

Rhythms Of The Rising Sun

The Japanese Taiko tradition is an ancient art which has successfully reinvented itself for the 20th Century. Sri Peter Lockett offers a brief history of Japanese drumming and explores some choice rhythms with Joji Hirota.

It was the influence of Chinese and Korean culture between the 5th and 8th Centuries that started the ball rolling. There are records from the 5th Century of musicians from Korea attending an Emperor's funeral ceremony. In the 8th Century Buddhist services began to be held in the Japanese temples. It was during those few centuries that most of the origins of Japanese percussion arrived in Japan. From then on the Japanese made it their own, incorporating it in their traditional music and theatre, such as Gagaku, Nogaku, Bunraku, and Kabuki. Festival music (Matsuri Bayashi) also contributed to the refinement of techniques and musical forms.

However, professional drumming has only really flourished in Japan since a certain group of drummers was formed on Sado Island in the '60s. Originally they were called Ondeko-Za which means Devil Drum - 'devil' being used ironically in the same manner as we use 'evil'. After some time, there was a divide in musical approaches, and so the group split into two - Ondeko-Za and Kodo.

Before this, there were very few professional drumming groups in Japan, but they soon became popular, and now there are over 400 professional groups, each consisting of between four and 12 performers, sometimes more.

Four Main Types Of Drum:

MIYA-DAIKO (temple drum)

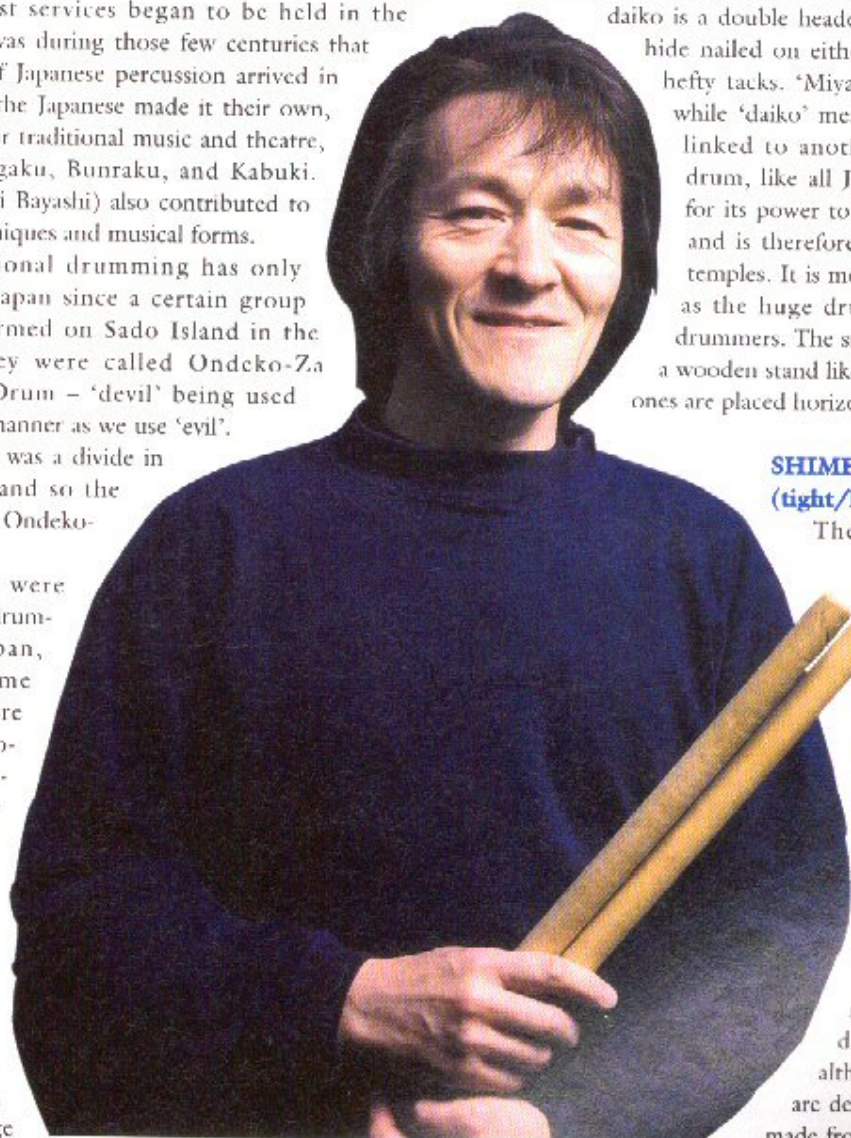
Carved from a single piece of Japanese elm, the miya-daiko can range

