

the KODŌ beat

鼓童

Less is More:

The Soft Approach to Power Taiko

After 16 years as a key performer with Kodo, Ryutaro Kaneko will take a break in performing with the group for the foreseeable future. His last Kodo performance will be the Kodo One Earth Tour Special directed by Tamasaburo Bando in December.

Though it is difficult for me to take leave of performing with Kodo, I feel there is more in the long run I can contribute from off-stage than on.

In Kodo's early years and during *Ondekoza* days there was far less discrepancy in the ability of the various players. Everyone started out in their early 20's with little background in taiko and then improved at a reasonably consistent rate. This might surprise some readers, but there was, and is, no real system or method for teaching in place, meaning everyone more or less works out how to improve on their own. On top of this, new members join every year creating a gap from *Yoshikazu*, who is 53 at the top, to 18 year old kids coming in at the bottom. Experience, career and skills are all very different. There are ways in which these differences can work together, but there are ways in which they don't. There are many pluses too to having no system in place and everyone working things out for themselves, but there is a downside. One being that the overall level of the group doesn't improve though individual members do. I don't think we can carry on like this anymore, especially with constantly improving taiko groups from around the world snapping at our heels. I am not talking about our sound and rhythm not staying together like a

metronome. I am talking about the quality of sound, the timbre of each player's individual drum beat. There are times when it is a good thing to have a variety of sounds, but there are times when they should blend together seamlessly and when a huge gap in abilities interferes. We must change our approach, and this will be one of my most time-consuming new responsibilities for the next few years. I can't teach someone to shine on the stage, but I feel sure there is a way to teach so a higher level of technique can be reached more quickly. I want at least to point new players in the right direction, after which they will have to tread the path on their own.

And what is that direction? Kodo is a very physical group, but from early days I noticed that the one



photo by Johnny Wales

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common principal seemed to be 'go like hell'. There is something truly beautiful in that. But it has also been the cause of more than one member quitting. So my new challenge is to develop a method for using one's body more efficiently. There are and should be lots of ways of playing within Kodo, but at the very beginning, in terms of the direction of one's training, there are basically two paths. One is to bang away with all one's might, and the other is to beat forcefully while withholding one's power. This is the direction I want to see Kodo headed. The advantages of this method are many, not least of which is that it leads to fewer injuries. And it was an injury that really got me to understand the need for this approach. One day on tour in Taipei I was whaling away playing *Zoku* when I twisted my body from the waist suddenly and *RRRRIP!* That was the end of that tour for me. I could no longer move my neck. Incidentally, I was in pretty bad psychic shape at the time which I think provided very fertile ground for my injury. I had been interested in the writings of a particular martial arts master who had synthesized his own unique philosophy from a variety of disciplines before my injury, and then I began to actually work with him. What he had written about not using unnecessary power had long fascinated me. I was equally intrigued by his belief that this was as important physically as it was mentally and spiritually. I felt sure his approach could be applied to taiko, and after working with him not only had my body healed and I felt much more relaxed, natural and at peace with myself, but in fact the actual sound of my taiko had improved. You know when you watch a drumstick hit the drumhead at speed you can't actually see the moment of contact? Well previously, while playing, I couldn't really feel that moment of contact either. I couldn't tell what the stick was doing on the head. Now I can actually feel the skin depressing and the depth to which the stick presses into it. More vitally, before – when I hit the drum with full power – it was as if I was killing the energy of each hit. I sent the energy down into the drum and it was absorbed there and I had to summon up the energy again for the next hit, quickly depleting my resources. Now I feel my energy going into the

drum and down into the ground and then coming back to me in a circle or cycle. The energy is being renewed and I can definitely play much longer and more consistently. A great added benefit is that I am not straining my other senses so I remain more alert than before. I feel as if I can hear the sound I am making more clearly. It seems as if it is not just the drum making noise, but that I am sending vibrations out in a field, like an aura of sound. People, both musicians and the audience have told me that my sound has changed. It now has a sharpness, a weight, and carries further than before.

