

going out

Women march to a taiko beat

MUSIC

Tamara Bernstein

On a recent morning in the small gymnasium of an elementary school in Toronto, young children were shrieking with fear and delight as a *shishi* — a dragon-like “monster” said to be half-lion and half-deer — ran among them. Moments later, two smiling young women emerged from under the cloth “body” and fearsome red mask, seized their drumsticks and resumed a concert of *taiko*, Japan’s viscerally powerful traditional drumming, presented by members of the Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble (KNE).

During a question period afterward, the youngest children fixate on the *shishi*: Was it real? The ensemble’s leader, Kiyoshi Nagata repeatedly and patiently assures them that the *shishi* is a mythological creature that in Japan brings good luck and purifies evil.

There’s an irony here, though the children are unaware of it: As *taiko* drummers, the two women who played the *shishi* — Aki Takahashi and Heidi Chan — would have qualified as fantastical, imaginary crea-



tures themselves, until recently.

“*Taiko* for women is really contemporary,” Takahashi said in a post-concert interview. In the rituals of Shintoism, the pre-Buddhist, animist religion of Japan, “only one or two persons in each village — usually old men — will play the *taiko*.” (*Taiko* simply means “drum” in Japanese; nowadays, it also refers to

the music performed by *taiko* ensembles.) The *taiko* player,” Takahashi continued, “has to be someone really special. They represent the village and community, to communicate with the god. So women are not allowed to touch or play the drums, which are so spiritual and so holy that you can’t even take it to make music for fun.”

Taiko drums, played by men and boys, are still a central part of *Bon*, the annual autumn festival that celebrates the harvest and honours the dead in Japan, Takahashi said. But in recent decades, as *taiko* has taken root in the West, and moved into secular realms of hobbies, exercise and the concert stage, women have not only been admitted into the



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The Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble breaks from tradition in welcoming women into a ritual usually reserved for older men.

ranks: In North America, it has become a girl-power thing.

Women form the majority of members in most *taiko* groups in Canada — often by a wide margin. Some groups, like Toronto’s Raging Asian Women, are 100-per-cent female; in Nagata’s advanced *taiko* class at the Royal Conservatory of Music, women currently outnumber men by about 7 to 1.

The KNE has always been an equal-opportunity ensemble, but for their annual show this weekend, Nagata went one step further, handing the direction over to Takahashi — the first time he entrusted the show to someone else.

“There are two schools of thought” about women in *taiko*, Nagata said. “One is that women should play just like men; that there is no such thing as a masculine or feminine way of playing. The other school of thought is that women bring a ‘feminine’ quality to what was once an exclusively masculine art form.”

A “masculine” style, Nagata explained, would be about “strength and brute force.” A female approach, he said, is “the idea that you can make as big as a sound as a male, but not necessarily through macho strength and muscle alone. It has to do with how you approach the drum — speed, style, attitude. A man and woman might be playing side by side, and they will get the same volume and power. But one might look fluid and graceful; the other as though he’s doing it through muscle alone. Our group, I think, has a bit of both styles,” although the masculine-feminine style split doesn’t necessarily fall

along gender lines, he said.

When I asked Chan and Takahashi what draws women to *taiko*, they replied instantly, in unison, “Power!”

“Power of the spirit, as well as the body,” added Takahashi, who grew up in the small fishing village of Hukuda in Japan.

Nagata, meanwhile, finds that male students are often more shy than women — particularly about the shouting that is part of *taiko* performances.

Gender questions aside, Takahashi’s show this weekend is taking the KNE into a new direction. “Every year when I’ve directed the shows,” Nagata said, “the theme has been very broad: new traditions; explorations; you can pretty much do what you like in something that general. Aki had a very specific idea: that of the sacred tree, ritual, ceremony and respect for nature. So all of the music ties in with that. It gives it a new cohesiveness.”

The Sacred Tree will also create a sense of ritual through costumes and movement, Takahashi said. And the theme itself reminds us that *taiko* are carved from huge, ancient trees; in Shinto thought, they retain something of the trees’ spirit.

You might say it’s the best of both worlds: the spirituality and respect for nature of an ancient culture, with the girl power of the modern West.

Today and tomorrow at 8 p.m. at the Al Green Theatre. Tickets \$20-25 at uoftix.ca or 416-978-8849. Info: kiyoshinagata.com

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