from a 16" by 18" shell to a staggering 6' by seven 7'. The smaller weighs a hefty 20 kilos while the larger cannot be lifted by two grown men. The cost of these drums is also gigantic - they can cost anything from £3,000 to £30,000. The miya-

daiko is a double headed drum which has thick cow hide nailed on either end with a double row of hefty tacks. 'Miya' means 'temple' or 'shrine' while 'daiko' means 'drum' ('taiko' when not linked to another qualifying word). This drum, like all Japanese drums, is renowned for its power to cleanse the air of evil spirits, and is therefore traditionally found in most temples. It is most recognisable to westerners as the huge drum seen used by the Kodo drummers. The smaller drums can be stood on a wooden stand like a floor tom whilst the larger ones are placed horizontally on hefty stands.

SHIME-DAIKO (tight/high drum)

The shime-daiko is the equivalent of the Western snare drum, but without the snares ('shime' translating into 'tight' as in skin tension). Sizes can range from 13" to 14" in diameter and 6" deep. The solid shell is made from maple or cherrywood and weighs approximately four kilos. Prices range from £2,000 upwards, depending on how good the wood is and how elaborately the shell has been decorated by an artist, although not all shime-daikos are decorated. The two heads are made from thick cow skin and laced



together with hemp rope – nowadays a mixture of cotton and nylon is used. The drum is pulled to tension just before a performance; this tensioning has even been made part of the Kodo ritual where each morning they form pairs and painstakingly pull the drums to tension, aided by the bashing of a huge stick. This drum dates back to the 8th century when it was used in the Noh theatre, and later where it was used in popular Kabuki music. The drum is supported on a small wooden stand on the floor with the player kneeling to play. Generally this drum is not used in Gaga court music or in shrines.

HIRA-DAIKO (slender framed drum)

This drum can range from 24" by 10" to 1.2 metres by 18" and can weigh anything from five to 30 kilos. The solid shell is made from Japanese elm or maple and has cow hide nailed in position on both sides. Like the *shime-daiko*, prices go from £2,000 upwards depending on the quality of the wood and the decoration.

This drum was primarily used in Gagaku, royal court music, but not in the Noh Theatre ('Gagaku' derived from 'ga' – 'gentle'/'elegant', and 'gaku' – 'music'). This drum is sometimes found in popular music and sometimes in shrines, although not as much as the *miya-daiko*. Traditionally, this is a hanging drum and is suspended from a framework by metal rings.

OKEDO (barrel drum)

This drum is a rope tensioned barrel drum and can vary in size from 16" by 18" to 6' by 7'. The smaller ones can be held around the neck on a strap and can be played with two sticks, sometimes one on each end. This technique is noted as being more Korean than it is Japanese. The shells are much lighter than the *miya-daiko*, and are not made from one piece of wood but from slats, like a barrel. The larger drums are supported almost horizontally on a stand and are then played at one end only or with a player at each end. This drum is primarily found in local folk music and popular music.

CHAPA (small cymbals)

Small brass cymbals varying in size from 7" to 10". Played in a similar manner to orchestral cymbals but with more of a time-keeping function, there are a lot of techniques for this instrument, and it is sometimes used as a solo instrument.

KANE (or *shoko* in the Japanese orchestra)

This popular time keeping device is made from 'blue bronze' and is played with a small beater, the head of which is made from water buffalo horn. The head of the beater is moved between the two opposite inside rims of the Kane and

