

# Taiko Drumming in the Classroom

by Jake Perry (Beeslack Community High School, Penicuik)



*TaikoTherapy, from Beeslack Community High School*

Taiko, ‘team drumming’ from Japan, has much to offer as a teaching resource at both primary and secondary school levels. It is based on straightforward musical principles and rhythms that are often simple enough to be accessible over a wide range of abilities. Taiko develops both individual and group-based musical skills as well as encouraging self-discipline, responsibility and teamwork. Above all the music engages the enthusiasm of youngsters like no other – kids love playing taiko, and will work hard to develop their drumming skills.

Taiko is a blend of ancient and modern, the traditional and the innovative. Although the drums themselves have been part of Japanese society for thousands of years the spectacular group-based style of performance familiar to audiences through ensembles such as Kodo and Yamato is a relatively recent innovation, only dating from the mid-1950s. Extremely popular in Japan, with an estimated 8000 groups in existence, and increasingly so in the United States, taiko is gradually becoming more widely known in the UK, thanks largely to the pioneering education work of British-based performing ensembles Kagemusha Taiko and Mugenkyo.

## **What is Taiko?**

Taiko (literally ‘fat drum’) is a fusion of rhythm and movement, music presenting a dramatic theatrical as well as musical spectacle. There are parallels between taiko and the martial arts in how movement (*kata* – literally ‘form’) plays as important a role in performance as the actual drumming rhythms – it’s not just what you do, it’s how you do it! The taiko instruments themselves add to the visual impact, of course – big, loud drums played with impressive looking sticks!

Just as in Japan there is no single style of taiko drumming, with many regional variations and local styles mixed in the pot, so there is no singular ‘authentic’ style of taiko to present in the classroom<sup>1</sup>. Taiko is a living and evolving art form, continuously developing rather than bound by static and inflexible rules. I do not live in Japan, nor was I born into the Japanese musical tradition. Our taiko were built in Penicuik, not Tokyo! I can, however, use the

---

<sup>1</sup> The lack of standardisation in taiko also extends to nomenclature – syllables, backing rhythms, even the drums themselves may be given alternative names depending on the source. Where appropriate I have included some of the most commonly encountered alternatives.

principles of taiko as a stimulus to my own creativity. It is perfectly appropriate to fashion your own 'take' on what taiko is and what it can become for you and your pupils – in fact, it is undoubtedly desirable to do so.

My way of presenting taiko is by no means the only one; nor do I make any grand claims of following a unique or in any way definitive approach. This brief introduction is merely designed to highlight some starting points towards introducing taiko into the curriculum. Of course, only so much information about this most dynamic of performing styles can be taken from the printed word and I strongly emphasise that there is no substitute for the 'hands-on' experience and individual tuition of a professional workshop. I would also unhesitatingly recommend the excellent series of teaching videos and manuals available from Kagemusha Taiko at [www.kagemusha.com](http://www.kagemusha.com) - these are an invaluable resource providing extensive background and technical information as well as complete taiko compositions.

### **Drumming Technique and Stance – the 'Golden Rules'**

- Holding the sticks - no pointing forefingers!

Hold the drumsticks (*bachi*) about a third of the way up between thumb and forefinger – the role of the other fingers is to balance the stick, not to grip it. The backs of the hands should be uppermost. Allow some flexibility in the grip - when playing 'in the air' the butt of the stick should bounce gently against the lower palm.

- Head up, bottom down!

Taiko drums are usually quite low down and so a solid, low stance is adopted – left foot forward of right, both feet flat on the floor and more than a shoulder width apart. Bend the left knee to lower the waist towards the drum level, keep the right leg straight without locking the knee. Straight back, keep the head up.

- Elbows away from the sides - *bachi* forming an upside-down V position on the drum

The drum stroke should always be crisp and resonant – don't allow the stick to 'crush' onto the drum.

### **The Classroom Ensemble**

A broken-down drum kit provides instruments suitable for classroom taiko. The Japanese nagado and okedo drums may be represented by tom-toms, particularly floor toms, and the bass drum is also useful when played with drumsticks - taping a duster to the drumhead helps to cut down some of the resonance if required. The higher pitched shime may be represented with a snare drum (snares off) or any similar high pitched drum. Cowbells, 'damped' triangle or perhaps tambourine may also be added to represent chappa (small cymbals) and atarigane (a shallow, ashtray-shaped bell). Youngsters also enjoy making their own *bachi* – cut down lengths of dowling into 16" sections and round off the ends with sandpaper. A set of drum practice pads is also a worthwhile investment!

