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# Pasatiempo

## PERFORMANCE

### Santa Fe's Torii Taiko sets the stage for the big drums of Drum Tao

- Devon Jackson | For The New Mexican Mar 29, 2024,
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Torii Taiko members Danny Silver, Emily Walukas and Dyan Yoshikawa. (Courtesy Jon Whitsell)

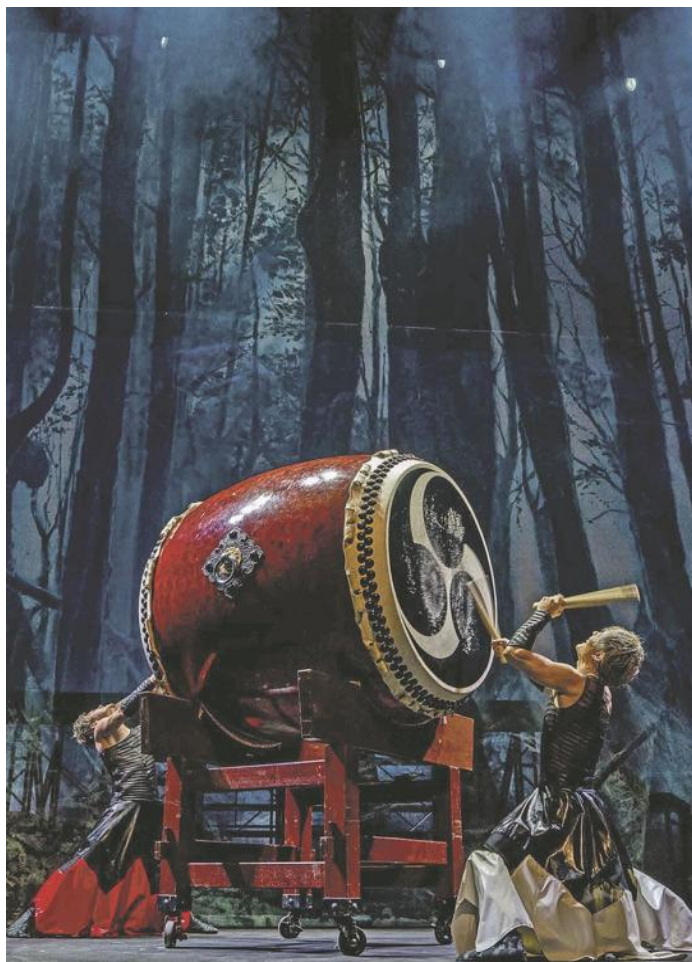
There are precious few forms of music that are as physical, as intense, and as palpable as taiko, the Japanese drums and drumming art form that goes as far back as the sixth century. Thought to have been used in ancient times as a way to simultaneously drive away pests (and evil spirits) from the rice fields while also bringing down rain (because of the thunderous sounds of the drums), it was also used for communication, in festivals and rituals, and in feudal times as a way to motivate the emperor's troops and set the pace for marches and in battle.

Taiko is an ancient and sacred form of expression, but one that has yet — probably due to its intensity and physicality — to fully cross over from its Japanese roots to Western music venues (despite the 1968 founding of the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, which contributed its unique drumming to the soundtracks of *Apocalypse Now* and *Return of the Jedi*).

That changed, sort of, when taiko reemerged from the aftereffects of World War II as a way of reengaging Japanese culture and more specifically, tapping into a need among Japanese men to have a warrior-like pursuit they could reembrace in lieu of the military. (Japan rewrote its constitution in 1947, explicitly forbidding the country from maintaining a standing army.)

That's when Daihachi Oguchi, a onetime jazz musician, received from a relative an old parchment from the Suwa Shrine with taiko musical notations on it — something Oguchi found nearly indecipherable but that he reinterpreted and remade, in 1951, into the Kumi-daiko style of taiko. Nearly overnight, the modern-day form of taiko took off, although almost exclusively in Japan, and evolved into the modern-day form of drumming that's also an intense version of music-cum-martial arts training — but as performance.

“In taiko, man becomes the sound. In taiko, you can hear the sound through your skin,” Oguchi, who died in 2008, told an Associated Press reporter several years ago.



Drum Tao (Courtesy Lensic Performing Arts Center)

## Drum Tao

- 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 2; a pre-performance presentation and demonstration by Torii Taiko begins at 6:30 p.m.
- Lensic Performing Arts Center
- 211 W. San Francisco Street
- \$45-\$69, 505-988-1234; [lensic.org](http://lensic.org)

One of Japan's preeminent taiko groups, Drum Tao, will bring its somewhat more contemporary style of taiko on Tuesday, April 2, to the Lensic Performing Arts Center. And appearing ahead of Drum Tao that evening will be Santa Fe's own taiko group, Torii Taiko. These four Santa Feans — Jon Whitsell, Dyan Yoshikawa, Emily Walukas, and Danny Silver — have been performing locally for the past two years.

