

# TAIKOPROJECT



## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Art Form: Music

Style: Taiko

Culture: Japanese

## MEET THE ARTIST

TAIKOPROJECT was founded in 2000 in Los Angeles, California by a group of young, emerging taiko drummers led by Bryan Yamami and Masato Baba. The group continues to define a modern American style of taiko, blending traditional forms with an innovative and fresh aesthetic. They first made waves when they became the first American taiko group to win the prestigious Tokyo International Taiko Contest in 2005. Currently consisting of 17 members, TAIKOPROJECT has performed on the Academy Awards, the Grammy Awards, NBC's The Voice, Syfy's Face/Off, The X-Factor, Conan, Jimmy Kimmel Live, The Late Late Show with James Corden, Food Network's Iron Chef Gauntlet, the iHeartRadio Music Festival, and have performed with numerous mainstream artists such as 30 Seconds to Mars, Stevie Wonder, Usher, Alicia Keys, John Legend, and Peter Gabriel.

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

TAIKOPROJECT presents an interactive and dynamic introduction to the music, history, and art of taiko. The program features songs interspersed with detailed history on how taiko has made its way from ancient Japan to modern day America, information on drum construction and craftsmanship, and insight into the contemporary approach used to create and play taiko music today.

## PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE

Originating from Japan, taiko was first used by farmers to pray to the gods for a good harvest of their crops. The deep rumble of the drum when struck resembled the sound of thunder, so farmers would strike the drum in hopes that the thunderous sound would bring rain for their crops to grow. Taiko was also used as part of ceremonial and religious events and later on used in traditional Japanese theatre and music.



The style of group taiko drumming known as “kumi-daiko” that is often seen today has existed for around 70 years, which is considerably new, looking at the long history and evolution of taiko. In the 1950s, Daihachi Oguchi, a Japanese jazz drummer trained in western music, visited a temple in Japan and found ancient Japanese sheet music. Instead of playing the music by himself, he decided he wanted to split up the parts and play them on taiko with a group of musicians. Thus, the new style of playing taiko with an ensemble, “kumi-daiko,” was born.

Taiko first made its way to America in 1968 by a Japanese man named Seiichi Tanaka. He founded the first taiko group in America, San Francisco Taiko Dojo, that is still an active taiko group. Around the same time in Los Angeles, a group of third-generation Japanese Americans were looking for a way to express their cultural heritage, and started playing a taiko they found at their local temple. They started a group called Kinnara Taiko. From these first two groups, taiko started spreading all over the United States, and today, there are over 300 taiko groups across the country.



The members of TAIKOPROJECT did not grow up in Japan, but in the United States, listening to American music. These experiences and influences have been integrated into their work and play a large role in their music and performances. Just like any other art form, taiko continues to grow and evolve everyday.

## ABOUT THE SONGS

TAIKOPROJECT’s songs are a combination of traditional songs and styles that the group grew up playing, along with original compositions written by members of the group.

**Expanding** (2003) Composed by Bryan Yamami and Masato Baba

This song embodies one of our main goals; to expand the boundaries of taiko performance as well as the vocabulary of taiko drumming. As taiko players might tell you, most taiko songs are taught through *kuchi shoga*, vocalizing the rhythms and then playing them on the drum. Blending hip hop rhythms and movements with taiko, it has become one of our signature compositions.

**Many Sides** (2004) Arranged by Masato Baba

Sukeroku Taiko was founded in Tokyo in the late 1950s and their dynamic style of taiko came to the U.S. with Seiichi Tanaka in the late 1960s. This song is our own interpretation of this exciting style, inspired by Sukeroku Taiko’s “Yodan Uchi” and Shasta Taiko’s “Tsumujikaze.”



## **Here We Go Now!! (2006)**

Composed by Bryan Yamami & Masato Baba

This spirited composition combines traditional Japanese sling *okedo* taiko drums along with American drumline-style drums and choreography. It is an embodiment of our group—Japanese traditions reinterpreted with an American spirit and attitude.



## **Omiyage (2003)**

Composed by Shoji Kameda, arranged by  
TAIKOPROJECT

*Omiyage* refers to the traditional Japanese custom of gift-giving. During workshops and residency activities, we teach “Omiyage” and offer it to communities as our “omiyage” in thanks for bringing us out to share our show.

## **ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTS**

Taiko performances typically feature a variety of types of taiko drums and instruments. Most of our taiko drums are made by the Asano Taiko Company of Ishikawa, Japan. They were founded in 1609 and have over 400 years of taiko-making experience.



### **Chu-Daiko (Nagado-daiko)**

These are “middle-sized drums.” This term usually refers to the standard drums in an ensemble. They are primarily played in “betta” (down) or “naname” slant styles. The type of construction is called “Nagado-daiko,” referring to a solid-body barrel drum with a cowskin drumhead attached with metal tacks.

*\*Fun fact - The cost of one of TAIKOPROJECT’s Chu-Daiko is about \$12,000 US dollars.*



### **Shime-Taiko**

These are the drums in a taiko family that have the highest pitch. Their drumheads are made of cowhide wrapped and sewed onto a metal ring. Then the two drumheads are placed on either side of a wooden drum body and a metal ring and bolts or rope is used to tension the drumheads over the body.

*\*Fun fact - In major concerts, TAIKOPROJECT uses 4 shime-taiko, and their pitches are tested and utilized for different musical purposes.*



### **Okedo-Taiko**

These drums come in a variety of sizes and has cowhide heads similar to shime-taiko, but usually thinner heads and metal rings. The drum bodies are much lighter and longer, allowing them to be played in a multiple drum set, or slung over the shoulder and played while moving, called “katsugi-okedo.”

