

Drummers of volume, virtuosity

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Remember when it was time for the extended drum solo? Finally the percussionist in the band got to show his stuff -- fancy licks, syncopated tempos, fascinating rhythms, and just plain heavy thumping sounds.

Of course then the crowd goes wild, whooping and hollering, jamming with the sound, and finally sending up a rousing, mass wail of pleasure.

That was the feel on Saturday eve, when the six men and women of Nagata Shachu stormed the Elora Festival Barn with their massive percussion performance on Japanese drums, or taiko, which, in addition to six barrel sized wooden drums, included gongs, bells, wooden clappers, shakers and bamboo flutes.

The opening number, *Shouting Earth*, took a bit of an adjustment to the sheer volume of sound coming from the stage. The entire cast pummeling huge drum sticks to the same rapid-fire round of repeated beats -- surely they would blow the roof off the barn (and we would all wind up with migraines).

As the piece progressed they introduced a good measure of dynamic and rhythmic variation. Bringing the volume down (now to just double forte), they split the percussion into a forward beat, and a back beat, introducing a wonderful sense of syncopation and rhythmic life.

The next piece, *Stormy Sea*, continued the feeling of primal earth energy -- powerful, majestic and inevitable.

This time the flute featured prominently, floating a high-pitched breathy note over the deep, ever-bounding drum beats below. Other percussion included a metallic bowl firing a frenetic clicker sound, as well as the occasional gong and tinkling bell for spice.

There was a sense of ritual to the performance. Matching black robes featured broad white blocks and stripes, playing off the variations in lighting for dramatic effect.

Their movements on stage alternated between reverent bows and graceful body flows, to wild and fancy displays of gymnastic athleticism, all within the context of drumming.

Taiko draws from a number of Japanese traditions including folk dance and singing from different parts of the country, prominent festivals of the people, and accompaniment for Noh and Kabuki theatre.

Respite from the wall of drumming sound came with a couple of numbers featuring the fretless three-string lute and vocal solo. One of these was described as a tune used to relax patron visitors at a hot springs.

Repeating the same three notes in a kind of mesmerizing repeated vamp, the voice took on an almost bluesy, improvised feel, subtly soulful and wonderfully expressive.

What makes these performers irresistible is their extremely high level of musicianship evidenced in their virtuosic technique, discipline, precision, and energy.

At the same time there is an air of humility and grace as they enthusiastically bound around the stage assuming various percussion configurations. A highlight of the evening was the final Fishing Song, where wonderfully fluid thrusting arm motions between drum beats, mimicked the actual movements one could observe on traditional Japanese fishing boats.

The effect was a spectacular visual and aural display, as well as a wonderful celebration of Japanese life and culture.

In response, the crowd sprang to their feet with their own boisterous display of inevitable rhythm, sound and celebration.