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Japanese drumming mesmerizes Hopedale students

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HOPEDALE -- Elizabeth Bliss wasn't quite sure what to expect as she filed into the school gymnasium yesterday for a special assembly.

"I heard it was going to be something about drums," the fourth-grader said. "It might be loud but I'm used to noise because I always scream at my two brothers."

And loud it was. The rhythm created by the cowhide topped wine-barrel drums called "taiko" filled the gymnasium and mesmerized students.

The Japanese drum performance was given by members of Odaiko New England. "Odaiko" specifically means big drum, which the group uses in some performances.

The Boston-based nonprofit performing arts group visited Hopedale Elementary School to expose students to Japanese culture and a form of drumming that has existed in Japan for well over 1,100 years.

"I was at the marathon in Hartford and saw this group performing there and I was just amazed at how great they were. I brought the idea to the school's Parents Advisory Council on Education and with their support and grant money from the Hopedale Cultural Council we were able to bring them here," said Robyn York, enrichment committee member and mother of two Hopedale Elementary students.

In addition to drumming, the performance tells a story that's acted out by members of the organization. Yesterday three Odaiko New England performers dressed in full Japanese costume, taught and entertained students with two separate performances.

"All my life I had never (seen) a woman play a drum until I saw an Odaiko performance in the '80s in New York. I joined the group and stayed with them for 10 years. I came to Boston and decided to start an Odaiko (group) here. I started with nothing but a dream and today we're 12 years old and have 10 members and we perform all over New England," said Elaine Fong, Odaiko New England founder.

Mark Rooney participated in both performances yesterday and had five other



An Odaiko New England drummer prepares to strike a tradition Japanese drum. (Mike Springer photo)

performances scheduled at other schools this week. The drummer said he's half Japanese and loves being able to share the drumming technique and promote diversity.

"I love performing for kids. This is a good cultural experience for them," he said. Fong said certain types of rhythms can alter brain waves, helping listeners to reach an alpha state -- or deep state of meditation.

"Many cultures use drums because rhythm is very powerful and almost spiritual," Fong said.

The gym was alive with drumming rhythm and students were also taught a few Japanese words. As Fong read, one of her performers acted out the story of a woman who traveled all over Japan before finding a village where drumming existed.

Kids really seemed to take to the unusual form of music. Bliss said it was much louder than she expected but she really enjoyed seeing the performance.

"I think it's so important to expose students to a variety of cultures and arts and I'm so happy that everyone pulled together to bring this show to the school. It wasn't easy squeezing it in between recess, class time, and the MCAS but we did it," said York.

Odaiko New England is Boston-based but holds rehearsals and workshops in Woburn. Fong said they visit about 50 schools per year and are also available for a variety of festivals and corporate gatherings.

"People who do it view Odaiko as a way for people to give back to the Asian community," Fong said.