*\*Fun fact - TAIKOPROJECT has developed original choreography and movements in “katsugi-okedo” style influenced by hip hop dance, drum line, and other American choreographers.*



### Odaiko

Odaiko usually refers to a group's largest and most-revered drum. In this performance, biggest and deepest drum is about 4' in diameter and 3 1/2' deep. It is an okedo-style drum, tensioned with thick purple ropes.

*\*Fun fact - The design on the drumhead is called a "Mitsudomoe." It is a common family crest, and for us, the three swirls represent the elements that comprise taiko drums; animal (cowhide skin of the drumhead), tree/plant (the wooden body of the drum), and earth (the metal tacks used to attach the drumhead to the drum body).*



### Bachi

Drumsticks used to play taiko. Usually these come in pairs and are made out of various types of wood, from lightweight, soft woods such as hou (magnolia) and cypress (hinoki) to dense hardwoods such as kaede (maple) or kashi (white oak). Bachi can even be made out of bamboo or other natural materials.

*\*Fun fact - A more modern bachi trend is the "baseball bat" bachi, used to play the largest drums in an ensemble.*



### Shinobue

The shinobue is the Japanese bamboo side/transverse flute. They come in various sizes from #1 to #12, with the most commonly-used ones being #6, #7, and #8. There are seven finger holes that are played open or closed to change the notes and one embouchure hole that is blown across.

*\*Fun fact - The shinobue was the first melodic instrument used in TAIKOPROJECT. We have since added vocals, koto (13-stringed zither), and marimba*



**Other Instruments** (High-hat, Cymbals, Woodblocks, Marimba)  
TAIKOPROJECT performances incorporate non-traditional musical instruments that provide color and texture to our various songs. In this performance, you can see Western instruments such as high-hat and cymbals, percussive components you might normally see with a standard drum set, as well as wood-blocks, a common Western percussion instrument. In "Kidou," you can also see and hear a custom-made wooden marimba of Zimbabwean design.

*\*Fun fact - Our marimba was custom-made to fit in with the design of our taiko instruments and was made in Portland, Oregon by marimba-maker Carl Dean.*

## **ABOUT THE COSTUMES**

TAIKOPROJECT's costumes were custom-designed and constructed by accredited kimono master and stylist Sueko Oshimoto, utilizing high-quality, finely-crafted kimono materials. The costumes are based in traditional Japanese designs, but with a modern, innovative aesthetic.



### **Haragake**

This top part of our costume is based on the traditional Japanese apron typically used for festivals.

### **Happi Coat**

These coats are based on festival coats, but using heavier, more visually stunning fabrics and sections of embroidery. In order to play more freely, we use tasuki, a long piece of fabric, to tie back the sleeves of our happi coats.

### **Tekkou (and other arm accessories)**

Tekkou are traditional wristbands, used to keep our wrists warm and to keep sweat from getting onto our hands. We have expanded these arm accessories with a modern edge, creating decorative gauntlets, arm sleeves, and bicep bands for variety and individual preference.

### **Hakama (Pants)**

Our pants are based on traditional “hakama” formal pants, but allow for movement, stances, and active choreography. Normally “hakama” pants are baggy all the way to the floor. If we wore them for our performances, we would trip on them in our more active songs.

### **Tabi**

Tabi are traditional Japanese footwear that are flexible like socks, but have rubber soles like shoes. They are used by Japanese roofworkers and fisherman due to their ability to provide a strong grip on slippery surfaces.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

The sound of taiko is often used to recreate sounds heard in nature such as thunder and rain. What are some other instruments that you can think of that are often used to recreate or imitate other sounds?

What are some differences you see between taiko and a drum you might see and hear in Western music?

What were the different types of taiko that were demonstrated? Which one was your favorite and why?

What was your favorite part of the performance? What about this part that stood out to you?

## **FRAMEWORK FOCUS: SCIENCE**

Have students learn about natural materials similar to taiko construction materials. To learn about various types of wood, students will need to bring in one wooden item from home and tap them to hear the different sounds they make based on the hardness or thickness of the wooden item. A rawhide chew or toy can be used to demonstrate how taiko drumheads are stretched. When taiko drumheads are stretched over the drum body, the cowhide heads are soaked in water overnight in order to make them soft and pliable. Then once they are stretched, they are tacked and left to dry. Once dry, they are hard again. This process shows the science of biological materials and effects of water on them.

## **ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE**

Taiko is an important aspect of Japanese culture that has been passed down from ancient times. Can you think of something in your culture's history that has been passed down from your ancestors? Make a list, then share and discuss with your fellow classmates.

Taiko come in all shapes and sizes, and each can be played in various ways. Do you remember all of the different types of taiko that the performers introduced? Draw a picture of the different drums you saw during the performance.

Compose a simple 4-beat drum pattern using a combination of Don, Do-Ko, dokodoko, Tsu, Tsu-Ku, Ka, and Ka-Ra (the words used for the basic sounds that can be played on a taiko). Say the pattern out loud and have your fellow classmates imitate you by clapping the pattern. Loud claps should be used for a 'Don' or 'DoKo'. Soft claps should be used for a 'TsuKu'. Snap your fingers (or stomp your feet if you can't snap your fingers) for a "Ka' or 'KaRa'. Try to play the pattern to a constant tempo (if you have access to a metronome, this would be the best tool to keep a steady tempo).

## **SUGGESTED RESOURCES**

“The Way of Taiko” by Heidi Varian

“Taiko Boom” by Shawn Bender

“Jasmine Toguchi, Drummer Girl” by Debbi Michiko Florence (fiction)