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Nagata Shachu primal drum concert an unforgettable experience

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The Society of the Four Arts normally hosts European and American presentations of music, art, drama and literature. Listeners Wednesday night entered elemental territory.

Taiko is Japanese for drum. The Nagata Shachu drumming and music group is based in Toronto, and includes Japanese and non-Japanese, male and female — three of each. They are the only group outside of Japan to have four Japanese drum makers as sponsors, and their performances span three continents.

Artistic director Kiyoshi Nagata is on the faculty of the Royal Conservatory of Toronto. Each of the other members — Aki Takahashi, Scott Kusano, Angela Colangelo, Nick Shao and Akemi Akachi — plays one of several sizes of taiko. Other traditional Japanese instruments are included. Takahashi sings and plays the shamisen, a guitar-like instrument; three others play types of flutes: the shinobue and the shakuhachi.

This music is primal, elemental. It is often loud, extremely and violently loud. Performers, particularly on the largest drum, the O-Daiko, assume a stance something like the warrior asana in yoga, and it is not overstating to describe their movements as an assault on the instrument. But these are not only finely disciplined musicians, they are magnificent dancers, athletes.

How can such an ensemble maintain interest throughout a nearly two-hour performance? Their programming was excellent, with enough variations to sustain audience attention.

The opening piece, San Ren On, translated as 'Three Continuous Beats,' was just that — permutations of three beats, in combinations just short of Stravinsky in complexity.

Take Ito Kawa combined the shakuhachi, the shamisen, and the taiko, starting with an extended solo on the shakuhachi. The instrument produces haunting microtones in its melodies, as does the shamisen — though the latter instrument adds percussive sounds of the plectrum on the instrument top. One might have expected the entry of the drums to be on a similarly subtle balance. One would be wrong. And this violent contrast made the music all the more powerful.

In the same way, Araumi evoked storms at sea by matching the shinobue with the O-Daiko, an



Sandra Symonds

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

The Nagata Shachu drumming group often played loud, extremely and violently loud, at its Wednesday concert at the Four Arts.

effect as strange as it was powerful. Enya Totto brought all six performers together, singing a Japanese fisherman's song, assuming Japanese fishermen to be unusually precise in their singing and clapping. The close of the first half, Gokan ('Five Senses') gave each of the performers a solo opportunity — and each was equally impressive.

The highlight of the second half was the only non-drum work: Hon Choshi, for Takahashi as singer and shamisen. She proved a great artist on each — with subtle, complex, haunting singing, as affecting as a flamenco singer filled with duende — with a shakuhachi joining as the piece progressed.

This quiet, affecting moment was broken when a drummer, clad only in a string and a pouch to cover his genitalia, entered the stage and crouched before the massive O-Daiko, and attacked the drum with primal ferocity. His improvised solo, bracketed by the other drummers, was overwhelming in its intensity.

The concluding piece finally allowed the ensemble to shed their coats and perform in clothing that allowed the musculature of their arms and shoulders to be displayed — five drummers on three drums (by sharing the double heads), dancing and weaving as they played. The style is called miyake, and it shows perfectly the relation of dance and music in this art form.

The audience demanded an unnamed encore, and were rewarded by a work that matched drum solos for four players with a shinobue duet. This concert was an unforgettable experience.

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