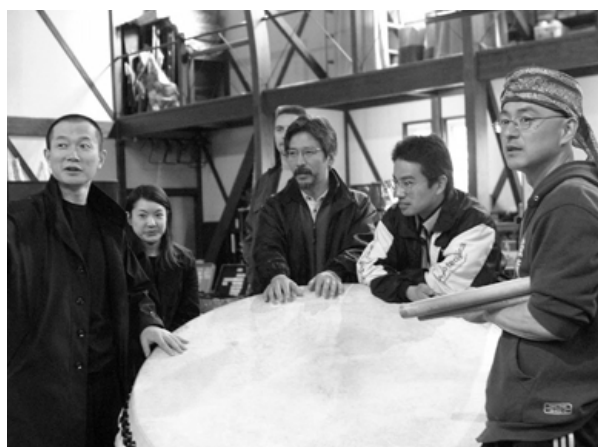
As for performing, I will carry on my solo activities and joint concerts with other musicians.

I will also be conducting a number and variety of workshops based on my method. I don't as yet have a name for my approach; when I hold workshops I usually call them '*yurunde tataete*' (loosen up and drum) or '*shizen na chikara o kanjinagara tatau*' (to drum while sensing one's natural power), a bit long that one. I should probably come up with a compact name, but part of me resists the urge to squeeze my thinking into a simple title.

In workshops I have participants drum the way they always do without my saying anything. After that I check each player to see how relaxed their bodies are. People are usually surprised at how much energy they have bottled-up in their arms. After exercises to show them how to relax and play they are startled at the difference, even over the course of a single workshop. Everyone can *hear* the difference. The new sound is soft, but with a very sharp beginning. The player feels relaxed and as if they can drum forever. Also, because they aren't straining, they can hear not only their own instrument, but the surrounding taiko much more clearly. Perhaps most surprising of all is that even without doing any rhythm practice in the workshops, they invariably join into the rhythm pattern more easily and maintain it as a group much more naturally than before they began.

So this is my new challenge, the next step in my career as a taikoist. I look forward to sharing what I have learned and what we have all yet to learn with new Kodo members and workshop participants alike.

Kodo and *The Hero*



Tan Dun (far left) at Kodo Village photo by SHIGGY

What is this obsession Kodo seems to have for working on the soundtracks of movies that begin with the letter 'H'? It's getting slightly weird...

Hard Target

Hunted

The Hero

The Hulk

The Hero, already a big hit in China and due out in Japan in August, was directed by *Zhang Yimou*, with music composed by *Tan Dun*. Musical luminary *Tan Dun* is one of the most celebrated composers of our time. He was heralded by the *New York Times* as one of the 10 most important composers in the world and received an Academy Award for his work on the '*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*' soundtrack in 2001.

Kodo Beat readers may be wondering how these kinds of collaborations come to be. One of the great things about touring is not only that it gives people around the world the chance to hear our music but it also provides opportunities for us to connect with other artists. This happened on March 20, 2001 when *Tan Dun* came to our Carnegie Hall show in New York where he lives. He suggested that he would like to work together sometime and this led to his travelling to Sado Island last August, newly-minted score in hand, exactly one day after the wonderful but exhausting completion of the *Earth Celebration '02*. While everyone else partied at the post-festival

barbeque, players *Eiichi Saito*, *Ryutaro Kaneko*, *Hideyuki Saito* and *Takeshi Arai* knuckled down with Kodo musical director *Motofumi Yamaguchi* and *Tan Dun* to record the taiko tracks, with, it should be pointed out, very little rehearsal. The *Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra* recorded their music over these rhythm tracks and then over both of these the renowned *Itzhak Perlman* added the strains of his sweet violin. Not his *Strad* or *Guarneris* however, but a 50 dollar knock-off *Tan Dun* had lying about his apartment whose sound he particularly liked. We all autographed it with a magic marker when we met later in New York. This kind of serendipitous improvisation seems typical of *Tan Dun* who, throughout the entire process of choosing the best taiko for each piece and the recording was wonderfully open to our input and suggestions. We are very pleased musically with the results of this international collaboration, and are especially happy with the quality and timbre of the taiko in the recordings.

The soundtrack will be released in Japan on July 16th on the Sony Classical and Jazz label.

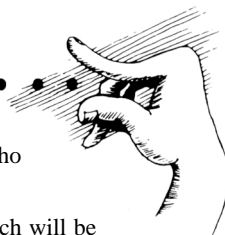
Hero: Overture, For The World-Theme Music, Warriors, Gone With Leaves, Longing, At Emperor's Palace, In The Chess Court, Love In Distance, Spirit Fight, Swift Sword, Farewell Hero, Sorrow In Desert, Home, Above Water, Snow, Yearning For The Peace. Bonus Track: Hero (Theme Song)

Soundtrack Price: ¥2,520 (tax included)



We are very saddened to have to announce the death in April of long-time friend and mentor, composer *Maki Ishi*. His compositions of *Monochrome*, *Monoprism* and *Dyu-ha* have long been favourite staples of Kodo's repertoire. April claimed another dear friend too, Nigerian percussionist *Babtunde Olatunji* who appeared at EC '95. Our thoughts go out to their friends and families. Their music lives on.

in brief...



