

The way of the drum

Tim McCloskey
Lance Writer

The drum solo has long been made the butt of jokes by concertgoers. What do you do with that wasted time? Take a bathroom break? Head to the bar? Go score a nickel off the dealer? Well, here's a new answer to that question: If the band happens to be the Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble, you simply sit in awe.

If you were downtown on the night of Jan. 30, and thought you heard thunder coming from the Capitol Theatre, they were what you were hearing. The Toronto based group is a diverse bunch dedicated to rejuvenating the art of Japanese folk drumming. Using a wide variety of traditional instruments (from tiny Suzu hand bells, to the massive O-Daiko drum) bandleader Kiyoshi Nagata and his troupe transport their audience

through ancient lands and modern dreams.

They took to the stage dressed in simple, loose-fitting, gray-blue tunics, embroidered with Kanji spelling out 'Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble', bowed to the audience, then took up position behind their barrel-like Taiko drums. They then proceeded to drop the audience right into the deep end with 'Taichi no Sakebi' ('Shouting Earth'), an appropriately named piece that

shook the place like an earthquake. To say they played with mechanical precision would sound too sterile; while meter perfect, their spare and minimalist style spoke more of humanity's quest for spiritual perfection.

For those of you who think cymbals are merely for bashing together as punctuation at the end of a piece, think again. 'Music for Chappa' showcased the versatility of a simple, small pair of brass

know what the sonic equivalent of negative-space is? Aki Takahashi's sparse chords on the silk-stringed shamisen and freely wandering vocals, accompanied by small drums and tiny bells, evoked so much without a single wasted note. Perhaps this is what is meant by "listening to the notes that are not being played."

The centerpiece of the ensemble, the huge O-Daiko, came to the fore for 'Koku' ('Empty Sky'). Clad only in a small loin-cloth (and to those of you who giggled, grow up!), Kiyoshi Nagata took center stage before the pedestal on which sat the massive drum, sank into a grounded stance much like one might take in the martial arts, and raised his arms. Once he began to play, his lack of clothing took on a few obvious purposes; it granted complete freedom of movement, and I can only imagine the sweat he would work up with the ferocious pounding he meted out. It also made apparent to the audience the extremes of effort and stamina required for this drumming style, as one could see every muscle from his calves to his neck standing out in stark relief. Even more impressive, much of the piece was improvised. The focus and clarity of these musicians was simply astounding.

With hands and wrists wheeling into blurs, and drumsticks seeming to melt into streaks of liquid light, The Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble brings an elegant simplicity to Canada's multi-cultural landscape.

To say they played with mechanical precision would sound too sterile; while meter perfect, their spare and minimalist style spoke more of humanity's quest for spiritual perfection.

hand cymbals. Playing the chappa with breadth and motion reminiscent of air guitar, Nagata brought this underestimated instrument into the foreground.

'Araumi' ('Stormy Sea') began with quiet and disparate elements, from the haunting strains of a flute, to the soft ringing of a tiny bell, to the low roll of the O-Daiko drum. Each part seemed almost random when taken on its own, but together created the impression of a calm and flowing sea before the arrival of the storm.

The traditional 'Hon-Choshi Shamisen' evoked a quality I'm at a loss to describe; does anyone