## Warming Up

I begin each session with a series of warm-ups, both to loosen up and to establish the focus of the group. Warming up also reinforces to the class the physical nature of the music, that a performance is not just a matter of playing the drum rhythms correctly. For physical warm-ups think in terms of loosening from the 'top down' – begin with gentle head rolls from side to side, before moving on to shoulders and so on. A typical warm-up routine might include :

- Head rolls
- Shoulder scrunches (shoulders tight up to chin level, then drop) and rolls forward and back
- Stretching arms above the head – reaching to 'climb the ladder' with feet flat on the floor
- Arms straight out at shoulder level to each side, fingers extended – small circles getting bigger and bigger until hands clap together as the arms swing round – reverse and gradually get smaller again – hold for a second or two back in the starting position – relax!
- Hands on hips, roll the torso 'Elvis style'
- Feet together, hands on knees – roll round several times one way, then the other
- Feet well apart – bend at the knee transferring weight from one leg to the other, stretching the inner part of the leg

Lots of 'shake-outs' between exercises!

I also use team-based rhythm games as part of the routine – for example :

- Form a circle (teacher directs from the middle)
- Establish a steady pulse (finger snaps) – then tap a foot to the pulse – stop the snap but keep the foot going
- Walk the pulse – moving right foot to the side on beat one, feet together on beat two (step-together so the circle moves anti-clockwise)
- Think of a pattern of four beats – snap on beats one and two (snap, snap, space, space) as the step-together continues
- On beats three and four each individual takes a turn to clap a solo rhythm to fill the two empty beats (snap, snap, fill-the-gap!)

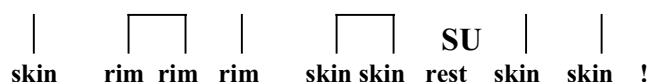
## Building an Arrangement - Taiko Syllables

At its simplest level a taiko arrangement (known as a song) consists of two distinct layers – a backing ostinato pattern supporting a main ‘melody rhythm’ (I tend to refer to this as the ‘solo’ rhythm even though it is played by the team of drummers rather than by one individual). All parts are taught aurally according to a system of syllables giving both the rhythm and the required drum sound.

For example :

<b>DON</b>	=	single stroke in centre of drum skin (ie crotchet)
<b>DOKO</b>	=	double stroke on drum skin (ie two quavers) <sup>2</sup>
<b>KA</b>	=	single stroke on rim
<b>KARA</b>	=	double stroke on rim
<b>SU</b>	=	silent beat (rest) <sup>3</sup>

So **DON KARA KA DOKO SU DON DON** for example translates as



Create a solo rhythm by building a sequence of taiko syllables - for example :

R                    L                    R            R L R  
**DON (SU) DON (SU) DON KARA KA (SU)**

R            L            R            L            R            R L R  
**DON DON DON DON DON KARA KA (SU)**

R            R L R                    R            R L R  
**DON KARA KA (SU) DON KARA KA (SU)**

R            R L R            L            R            R L R  
**DON DOKO DON DON DON KARA KA (SU) etc.**

## Backing Rhythms

The most common backing rhythms (known as *ji-uchi*) are :

R L R L R L R L  
**Gobu-gobu DOKO DOKO DOKO DOKO** (ie a straight quaver pulse)

R    R L R    R L R    R L R    R L  
**Mitsu-uchi DON DOKO DON DOKO DON DOKO DON DOKO**  
 ('galloping horse' style)

R    L R L    L R L    L  
**Shichisan DON GO DON GO DON GO DON GO**  
 (compound time 'shuffle' style)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> sometimes notated as DORO

<sup>3</sup> sometimes TSU

Ji-uchi are the rudiments of taiko, the most important and fundamental technical exercises. Playing ji-uchi builds drumming technique in the individual and helps establish timing and rhythmic precision within the ensemble.

### **Taiko Movements and Shouts**



The movements of taiko are fundamentally important, and there is lots of fun to be had working out choreography for your piece! Work on uniformity and elegance of movement within the ensemble; straight, well-defined arm shapes with smooth, fluid actions. Picking a particular spot in the wall or ceiling for everyone to ‘aim at’ helps to achieve consistency, as does practising opposite one another, mirroring each movement. Working on choreography also holds the focus of the group no matter how straightforward the rhythm being played – indeed, the simpler the rhythm the more the opportunity for ‘grand gesture’!