Eichi Saito will be holding a taiko workshop at the 2003 North American Taiko Conference which will be held from August 1st - 3rd in Sacramento. For details check out: <http://www.taikoconference.com/>

Kodo Beat readers will no doubt be familiar with the one of our most popular and dynamic pieces *Miyake*. It was taught to us by the good people of Miyakejima which 2 1/2 years ago was completely evacuated because of a cataclysmic volcanic eruption. We are soliciting donations from within Japan for the evacuees by *yuubinfurikae*. The account number is: 00580-5-68315 *Kodo Bunka Zaidan, Miyakejima Bokin*. Any amount you can spare will be greatly appreciated.

upcoming performances

Aikawa Kinzan Matsuri

July 27 Aikawa, Sado Island 0259-86-3630

Earth Celebration 2003 August 22-24

Shiroyama Concerts

- 22 Kodo
- 23 Badenya les Frères Coulibaly Family of Griots from Burkina Faso in West Africa
- 24 Kodo & Badenya les Frères Coulibaly Family

One Earth Tour Japan

September

- 13 Kyoto Maizuru Shimin Kaikan 0773-75-0513
- 14 Hyogo Yabu-cho Viva Hall 079-664-1141
- 16 Okayama Manabi Hiroba Niimi 0867-72-6110
- 18 Tottori Tottori Kenritsu Kurayoshi Mirai Chushin 0858-22-8161
- 20 Hiroshima Kurose-cho Bunaka Center 0823-82-1100
- 21 Hiroshima Mihara-shi Bunka Kaikan 0848-64-7219
- 22 Okayama Okayama Shimin Kaikan 086-224-6066
- 26 Ehime Uchiko-za 0893-43-1285
- 28 Osaka Kishiwada Shiritsu Namikiri Hall 0724-39-7584
- 30 Hyogo Himeji-shi Bunka Center 0792-88-6600

October

- 1 Hyogo Kobe Kokusai Kaikan 078-231-8162
- 3 Kyoto Kyoto Kaikan Daiichi Hall 075-211-0261
- 4 Nara Nara Hyakunen Kaikan 06-6362-8122
- 8 Mie Matsuzaka Shimin Bunka Kaikan 0598-26-4421
- 10 Gifu Toki-shi Bunka Plaza 0572-55-5711
- 11 Shizuoka Hamakita-shi Bunka Center 053-586-5151
- 13 Shizuoka Yaizu-shi Bunka Center 054-627-3111
- 14 Shizuoka Fuji-shi Bunka Kaikan Rose Theatre 0545-60-2500
- 17 Yamanashi Yamanashi Kenmin Bunka Hall 055-235-3975
- 19 Miyagi Miyagi Kenmin Kaikan 022-225-8641

Kodo One Earth Tour Special

Artistic Director: Tamasaburo Bando

November

- 14-30 Tokyo Setagaya Public Theatre
No performance on 20th and 25th
Ticket sales start Sep. 23.
Inquiries: Kodo 0259-86-3630

December

- 6, 7 Nagoya Aichi Kosei Nenkin Kaikan
Ticket sales start Oct. 8.
Inquiries: Chunichi Gekijo 052-263-7171
- 12-14 Osaka Theater Drama City
Ticket sales start Oct. 5.
Inquiries: Page One 06-6362-8122
- 18-20 Niigata Ryutopia
Ticket sales start Sep. 6.
Inquiries: NT21 Ticket Center 025-229-2229
- 23, 24 Sado
Amusement Sado
Ticket sales start Oct. 1.
Inquiries:
Kodo 0259-86-3630



photo by Kishin Shinoyama

Earth Celebration 2003 ticket info

We are still accepting applications for the below workshops:

Multi-Day Workshops

Aug. 13-15 Let's Play Samba!

Mini-Workshops & Seminars

- Aug. 22 Hula 'Auana: Beginners' class
Rhythms and Chants of Hawaii
- 23 Kasuga Ondeko
Ogi Okesa Folk Dance
Taiko *Yobanashi*
- 24 Kasuga Ondeko
Hula 'Auana: Intermediate class

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 web site.

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

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