While the main stage will be set up for the bigger drums of Drum Tao (part of the appeal and impressiveness of taiko is that some of the drums are almost as big as a Mini Cooper), Torii will perform in front of the apron, serving as a sort of warmup and playing three songs (one of which, “Can You Hear Me?,” was written by Yoshikawa) along with a brief lecture.

“We’re going to show people a variety of different taiko styles,” says Walukas, a STEM teacher at Santa Fe High School. “We want to point out the differences between traditional taiko versus contemporary taiko, and answer people’s questions, like, ‘What are those instruments called?’ and ‘Why are they all yelling?’”

Torii, which refers to its form of taiko as a “blend of dance, aikido, drumline, Afro-Cuban, and taiko with rock ’n’ roll influences,” has developed a chemistry that’s as tight as that of Earth, Wind & Fire or James Brown and the JBs.

“We’re all real good communicators,” says Whitsell, an audio and video engineer (and in his younger days, a drummer), who works with Brand Nature, a Santa Fe web and social media design firm. Taiko took hold of Whitsell when he came upon a Kumi-daiko group performing back in 2002, and he sought out Taos drummer Blake Himm for lessons. When one of Himm’s other taiko students moved to Albuquerque, they began meeting for lessons halfway — in Santa Fe.

As Whitsell honed his drumming, it led to a desire to share, perform, and start a group, the key to which has been its ongoing chemistry.

“The communication is almost more important than any technical skills or musical endeavors,” says Whitsell.

Walukas agrees, adding, “We’re all very kind and gentle with each other.”

The performances themselves are less gentle and more demonstrative. Drum Tao first performed in Santa Fe 10 years ago and has played The City Different and Albuquerque several times since then.

“These two cities are the only places where we have a performance every time we come to the U.S.,” says Taro Harasaki, Drum Tao’s manager and one of its performers. “Japanese audiences tend to be a bit shy, and while they certainly applaud, they don’t shout with excitement like Americans do.”



Torii Taiko members Danny Silver and Jon Whitsell. (Courtesy Jon Whitsell)

Established in Japan in 1993, Drum Tao possesses a somewhat Cirque du Soleil aesthetic and prides itself on the show’s demanding physicality. When the group started out, the performers’ daily workouts included a 5 a.m. wake-up call, a 20K run, calisthenics, martial arts training, and several hours of dancing and drumming until its members were sent to bed at 10 p.m. The performers saw it as a badge of honor that some 400 trainees couldn’t hack it; even when their founder lightened up the intensity of the regimen, the group still winnowed out another 40 hopefuls between 2003 and 2008.

Most rock 'n' roll musicians don't train as rigorously as taiko players do, and the closest analogy to taiko's musico-athleticism is a Historically Black College and University marching band or Stomp, the raucous, punk-inflected British dance-percussion group that makes music out of broomsticks, aluminum garbage cans, and barrels.

Most taiko drums ("taiko" means drum) are made from a single hollowed-out tree trunk with cowhide tightly stretched across it. The drums range in size from the typical snare drum or timpani you'd see in a jazz ensemble or classical orchestra, to what distinguishes taiko from so many other drums: the monstrous size (hence, the athleticism required to play them).

"I responded to it right away," says Yoshikawa, a massage therapist who majored in dance performance. Yoshikawa grew up in her native California hearing taiko but only started taking classes (alongside Whitsell) here in 2008, eight years after moving to Santa Fe.

"I love making noise and the visceral sense of how the drums make you feel," she says.

And what about all that yelling? Unlike the genteel performances one expects at a chamber group performance or at the opera (where yelling is more, well, operatic), the shouts and shrieks at a taiko performance are essentially elements of musical notation. Known as kakegoe and kiai, taiko players use these guttural eruptions to encourage their bandmates or as signals for a change in tempo ("Faster!" or "Transition now!")

"We are using instruments that represent Japanese culture, so there is a sense of pride in bringing our culture to many people," says Drum Tao's Harasaki. "At the same time, we are always thinking about how we can convey the coolness of Japanese culture through music using these instruments."

Silver, who teaches dance and fitness, spent 18 years at the National Dance Institute and once worked as a whitewater river guide. She responded to taiko's blend of dance, music, and rhythm. "I had such a magnetic attrac-

tion to it,” she says. “I thought to myself, ‘I’ve just gotta have that in my life.’”

Walukas first saw taiko in a video. “It’s the most therapeutic form of music I’ve ever done,” they say. “It’s dance and athleticism and rhythms and movements, all of which have to be coordinated and timed with who you’re playing with. So if you don’t have a musical background, it can be a pretty steep learning curve.”

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