

Japanese drummers have rhythm

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DAWN STEVENSON

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Instead of settling for one big bang, the Elora Festival ended with a thundering hour and a half of them.

If you've never seen Japanese Taiko drumming before, consider the experience a combination of music, martial arts and dance choreography.

The six percussionists of Toronto-based Nagata Shachu fall about dead centre on the sliding scale between athleticism and artistry, in a unique place where the difference between the two is really negligible. Saturday night's show at the Gambrel Barn in Elora seemed built as much for the eyes as it was for the ears.

The group launched into its fiery program, adding layer upon layer of percussion parts to the cumulative sound, manipulating the composite rhythms to shudder, churn, dance, or halt on a dime.

Constantly changing time signatures, syncopation patterns and textures (the program listed 10 different taiko drums), Nagata Shachu kept musical interest on high throughout the show. Artistic director and drummer Kiyoshi Nagata noted the particular difficulty of "14-14", written in a fast 7/8 time, which the ensemble pulled off with vigour and facility.

Working rhythmic intensity to a fever pitch, the group would often pare back to almost nothing, just to go at it again from a different angle.

You can imagine the effect such relentless rhythmic pounding has on the audience's sensibilities over time, so at a few key moments in the program the group slowed things down, introducing melodic instruments like the shino-bue (bamboo flute). The temporary respite from such a barrage of shifting syncopations highlighted the extreme candour of a pentatonic melody.

Aki Takahashi led many of these slower, contrasting works, using her staggering talent to generate a meditative vibe through the directness of quarter-tone sensitive vocals, and the simplicity of sparse accompaniment on the fretless three-stringed shamisen.

As a drummer, Takahashi performed tirelessly, hardly sitting out a single number all evening. She sometimes played one-handed eighth notes on the higher-pitched (hence, technically transparent) Atari Gane, as fast as machine-gun fire for minutes on end without skipping a beat. The technical focus and performing flare were unbelievable.

On a different note, I was pleasantly surprised to see some partial male-nudity at this Elora Festival show -- now that's entertainment.

I figured Kiyoshi Nagata's revealing attire during the penultimate piece of the evening is probably linked to a performance tradition, though nobody directly said so. But frankly, putting the spotlight on the back of a next-to-naked musician, fit as an Olympian, as he hammers out an intense solo on a huge O-Daiko drum, has other merits, too; no explanation was really necessary.

Of the same high-calibre as all Elora Festival musicians, Nagata Shachu offered audiences a taste of something a little less familiar to our ears with "Taiko."

The physical intensity of their performance, as well as their mechanical efficiency and almost inhuman rhythmic accuracy, was unstoppable.

That it could be done with such unique grace of movement and confidence is wholly unbelievable; athletic fireworks stippling the Elora Festival's worthy closing ceremony.

editor@guelphmercury.com