

The Circle of ONE: Odaiko New England

Premier taiko group celebrates 15 years

By **CONNIE PHILLIPS**
Epoch Times Staff

WOBURN, Mass.—“If you have a heartbeat, you have rhythm,” says Odaiko New England’s artistic director Mark H. Rooney.

His statement clearly explains people’s basic attraction to drums throughout history. And it’s one of the reasons why Japanese-style drum group Odaiko New England has been so popular throughout the region, attracting audiences and students for the past 15 years.

“Taiko is really accessible to anyone. This idea of using your entire body and energetically connecting to an instrument that way is a very immediate kind of reaction,” says Mark. “The idea of drumming itself is very rudimentary.”

Odaiko New England—referred to by the acronym ONE—is the largest taiko group in southern New England and was founded in 1994. The nonprofit organization based out of Woburn, Mass., not only has an ensemble group consisting of five core professionals but also embraces a large number of community members who volunteer to play at festivals, give workshops, and help with various tasks. There are also classes for recreational players and those wanting to learn more about taiko style.

Mark became interested in taiko drumming when he first saw it. The drums personally speak to his roots, he explains, as his mother is Japanese. Although he is a musician formally trained in Western music, taiko was his first experience with percussion. Since then, he’s studied and performed extensively with renowned musicians as well as traditional and nontraditional taiko groups throughout Japan, Europe, and the United States.

Mark joined Odaiko New England in 1998 and has been a full-time staff member since 2004. Last year he became artistic director, taking over the position from founding member Elaine Fong, who is on the board of directors. Mark is also the principal instructor.

Beginner drummer Melissa Ferris, ONE’s new director of operations, first heard taiko at a friend’s wedding. Her friend happens to be Chris Powell, board president of Odaiko New England, and he played with the ensemble on stage as part of his own wedding. She was immediately hooked and started taking lessons with Mark about a month ago.

“I found that most people who



DRUMMING AS ONE: Artistic Director Mark H. Rooney leads Odaiko New England members with Beth Lowe on cello, guest artist Yael Bat-Shimon on violin, and David Wiggins on vocals during a rehearsal for the group’s upcoming anniversary concert. SCOTT PHILLIPS/THE EPOCH TIMES

hear Odaiko New England want to hear more and they want to come back and do it, and that was what sold me to work for Odaiko New England. You can feel the passion,” she says.

“We play as one. Our name is Odaiko New England—as an acronym it’s spelled O-N-E, and we call ourselves ONE. We’re playing as one, together. I’m hitting my drum at the same time as the person next to me, as the same time as the person next to them. You’re working together; you’ve got an instant connection with everyone in that circle. It’s an amazing experience—your mind, your body, everything is connected into one.”

The Art of the Drum

“Taiko” is the Japanese word for drum (called “wadaiko” in Japan) but is also used in America to describe the art form of Japanese-style ensemble drumming or “kumidaiko.” Traditionally, taiko were used in a functional capacity to accompany events such as ceremonies, dances, and festivals. The drums were also historically used in battles to set the pace for troops and communicate orders.

The concept of ensemble playing, however, is a unique and relatively recent development in Japan that started almost 60 years ago when Japanese jazz drummer Daihachi Oguchi performed a traditional piece at a festival. He incorporated multiple taiko of different sizes in his arrangement of the piece. His idea caught on, and taiko ensembles began springing

up around Japan.

In any group, the largest drum is the “odaiko.” Mark explains that in Japan, the odaiko could be as big as 7 or 8 feet across. The odaiko is traditionally made from one piece of wood, hollowed out from an ancient tree trunk. A large slab could yield an odaiko as well as several drums of different sizes.

In North America, however, the tradition for drummers to build their own instruments began about 40 years ago when the first taiko groups formed in California. Because the Japanese taiko were so expensive due to the craftsmanship involved, with a small one running around \$5,000, the Californians began making their own out of what they had available—wooden wine barrels.

ONE follows the same American tradition and uses drums that members have crafted. It’s been a couple of years since Mark himself made a drum, since he’s so busy these days, and said it would probably take him about six weeks to finish one.

Celebrating 15 Years

The project he and other members of ONE are currently focusing their efforts on is the upcoming anniversary concert titled “reVISION.” It will include new pieces composed specifically for the show and incorporate dance, voice, violin, and cello performed by guest artists—a new direction for the group’s performances.

Odaiko New England combines the traditional rhythms, specific

movements, and styles of Japanese festival music with contemporary elements to “create a constantly evolving and dynamic art form,” as it says on the group’s Web site.

“The art form for taiko is very visual as well as musical,” says Mark. “It’s not just about hearing the rhythms, but it is just as much about seeing it played and performed. This is the hallmark for taiko, what makes it really different than a lot of other traditions. Some people describe it almost like a dance.”