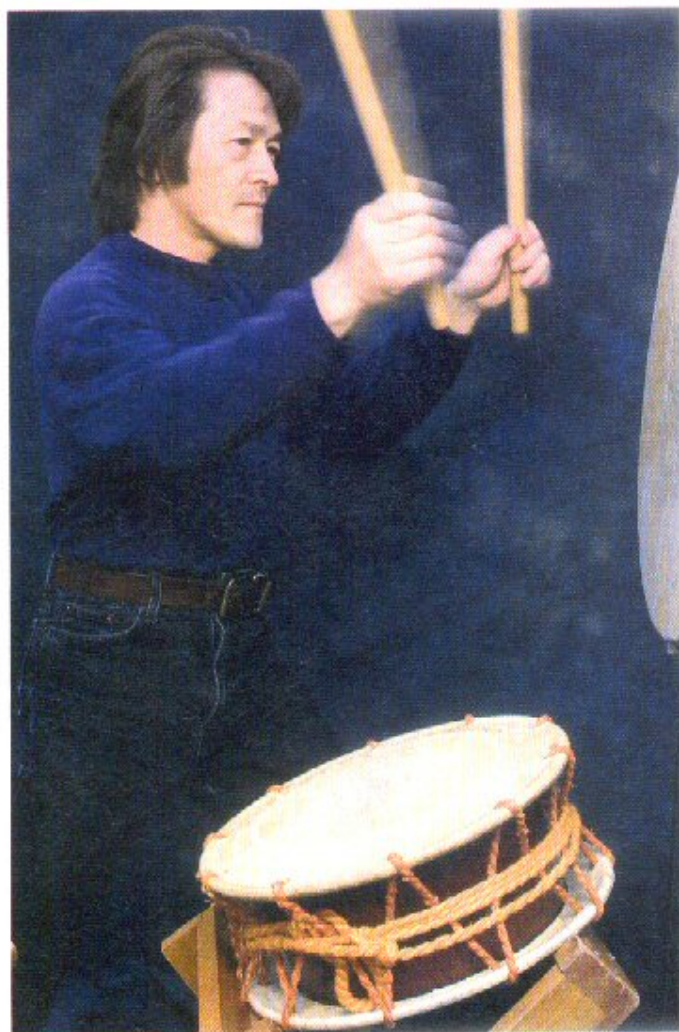
sometimes the inside surface. In the Gagaku orchestra it is supported on a decorated stand and played with two beaters.

STICKS

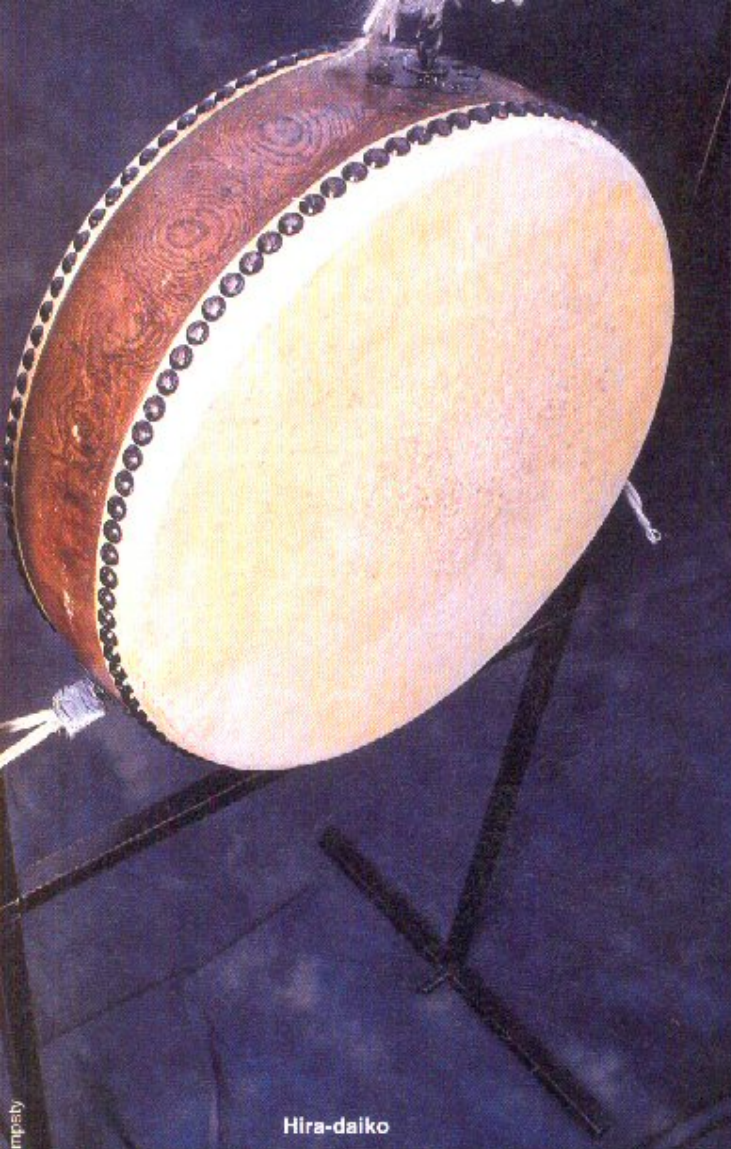
These can be an unbelievable four inches (yes, *four* inches) thick by 50cm long. Typical sticks would be made from oak and would be 40 cm long, 2.5" thick and weigh approximately 200 grams each.

