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Drummers a crowd-pleaser in Hebron

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HEBRON — Visitors to the Hebron Common Sunday afternoon were treated to a unique and powerful display of Japanese taiko drumming by the Boston-based group Odaiko New England.

Seven members of the group made the trip to Hebron, including its assistant director, Mark H. Rooney. The group's founder, Elaine Fong, was the lone member unable to make the trip.



Before the show, Rooney explained that the kind of drums being used in the show have been made for a couple of thousand years — but in Japan, he explained, traditionally only one or two drummers at a time would be playing. He added that the style called Kumi Daiko — where multiple drummers play together at once like Odaiko New England does — has only been around for about 60 years.

Rooney confirmed that Hebron was further away than most of Odaiko New England's other venues, which include schools, festivals, and other gatherings. The group also presents taiko drumming workshops in the Boston area for beginners and others. Rooney reports that, regionally, there are three or four other taiko groups in Massachusetts, one in Burlington, Vt., and one in Connecticut.

Taiko drumming has also received some exposure at the national level. Some drummers are featured in a recent Mitsubishi commercial and clips of it can be seen occasionally in movies. The best-known taiko band worldwide is Japan's Kodo (<http://www.kodo.or.jp/>), which tours North America and Europe on a fairly steady basis and which has played at least twice at Boston's Symphony Hall in recent years.

Rooney noted that he travels to Japan yearly, including Sado Island, home of the Kodo drumming group. There he does volunteer work for the group's annual Earth Celebration, held each August. Later in the show he mentioned that approximately 1,000 people in America are taiko drummers, many of them women and people of all races and ethnicities.

For her part, the co-director of the Hebron Gazebo series, Jane Ramsay, was pleased with the turnout, which appeared to be more than 250 people, and she was equally pleased with the opportunity to help bring such a unique show to town. Ramsay noted that Odaiko New England played last year at Laconia's Diversity Day

event. Impressed with their performance, she proceeded to seek them out for this summer's Hebron Gazebo series.

"We try to make it different," said Ramsay, "We never have the same group two years in a row."

The drummers performed an athletic and talented set that lasted for a little more than an hour, playing a mix of traditional Japanese and more recent taiko compositions with names such as "Crashing Waves" and "Festival." The various drums ranged in size from a palm-sized metal one to four medium-sized wooden ones to an extra deep bass drum that was approximately two feet across and was suspended from a wooden rack. The group also used cymbals with some dance and even a little Japanese singing.

Rooney told the audience during the show that in ancient Japan, village borders would be set by how far away a drum could be heard playing in the center of town. By playing extra loud, he joked, the group would be expanding Hebron's borders somewhat that day.

At one point, the group also brought a few audience members up to try their hand at playing a basic Taiko rhythm. Two small children played along with the group afterward on the wooden Hebron gazebo sign with plastic silverware.

At the end of the show, the audience gave the group a standing ovation and many went up to meet them and to check out their equipment.

The next Hebron Gazebo concert is scheduled for Sunday, Aug. 7, at 5 p.m. when Gary Sredzienski and the Serfs, a band that plays '60s-style surf rock, will be playing.

To learn more about Odaiko New England and taiko drumming, visit their Web site at <http://www.onetaiko.net/>.

For more information on the Hebron Gazebo Series, call 744-5095 or 744-3335.

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