she remembers running most of the time. During high school she worked part-time in the Apple Theatre in Shinjuku helping her mother sell ice cream. It was here she first saw Kodo. As the end of high school approached she began to feel a regular office job would be boring. She thought of Kodo, attracted to the fact that they lived communally on Sado Island, which sounded fascinating. She went to for an interview and though she wasn't able to manage even the basic 'dondoko dondoko' rhythm, she decided to join. She was accepted at the age of 18.

There were 7 apprentices that year, including Aya, Gan and Peko, all who eventually became members. One of the apprentices was heavily into *aikido* and he cooked up an incredibly rigorous training programme which left her feeling ill at times. Older members had told them that since Katsuji Kondo was no longer in charge they would get soft under Oi san's much more laid-back approach. So they took it upon themselves to work that much harder on their own. In spite of difficult periods when she remembers detesting everyone in turn, she looks back on the year as having been fun. She remembers feeling a strange sense of superiority almost, waking up in the cold and dark to run she would think, 'There aren't too many other people doing this, just us!' She knew at the time that those experiences would have great meaning in her life. Unlike some of her fellow apprentices she hadn't staked her future happiness on being accepted into the group. Even if she were rejected she felt that she would be able to use the experience of the year in her life to good effect.

After the year's apprenticeship she claims it wasn't as if she had become good at the taiko or dance, but that she was better than when she had started, she had made progress. Kodo must have felt so too because she was invited to join.

She appeared on stage about a month after becoming a full member,

playing in *Sankan-shion* in Osaka. While setting the drums during the blackout she put her taiko on the piece of tape meant for *Miyake*, so when the lights came up there she was sticking way off to one side. She made her way to the end of the number a bit red-faced and was a bit surprised not to be given hell when it was over.

An 8 year veteran, her principal piece on stage is currently a drum/dance piece called *Hiina no ko* (*The Drum Princess*) She created this with Ayako Onizawa together with input from the members of the *hayashi* that accompanies them. Performing has at last become truly fun for her. Now she is able to express herself when she plays, as if she is directing herself rather than *being* directed. She feels it is up to herself to broaden her abilities rather than depending upon others to do it for her.

Women are playing a greater role on Kodo's stage than ever before. As for the future of this trend, she says that one direction is for them to take roles traditionally performed by men and play in the same way and blend in. Alternatively women can perform delicate numbers with dance and small drums which emphasize their femininity. Sachiko thinks there is a third way however, neither *male* nor *female* but one that simply expresses each performers' humanity. With hard work she feels the possibilities in this direction are limitless.

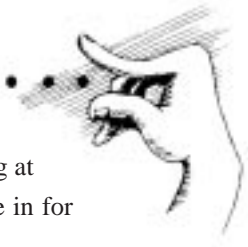
She married fellow player Kazunari Abe the year before last and when on Sado they live in a tiny fishing hamlet on Sado's southern coast.



Sachiko and Kazunari

Kodo Beat editor *Yuka Inoue* left Kodo at the end of 2001. She will be working on Sado as a freelance consultant. We wish her the very best.

in brief.....



On the 12th and 13th of January the interviews for new Kodo Apprentice applicants took place. Normally cold, snowbound and forbidding at this time of year the 30 hopefuls were greeted by sun and unseasonable warmth. (They're in for a surprise). The 10 chosen will begin their 2 year apprenticeships on April 1st.

We just had the *tomoe* (comma) mark repainted on the Kodo Village *Odaiko* in November, but the other day during practice the skin was ripped wide open. Most unusual (Mitsuru Ishizuka did it) so everyone from the office piled into the rehearsal hall to have a peek inside the drum. It's gone to Asano Taiko for repairs.

upcoming performances

One Earth Tour Japan

February

5,6	Sado	Amusement Sado	0259-86-3630
10-12	Tokyo	Tokyo International Forum	03-3201-8116
15	Nagoya	Aichi Kosei Nenkin Kaikan	052-263-7171
16,17	Osaka	Osaka Kosei Nenkin Kaikan	06-6362-8122
19	Okayama	Okayama Shimin Kaikan	086-224-6066
20	Okayama	Kuse Espace Land Espace Hall	0867-42-7000
21	Okayama	Takahashi Sogo Bunka Kaikan	0866-22-1040
23	Ehime	Matsuyama Shimin Kaikan	089-943-8083
25	Kochi	Kochi Kenritsu Kenmin Bunka Hall	088-822-1421
27	Tokushima	Naruto-shi Bunka Kaikan	089-943-8083

March

1	Hiroshima	Fukuyama Geijutsu Bunka Hall	0849-28-1810
2	Hiroshima	Hiroshima Yubin Chokin Hall	082-249-1218
5	Shimane	Yuyu Furusato Kaikan	0855-72-0001
7	Yamaguchi	Sun Beam Yanai	0820-22-0111
9	Yamaguchi	Hagi Shiminkan	0838-26-3492
10	Yamaguchi	Kikukawa-cho Fureai Kaikan	Abnir Sold Out
12	Oita	Oita Grand Theater	092-715-0374
14	Fukuoka	Fukuoka Shimin Kaikan	092-715-0374
15	Fukuoka	Munakata Yurix Event Hall	0940-37-1483
18	Saga	Saga Shimin Kaikan	0952-26-2351
19	Nagasaki	Arcus SASEBO	0956-42-1111
21	Kumamoto	Minamata-shi Bunka Kaikan	0966-61-1639
23	Kagoshima	Kagoshima Shimin Bunka Hall	099-226-3465
24	Kagoshima	Osumi-cho Bunka Kaikan	0994-82-1216
26	Miyazaki	Kiyotake-cho Bunka Kaikan	0985-84-0181

Earth Celebration 2002

May 10-12 Ogi, Sado Island 0259-81-4100

One Earth Tour Japan

May 29-31 Niigata Ryutopia 025-281-8000
Kodo performances in tandem with the World Cup Opening Games

June

9	Gifu	Tajimi-shi Bunka Kaikan	0572-23-2600
11	Aichi	Toyoake-shi Bunka Kaikan	0562-93-3310

12	Aichi	Toyokawa-shi Bunka Kaikan	0533-85-3444
14	Shizuoka	Numazu Shimin Bunka Centre	0559-52-6633
16	Shizuoka	Kikukawa Bunka Kaikan	Ael 0537-35-1515
18	Tokyo	U-PORT	03-3204-9933
19	Tokyo	Chofu-shi Green Hall	0424-81-7222
21	Kanagawa	Isehara Shimin Bunka Kaikan	046-223-6421
22	Kanagawa	Kanagawa Kenmin Hall	045-242-1155
23	Tokyo	Nerima Bunka Centre	03-3204-9933
25	Chiba	Kashiwa Shimin Bunka Kaikan	047-365-9911

Earth Celebration 2002, May 10-12

Ticket sales start March 15.

Order forms for *Friends of Kodo* will be sent to them by mail in early March.

EC website: <http://www.kodo.or.jp/ec>

i-mode version: <http://www.kodo.or.jp/i/ec>



Illustration by
Hideaki Masago

Notice to Kodo Beat Readers

Kodo Beat is a newsletter focusing on the activities of Kodo and is sent quarterly to members of *Friends of Kodo*. *Friends of Kodo* is dedicated to bringing Kodo closer to our audience and fellow taiko enthusiasts. Membership is available to all. As well as receiving *Kodo Beat*, members also get special advance ticket reservations for selected concerts in Japan, the chance to buy original goods available only to them, and selected discounts on a range of Kodo goodies. For further information about these offers contact us or check our website.

For those readers who only want the newsletter, an on-line version is available on the Internet.

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