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Taiko performers wow Chelmsford audience

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Chelmsford — During wartime in ancient Japan, only one sound could penetrate the pounding of horses' hooves, the clang of swords and the cries of men to deliver secret commands to embattled samurai. Only one sound could sustain a lonely, exiled warrior and carry across the sea to let his grieving family know he was alive.

That sound, described by Odaiko New England director Juni Kobayashi, was heard in the Chelmsford Senior Center Wednesday, Aug. 3 during one of MacKay Library's final World Wide Wednesday performances. For an hour and a half, Odaiko's 12 taiko performers mesmerized an audience of almost 200 with their colorful robes, sashes and headbands, their shouts and motions - and of course, their drumming.

After greeting the audience with a cheerful "Kombawa!" ("Good evening!" in Japanese), Kobayashi explained "taiko" means "drum," but the art of Japanese drumming is more than simple percussion. Winding woodwind melodies and impassioned vocalizations embellish the sonorous tones. The players, circling their instruments and flourishing their sticks, often appear to be dancing as much as drumming.

Odaiko members were no exception as they performed for their Chelmsford audience. Their first piece mimicked a rushing river, with the powerful, unrelenting drumbeat rising and falling, speeding up and slowing down like moving water. The players dropped into crouches as if about to take off running and let out harsh cries that added to the momentum.

The second piece began with a long note blown through a shell like a summons, and portrayed a dragon god descending to Earth to deliver three blessings. The performers rose from kneeling positions and launched into an upbeat, swinging rhythm with smiles and shouts, hitting the wooden rims of their drums and striking their sticks together for a lighter sound. They ended with their sticks raised and their faces turned upward. Taiko often accompanies Buddhist and Shinto rituals and Japanese festivals, Kobayashi told the audience, and the compositions often have a reverent or celebratory flavor.

In the third piece, members ran onstage laughing and chattering before dividing into two groups and engaging in what looked like a sparring match - members played on each other's drums and snatched their sticks back, or handed a repeating riff back and forth with playful, challenging stares. The performance contrasted with the next, a solo piece composed by Kobayashi, which began meditatively in front of a gong but quickly expanded into the equivalent of an ensemble piece, with Kobayashi playing all the parts. The audience answered her performance with a standing ovation.

Each piece left the group members perspiring and breathing hard - especially after one drum was mounted on a tall stand, requiring performer Calista Tait to play with her arms above her head and swing her sticks like axes. The art is one of stamina and dedication, Kobayashi said, referring to the story of the exiled samurai.

"He played from sunup to sundown," Kobayashi said. "When he got tired, he tied the sticks to his hands with twine so he could keep playing."

But the many children in the audience, warned about the loud music beforehand, didn't seem intimidated. After the show they flocked to the front of the auditorium to try out the giant drums for themselves.

Odaiko New England began drumming in 1994 on old taped-up tires and borrowed taiko in a Brookline church basement. Later they began making their own taiko, teaching others how to play, and performing concerts other towns. Now based in the Woburn ACAS center, Odaiko has 17 performing members and still makes some of its own taiko from California oak wine barrels.

Traditional taiko are normally made from a single piece of wood taken from an enormous tree, but much about Odaiko breaks from tradition, as Kobayashi explained. Besides putting their own spin on basic taiko compositions, she said, the group performs not for religious ceremonies, festivals or war marches, but for a different reason than players of old.

"We play for entertainment," Kobayashi said. "This is a new form in taiko."

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