

# the KODŌ beat

# 鼓童

## Capturing Taiko

*In celebration of Kodo's 25th anniversary, Sony Records released our 21st CD, 'Heartbeat' on November 22nd. Former player and Kodo's sound engineer Takuro Susaki talks about producing this album and gives some advice on capturing the sound of taiko.*



*Heartbeat, the re-mix of 25 years of Kodo's best work.*

When conceiving this remix of Kodo's best music I decided on several themes. For old Kodo listeners I wanted to give them one CD where they could listen to 25 years of Kodo in a fresh way, and for new listeners I wanted to introduce a broad range of our work. 3 of the 14 cuts are traditional festival pieces we have rearranged, 3 are composed by guest artists and the remaining 8 are composed by Kodo members. I re-listened to every Kodo recording and then loaded the master tapes into our PowerMac G5 hard disk with

ProTools software, and re-mixed them to create the optimal sound for digital listening. I am very happy with the result. The best way to enjoy it - or any Kodo CD - is to have as large speakers as you can manage in as big a room as possible. It is really the same with classical music recordings, where there is a huge dynamic range between the smallest sounds and the biggest ones. You need an amp and speakers that can produce everything in that range. If you live in the city and can't have a big sound system blaring - rather than listen on a small radio cassette player - you will probably be better off listening in a pair of reasonably decent headphones. Another place where you can crank up the volume without upsetting your neighbours is in your car.

A few words about both recording taiko and amplifying them (PA) for a live performance. The first thing to consider about recording a taiko - before you even get to the recording session - is to make sure the taiko themselves sound good. The drums used by most taiko groups (as distinct from the taiko used in the Japanese performing arts like *noh* and *kabuki*) are traditionally used at a festival, so their history as 'musical' instruments is really quite recent. The taiko as a *musical instrument* might not be the same thing as a taiko appropriate to a festival setting. Kodo's drums are designed to be played without amplification in a 1,000 seat space. But when you put a mic in front of those same taiko the sound may be terrible, especially in the case of larger drums. With *okedo* drums - the heads of which are adjustable with ropes - the problem is less severe, but with the *miyadaiko* - whose heads are nailed down with tacks - you can't do much, at

**volume seventy-nine**

**winter 2007**

most moisten the skins a bit. So before you start out you have to look for taiko that are in good shape. Ideally you should record in a season when the atmospheric conditions are friendly to the taiko. Then there is the recording space. We did *Prism Rhythm* in Kodo's Rehearsal Hall, a large wooden room, so the sound is great, but you might have to do it in a small concrete recording studio where the sound is unfriendly to them.

With PA, the first characteristic when choosing mics is that they don't break down under the strain and spoil the concert, so you can't use anything too delicate. When you are *recording* you want the best possible sound so you should go with a more delicate one. You can always re-record if something goes wrong. When I am recording *odaiko*, I set one mic very close to the skin and one further back. For the close mic I like using a large Electro-Voice RE 20 dynamic cardioid microphone. It picks up the sound that the drummer hears themselves. For the mic that is further apart, any 2 omnidirectional mics will do. These will pick up the reverberations, and then I balance the 3 mics on the mixing board. I also put a mic on the back side of the *odaiko*, another Electro-Voice. It picks up the reverberations from within the drum's body. It takes experience if you want to do this because - if you don't 'phase reverse' this one - it will cancel out the sound from the mic in front. Done well, you can get a very full and rich sound. I use this set-up whether there is someone playing one side of the drum or two.

During concerts I attach a small wireless mic to the light *okedo* drums, as they tend to be played while the drummer dances about, so a mic on a fixed stand would limit their movement. A fixed stand can be used when recording them. The thing with *okedo* is that depending on so many variables - the tightness of the heads, the kind of sticks used and the player's style - so many different sounds can emerge, so you have to listen to the sound made in each case when choosing the best mic for the job.

You have to break down the sounds a drum makes into several phases. The first is the 'attack', the first '*ku-TTSU*' sound. With *shime* - especially the rope-tightened ones that Kodo uses - the heads are thick

leather that are very tight so the reverberation after that isn't very long, but there is a '*wu-UN*' sound. If you try to capture this with an ordinary mic you can't get the whole '*ku-TTSU*' sound. It doesn't sound the same as the acoustic sound does to your ears. So it's better to use a quite sensitive mic set at a bit of a distance from the drum. However, if you are recording the *shime* together with a number of other instruments, it becomes difficult to make the *shime* stand out. If you use a less sensitive mic close up, you tend to lose the attack sound and you end up with a kind of dull or gentle '*po po po po po*' sound.

Therefore - depending upon the kind of music or performance - unless you pre-determine what kind of sound you want the *shime* to have, you can't know what kind of equipment or recording techniques to use. It's kinda tricky.