All of ONE’s performances are contemporary originals, many of which were composed and choreographed by Mark himself. He says that a lot of the motions, movements, and rhythms are contemporary but based on traditional forms and rhythms.

‘Holistically Beneficial’

Members of ONE spend a lot of time teaching in schools, giving workshops, and performing all over New England with the mission of exposing people to Asian culture and educating them about the art form of taiko. In 2007 alone, the group was involved in over 200 outreach activities. Learning taiko is also beneficial in that it promotes good teamwork, emphasizing respect and cooperation to create one sound.

Mark uses the term “holistically beneficial,” to describe taiko. Besides helping to promote multiculturalism, playing taiko is good exercise—and fun at the same time. “It’s full-body drum-



HAPPI: Drummers (L-R) Cat Tait, Karen Young, and Kate Jurow rehearse in new happi coats they will wear for their 15th anniversary performance. A happi coat is a short kimono-style jacket traditionally worn in Japanese festivals. SCOTT PHILLIPS/THE EPOCH TIMES



PRACTICE: (L-R) Joy Nicholson, Diane Sweet, Tanya Downing, and Greg Richards work on learning taiko rhythms. SCOTT PHILLIPS/THE EPOCH TIMES

ming,” he says. Before beginning, players take time to stretch and do warm-up exercises. Professional taiko performers work on building stamina, strength, coordination, and flexibility.

In addition, taiko drumming teaches how to focus. Mark teaches according to traditional methodology—which is an oral style of teaching. Students learn to vocalize rhythms alongside playing them. This practice helps them internalize and “absorb” the rhythms—they embody a rhythm rather than just re-create it, he says. The traditional way of learning taiko is very different from the way music is learned in the West and makes a difference in the way people play and understand the drums.

“I’m a beginner. I don’t have much rhythm; I don’t have a lot of coordination,” says Melissa Ferris about participating in a recent community workshop. “But the way Mark teaches and the way it’s presented, [I say] ‘Okay, I can do

this,’ and you build up from there.”

Preserving fundamental cultural traditions and adapting them for a contemporary setting is the key to Odaiko New England’s success in creating a unique and universal message that appeals to all cultures and age groups. The group “seeks to revitalize the importance of culture and music” and create harmony in the community through taiko.

Whether you see them in performance, during practice, or in the classroom, it is evident from every aspect—from building instruments to singing rhythms, to imbuing viewers with their energy and passion—that members of ONE truly work together to create a circle of one.

Odaiko New England’s reVISION concert to celebrate the group’s 15th anniversary will be held on May 30 and 31 in Arlington, Mass., at the Arlington Regent Theatre. For more information, visit onetaiko.org.

The Antidote—Classic Poetry for Modern Life

A Reading of ‘The Arrow and the Song’ by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

By **CHRISTOPHER NIELD**

The Arrow and the Song

*I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.*

*I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?*

*Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.*

We can never predict the power of our actions. The word said, the deed done, disappear into the past, but often, years later, we can be astounded to learn of their impact. A friend explodes with rage over an imagined slight; a stranger thanks us for a favor we’d forgotten.

In this poem, Longfellow compares two forms of action, represented by an arrow and a song. The speaker shoots an arrow into the air and it falls to earth, out of sight. What could it symbolize?

As a weapon, with the capacity to cut and kill, it could represent our destructive emotions and behavior. We say a bad word, we spread a rumor, we lie. Our hatred may fly out of sight, but who’s to



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say there’s no lasting damage?

In the second stanza, the speaker breathes a song “into the air.” A song suggests something carefree

and benign. Formless and free, it is the opposite of the arrow, but its destination is similarly unknown.

Does it represent our efforts to

celebrate life rather than to damn it? To look for the good in people rather than to condemn them for their flaws? But if we do someone

then its unbroken shaft slicing into the oak may indicate that the hatred of the past remains as sharp as ever.

The damage is done, and cannot be undone. But the song has grown within the heart of a friend. The sharing of simple joy has flourished. Significantly the song, like the arrow, exists unbroken.

It is known from beginning to end. This touches on the role of memory in the transmission of poetry; and, indeed, what is the literary canon other than what people have chosen to remember?

In a sense, this poem is about karma. It is a lesson to be aware of our moral choices and their consequences, because on some level they are always present, waiting to be discovered. It is also about the difference between our practical efforts to make a mark on the world, which often come to naught, and the peculiar power of art to shape reality in slow time.

As the final phrase suggests, art can create friendship among perfect strangers: It provides us with a common language through which we can come to know each other in our most distinctive selves.

Take this column. Having been plucked from an anthology, the poem now lands on the page of the newspaper and the Web site, to breathe into the mind of each reader. Yet who are you? I have no idea. Yet if we were to meet, Longfellow’s poem would exist as our point of contact, our introduction and our bond.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) was an American poet most famous for “The Song of Hiawatha.”

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