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Oh, say can you cheer to a different drummer?

Berklee professor incorporates Japanese taiko, jazz for national anthem at Sox game

By John C. Drake, Globe Staff | April 19, 2007

You've probably never heard "The Star-Spangled Banner" performed like this before.

As a tribute to new Red Sox pitching ace Daisuke Matsuzaka, compatriot and Berklee College of Music professor Tiger Okoshi has arranged a version of the national anthem that melds jazz trumpet stylings with traditional Japanese taiko drumming.

The Needham resident will lead a special ensemble of Berklee musicians and local drummers as they perform the arrangement at Fenway Park before tomorrow night's game against the Yankees.

The arrangement opens with a single taiko drummer beating out a driving rhythm that initially sounds nothing like the national anthem. The drummer is then joined by a trumpet soloist playing the familiar melody accompanying "Oh, say can you see."

Soon, a booming chorus of taiko drums is providing a thick backdrop for the soaring riffs of some of Berklee's top jazz trumpet and trombone players.

And yes, you can sing along.

"The national anthem's got to have that really majestic sound, and it has to have that dignity," said Okoshi, an accomplished jazz trumpet player who has released several instrumental albums. "I didn't want to mess up anything with the melody. I know people want to sing, so I didn't want to change that.

"I felt like with the Japanese drums I respected the Japanese tradition as well, so Japanese people will listen to this and say this is a traditional Japanese beat."

Mike Olano, a public affairs assistant for the Red Sox, said an official from Jazz Boston called the



team, suggesting a jazzy version of the national anthem at Fenway Park would be a good way to kick off Jazz Week in the city, which starts Saturday.

Charles Steinberg, executive vice president of the Red Sox, said the performance represented a nod to the growing diversity of the team's fan base.

"When you have a population as diverse as Boston's, as diverse as New England's, whatever language is spoken, whether it's English, Spanish, Japanese, Cambodian, you name it, we want to take measures to demonstrate that you're welcome at Fenway," Steinberg said.

When the Red Sox approached Okoshi with the idea of performing the national anthem, he immediately thought of including taiko drummers. The ancient style of drumming has been popularized by its use in Japanese ceremonies and is easily recognized by the dramatic arm movements of the performers.

Okoshi said he had seen Odaiko New England, which performs a contemporary style of taiko

drumming, at previous events, so he commissioned them to participate.

He said he had little trouble crafting the arrangement, once he realized how surprisingly well the melody of the national anthem meshed with taiko drumming.

At a recording session Friday on Berklee's campus, the ensemble grew larger than expected as word spread about Okoshi's endeavor.

"Some of the really good trumpet players showed up and said, 'Tiger, I heard about what you're doing, and if you need one more trumpet player, I'd love to do it,'" Okoshi said.

For some, the thrill of performing at Fenway Park -- particularly a Yankee date -- was the motivator. "I canceled another gig to do it," said Sam Dechenne, 22, one of Okoshi's students at Berklee. "I'm a huge baseball fan, a huge Red Sox fan ever since I was a little kid."

This is not the first time Okoshi has played for the Red Sox.

He said that about 20 years ago, he recorded a Red Sox theme song that was played on television at the start of local game broadcasts. "I'm a big fan of baseball," he said.

Locally, Okoshi has performed in concerts to raise money for Needham's Pollard Middle School and the high school. Okoshi said his three sons graduated from Needham schools.

Okoshi, 57, was born in Japan as Toru Okoshi in 1950 (the year of the tiger and the source of his American nickname). He came to the United States after graduating college in 1972 for his honeymoon, and decided to stay put. A one-hour trumpet lesson at Berklee during the trip sealed his desire to stay in the Boston area.

But he has maintained a connection to Japan, traveling there often. He's also kept up with Japanese baseball and knew about the Matsuzaka phenomenon before the pitcher became Dice-K in Boston.

Okoshi produced an album celebrating the Hanshin Tigers professional baseball team as a fund-raiser for victims of a 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan. He said the album is still sold at games.

Okoshi said that while some people had assumed he was going to be playing the Japanese national anthem tomorrow, that was never the idea.

"I am Japanese, but I've lived here for 35 years," he said. "I very much respect the culture."

The performers are hoping they'll get to meet Matsuzaka in return for the musical tribute.

"I'm kind of bummed out that he's not pitching on Friday," Dechenne said. Still, he said, "It's the coolest gig I've ever had and one of the coolest I'll ever have."

John C. Drake can be reached at 508-820-4229. ■

