

## Calista Tait joins in taiko drumming

By Sheilarae Lau  
Mon Dec 01, 2008, 10:44 AM EST

Somerville - Calista Tait – or Cat as she's known among friends – has a long-standing passion for electronics and gadgetry. Her Somerville home brims with assorted gaming systems, power tools and electric musical instruments. Tait's technophilia may very well be genetic; her parents ran an electronics business.

Yet Tait spends much of her time these days with one of world's most primitive instruments – a drum. And with nary a power cord nor amp in sight.

An amp would be superfluous. Tait is a taiko drummer, and her barrel-sized drum is loud. In ancient Japan, the thunderous beat of the taiko was heard across battlefields, rallying warriors and intimidating enemies. The deeply resonating sound of a taiko defined village borders and stood in for the voices of gods in Shinto and Buddhist rituals. In modern Japan, taiko is more likely to be the festive soundtrack of celebration.

At a recent rehearsal with Odaiko New England, a taiko group based in Woburn, Tait and 18 fellow drummers begin with a grueling half-hour warm up that includes 160 stomach crunches, an assortment of push-ups, and hand exercises that resemble flicking water from fingertips while revving an invisible motorcycle. The assembled taiko players are sweltering before ever hitting a drum.

Tait, absently twirling her hefty, inch-thick drumsticks called bachi, moves to a drum for the group's next phase of practice called oroshi. Players will drill progressively complex drumming patterns, slowly at first and then with increasing speed, for another 30 minutes or more. Finally, muscles aching, Tait is ready to play.

Tait has always had an affinity for Japanese culture, particularly for its duality of ancient and modern aesthetics. On a visit to Japan, Tait enjoyed the high-tech diversions of Akihabara Electric Town, a hotspot for electronics, gaming and anime, as well as the rich assemblage of history and culture at Japan's Drum Museum. It was here at the Drum Museum that Tait and her fellow travelers experienced what modern-day taiko is all about.

"We played the drums," Tait recalls. "We jammed together for a long time. It was amazing." What Tait experienced is known as kumi-daiko, or ensemble drumming, and it is the very essence of contemporary taiko. Tait returned to the United States with renewed admiration for this art form and resolved to become a part of it.

Tait enrolled in Odaiko New England's popular taiko classes in June of 2004. "Cat is in many ways an ideal student," according to Artistic Director Mark Hideyuki Rooney. "She's very dedicated, not just in learning the music, but every aspect of taiko."

Today, as a performing member, Tait exemplifies the artful melding of ancient tradition with modern aesthetics. Odaiko New England incorporates diverse historical and cultural influences in its rhythmic style as well. One of the pieces Tait is rehearsing is titled Kashmir. Written by Rooney, the piece riffs on the Led Zeppelin song of the same name. Another audience favorite, Yui, mixes a rousing latin rhythm with the stirring pulse of taiko.

A glance at Odaiko New England's full membership displays the broad range of cultures, ages and races drawn to taiko. Tait, a Canadian citizen living in the Unites States and playing a traditional Japanese taiko drum, personifies the group's mission to share taiko with diverse communities. As does Rooney, a Scottish-Japanese American who performs taiko all over the world.

Musically, Tait fits right in with this non-traditional fusion of styles. She's a former member of psychedelic-Celtic-folk-punk-rock band Mazer Rackham. Interspersed among the gaming consoles and power tools at home sit an eclectic assemblage of musical instruments. A big taiko drum shares the space with an electric cello, a marble Chinese flute, bag-pipes, a singing bowl and dozens more exotic musical instruments and accessories.

Tait is a valued member of the ensemble showcased by Odaiko New England. "She's able to help people, to influence people," says Rooney. "She has a great willingness to show by example, throwing herself into the music she plays." Reciprocally, Tait's been able to sharpen her own taiko skills through mindful awareness of fellow drummers.

At the dojo, Tait is playing a shime – a small tied drum – alongside long-time friend Joy Nicholson. After getting some feedback from Rooney, the women decide to turn their drums to face each other; it's important that they synchronize their fluid movements. Drumming as one with Nicholson and the other drummers is the joy of kumi-daiko. Many Odaiko New England members have been drumming together for years, and the group has a strong sense of community. "I like everybody in Odaiko New England," says Tait. "There's something about taiko that seems to attract cool and amazing people."

"Taiko for me is not just about the drumming. It's been a lot about who I am as a person and how I approach life," she continues. "It's full of challenges without consequences. It's helped me learn how to enjoy something for the now of it, from being goal oriented to being process oriented."

And performance, Tait says, is all about the process. "It's just doing what you're doing and having a great time and imparting it to the audience. The goal is not to execute the song, but to make an audience happy." When asked about her future as a taiko player, Tait demurs. "I try not to think about that. It's the goal vs. process thing. But I'd love to take it as far as it goes."

Tait is performing next in Odaiko New England's Winter Extravaganza concert on Saturday, December 13th. The concert will feature Odaiko New England members plus their student groups from around the region. The concert, which will be followed by a reception, begins at 7:00 pm at the ACAS Center in downtown Woburn. For more information, go to [onetaiko.org](http://onetaiko.org) or call 781-316-1948.



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