Takuro at the controls at the Kodo Village Sound Studio

*Chappa* and *kane* resemble *shimedaiko* in that their sound is sharp and short. The sound quality is especially important so I recommend using a sensitive mic set a bit apart from the instrument. If you are recording live though, and the *chappa* player is near the *odaiko* pounding away, then a mic set at a distance is apt to pick a lot of the *odaiko* sound, so you won't be able to treat the sounds separately in the final mix. As with the *shime*, you have to take into consideration what kind of sound you want and your priorities *before* you can decide what kind of mic you want to use and where you will place it in relation to the player.

Mic-ing solo *fue* is pretty straight-forward. You can use any sensitive mic you want, but it's when you are recording *with* taiko that things become difficult. From the point of view of the performer, it is usually better to play together with the taiko rather than recording separately. So you have to decide which are your priorities, the quality of the sound or the quality

of the performance. An engineer is more apt to be interested in capturing the best *sound* possible, so she or he would prefer the musicians to lay down separate tracks. Part of the job of a good engineer is to be someone who can make these kinds of decisions wisely. It goes without saying that no matter how good the quality of sound is, if the performance is no good, well, an engineer can only do *so* much.

On tour, when Kodo plays in halls of 1,000 seats or less, the greatest luxury is not to have to use PA at all. At outdoor concerts with thousands of people or indoor venues with say, 2,000 people, there are times when using PA will give you better sound than just going acoustic. At Earth Celebration on Sado, which is outside with thousands of people, we suspend 6 to 8 mics from the roof to pick up the ambient sound on stage. Then we mic the quieter instruments, *koto*, *fue* etc. with their own mics. On any instruments where the player moves about we use wireless mics. For the koto - because we are outside and I need something dependable - I usually use the universal standby, a Shure SM58. When there are many taiko on stage in ensemble - but a particular drum has a solo I want to make stand out - I will put a mic stand by that drum.



Recording in the Kodo Rehearsal Hall. *photo by SHIGGY*

In the case of the *odaiko* and *hirado* (the flat *odaiko* sometimes referred to in Kodo as a 'Big Mac') their sound is big, but at an outdoor venue - when you are listening from say 50 metres away - you tend to lose the initial low '*Boom*' and are left with only the later, high sounds. So from a distance you can only hear '*Gan, Gan*'. You don't hear the '*DON*'. So even with a big drum, if you are concerned about the quality of the

sound, you mic them separately. This means that at EC we end up using about 40 mics for the show with only Kodo playing. When playing together with guests I have used up to 100.

As for speakers, there are no simple rules. At a concert in a hall of say 300 people, and you use no amplification on the taiko but you want to boost say, the *fue*, your normal PA used for speeches on a stand are fine. The position of the speakers is more crucial than the type. Be sure not to turn up the volume any more than is necessary. It shouldn't be much louder than the acoustic sound of the drums. Mix them so they sound natural. Kodo doesn't use monitors much because for over 25 years they have been playing almost entirely acoustically. The players get confused when they hear their sounds coming back from a monitor to them. There are problems with time lag. However, at Earth Celebration - out in the open without any walls around the stage to bounce the sound back to the performers for them to hear - I will set up monitors for say, the *fue* or singers, but almost never for taiko. Be very sparing in your use of monitors and if you feel you *really* must use them, I suggest the players get in plenty of practice with them before they perform.

Mic-ing taiko is very challenging, so my best advice for getting great sound is to get in touch with me (laughs). If you are looking for *another* engineer, it is unlikely you will be able to find someone with much experience doing taiko, so I recommend someone with lots of experience with acoustic music, say classical concerts, rather than a rock concert engineer. You might also tap into someone who has experience with musicals, where you have similar challenges, like someone who must sing while they dance. Taiko isn't just sound, the visuals are very important too, so in that way they resemble musicals. You need someone who understands that you can't have a forest of mic stands all over the stage. Any way, my advice as a sound engineer is - whenever possible - don't use amplification with these beautiful acoustic instruments unless you *really* have to.

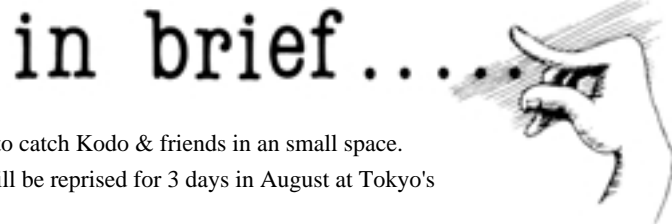
*If you have any questions you can get in touch with Takuro Susaki at Kodo and (provided he isn't too swamped) he will try to answer them when he can.*

On March 15&16 Kodo will appear at Joe's Pub, NYC (<http://web.joespub.com/>) with special guests *Tamango* (tap dance), *Koji Kakinuma* (calligraphy), *Cyro Baptista* (Brazilian percussion), *Kaoru Watanabe*

(flute), *Chieko Kojima* (dance) and more. Rare chance to catch Kodo & friends in an small space.