One peculiar stick sometimes found in Japan is a long thin stick not dissimilar to a headmaster's cane.

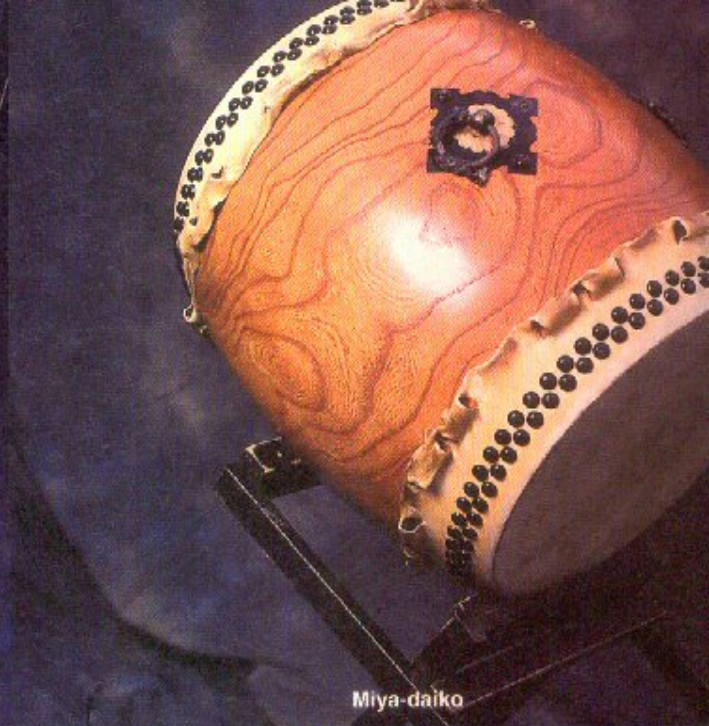
The thicker the stick the more it is held in a fist like manner. The thinner the stick the more the fulcrum is created between the thumb and first finger. Heavy playing is very important, so the fulcrum is never too dainty.



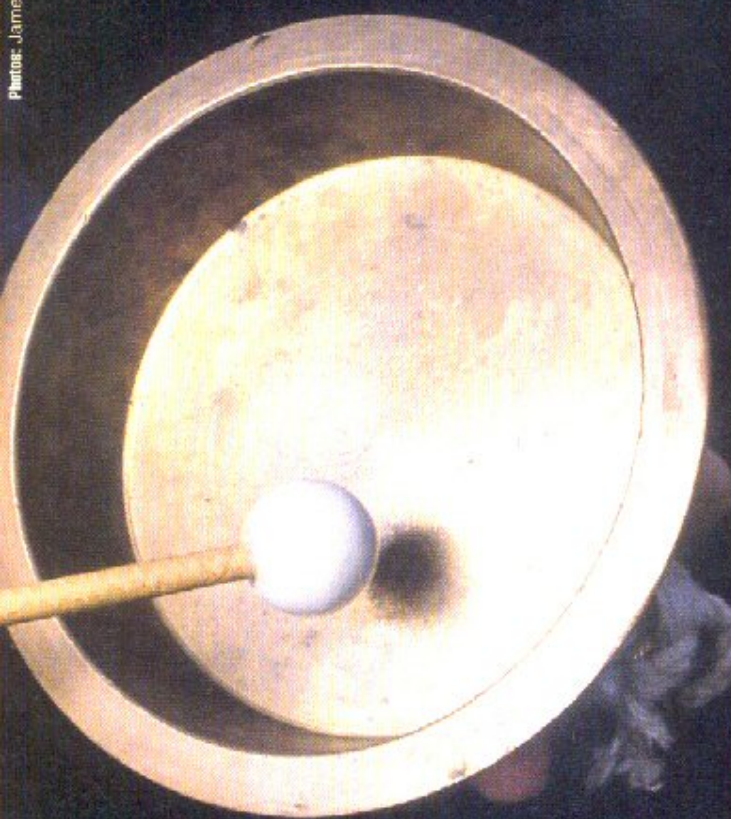
The future looks frightfully bright.



Hira-daiko



Miya-daiko



Kane



Shime-daiko