*AMATERASU* with *Tamasaburo Bando & Kodo* will be reprised for 3 days in August at Tokyo's *Kabuki-za*.

Kodo Players *Kenzo Abe & Yoshie Sunahata* married in January. Yoshie will keep her maiden name.



## upcoming performances

### One Earth Tour North America

#### February

- 2-4 Berkeley, CA Zellerbach Hall, UCB  
 8 Escondido, CA Concert Hall,  
 California Center for the Arts  
 9-11 Los Angeles, CA Royce Hall, University of  
 California at Los Angeles Campus  
 13 Mesa, AZ Mesa Arts Center  
 16 College Station, TX Rudder Auditorium  
 17,18 Houston, TX Jones Hall  
 20 Austin, TX Paramount Theatre  
 23-25 Dallas, TX McFarlin Auditorium  
 27 Fayetteville, AR Baum Walker Hall,  
 Walton Arts Center

#### March

- 1 Cleveland, MS Bologna Performing Arts Center  
 Delta State University  
 3 Birmingham, AL Alys Stephens Performing Arts  
 Center, University of Alabama  
 4 Columbus, GA RiverCenter for the Performing Arts  
 6 Greenville, SC Peace Center Concert Hall  
 8 Chapel Hill, NC University of North Carolina at  
 Chapel Hill Memorial Hall  
 11 Newport News, VA Ferguson Center for the Arts  
 Christopher Newport University  
 13 Richmond, VA Landmark Theater  
 15,16 New York, NY Joe's Pub  
 17 Newark, NJ New Jersey Performing Arts Centre  
 (NJPAC)  
 19 Ottawa, Ont. Canada Southern Hall,  
 National Arts Centre  
 21,22 Toronto, Ont. Canada Massey Hall  
 24,25 Montreal, Que. Canada Place de Arts  
 Salle Wilfrid - Pelletier

### One Earth Tour Japan

#### May

- 9 Niigata Joetsu Bunka Kaikan 025-281-8000  
 12 Niigata Shibata Shimin Bunka Kaikan 025-244-7485  
 13 Niigata Uonuma-shi Koidego Bunka Kaikan  
 025-792-8811  
 18 Ehime Matsuyama Shimin Kaikan 089-943-8083  
 20 Kochi Tosashimizu Shiritsu Shimin Bunka Kaikan  
 0880-82-2771  
 22 Kochi Kochi Kenritsu Kenmin Bunka Hall  
 088-822-1421  
 24 Shimane Shimane-ken Geijutsu Bunka Centre Grandtoit  
 (Masuda-shi) 0856-31-1860  
 26 Saga Saga-shi Bunka Kaikan 0952-26-2361  
 27 Nagasaki Nagasaki-shi Kokaido 095-826-2266

- 29 Fukuoka Fukuoka Shimin Kaikan 092-715-0374  
 31 Kumamoto Minamata-shi Bunka Kaikan 0966-61-1639

#### June

- 6 Kagoshima Shibushi-shi Bunka Kaikan 099-472-3050  
 7 Kagoshima Kagoshima Shimin Bunka Hall 099-226-3465  
 9 Kumamoto Kumamoto Kenritsu Gekijo 096-363-6655  
 10 Fukuoka Asakura-shi Sogo Shimin Centre 0946-24-6758  
 12 Yamaguchi Hofu-shi Kokaido 0835-22-1990  
 16 Shimane Unnan-shi Mitoya Bunka Taiikukan Aspal  
 0854-49-8500  
 17 Tottori Yonago-shi Kokaido 090-3171-4293  
 20 Okayama Tsuyama Bunka Centre 0868-24-0201  
 22 Kyoto Kyoto-fu Chutan Bunka Kaikan 0773-42-7705  
 23 Kyoto Kyoto-fu Nagaokakyo Kinen Bunka Kaikan  
 075-955-5711  
 24 Hyogo Kobe Kokusai Kaikan Kokusai Hall  
 078-231-8162

#### Attention members of Friends of Kodo.

Please find enclosed in this mailing advance reservation information for the May-June *One Earth Tour* in Japan.

### KASA Workshop Tour, North America

Instructors are Chieko Kojima (taiko and dance) and Kaoru Watanebe (fue). See KASA website for more details. <http://www.kodo.or.jp/kasa/>

- Feb. 9 Honolulu Mini concert  
 11 Maui Mini concert  
 17 Los Angeles Open workshop  
 18 Los Angeles Open workshop and mini concert  
 21 San Jose Open workshop  
 24 Winnipeg Mini concert  
 27 St. Louis Open workshop  
 Mar. 3,4 Minneapolis Open workshops

## 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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