Shouts also play a vital part in the performance, both to convey energy and as aids to timing. As a lead-in shout use ‘So – re’, a Japanese word with no particular meaning but used in the context of ‘let’s go’ or ‘3–4–and–in’.

For example, a simple ji-uchi based introduction :

**Jiuchi** :    **DON GO DON GO DON GO DON GO DON GO DON GO DON GO DON GO** etc.  
**Ensemble** : approach drum & into stance.....sticks up.....’**SO**    -    **RE**’  
(and into solo)

---

<sup>4</sup> also known as shichi-san, this ji-uchi may be notated as DON KO

Try the following movement drill for a team of drummers accompanied by a ji-uchi of your choice (I like to use DonGo for this particular one) :

<b>ichi</b>	<b>ni</b>	<b>san</b>	<b>shi</b>	<b>go</b>	<b>roku</b>	<b>shichi</b>	<b>hachi</b>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8



bachii above head

**Lead in** (as above) : **‘SO - RE’**

**R** slowly raise right arm back to starting position.....to the top  
**DON** 2 3 4 5 6 7 **‘HUP’**

**L** as before, with left arm.....(top)  
**DON** 2 3 4 5 6 7 **‘HUP’**

**R** raise R.....(top)      **L** raise L.....(top)  
**DON** 2 3 **‘HUP’**      **DON** 2 3 **‘HUP’**

**R** raise R      **L** raise L      **R**      **L**  
**DON** **‘HUP’**      **DON** **‘HUP’**      **DON**      **DON**      **DON**      **DON**

‘Hup’ is used as a timing shout in this context. Try some big ‘scissor-style’ movements on the last four DONs!

**Teaching the Song**

When teaching any piece the mantra is ‘if you can say it, you can play it’ – begin by speaking the solo rhythm, gradually piecing it together line by line. When confident add the ji-uchi quietly behind the spoken syllables, either spoken or played on a small drum or other percussion instrument, to enable everyone to hear how the two parts will fit together – especially if there are syncopations between the two.

Generally speaking I allocate the ji-uchi to a high-pitched, easy to hear instrument whilst the solo rhythm is played by the bigger drums. Other layers may be freely added to suit a particular group of youngsters – a bass drum stroke marking the ‘downbeat’, for example, a second ostinato, an improvised counter-rhythm – as with all things taiko, the only limit is the imagination!

**Inventing**

Taiko affords many opportunities for successful inventing either working in pairs or as a small group. I tend to have the class work initially in pairs with practice pads, composing sequences of syllables (with choreography) to fit a predetermined ji-uchi. Pre-recording the ji-uchi onto a cassette (either recorded live or as a computer loop) and playing it as a constant background to the activity gives everyone a point of reference in terms of tempo and rhythmic feel as well as giving each group something to practise along to. An initial pattern may be extended into a solo – by adding a contrasting sequence, by being combined with a sequence from another group – or be treated as an ostinato layer to which more may be added to produce a whole class or group-based composition.

### **Further Information**

[www.kagemusha.com](http://www.kagemusha.com) is the site for **Kagemusha Taiko**, based in Exeter. In addition to a full series of concert performances Kagemusha have a thriving community outreach programme, offering courses and workshops both in schools and the wider community. Teaching materials covering all aspects of taiko are available through the website. The site is the foremost link to other taiko activities in the UK and has first class sound and video.

[www.mugenkyo.com](http://www.mugenkyo.com) is the homepage of **Mugenkyo**, the first professional performing group in the UK. Based in a purpose-built *dojo* in Lanarkshire ([www.taikodojo.com](http://www.taikodojo.com)), Mugenkyo have an extensive touring schedule and also offer beginners courses at certain times of year. Again excellent sound and video, and details of performances and workshops.

[www.taiko.com](http://www.taiko.com) is the site for the **Rolling Thunder Taiko Resource**, a North American treasure trove of information and pictures.

[www.kodo.or.jp](http://www.kodo.or.jp) is the site for **Kodo**, universally regarded as the greatest exponents of taiko. Kodo CDs are readily available and provide excellent listening material.

If you have funds available there is no substitute for owning your own set of taiko. Our set of okedo-style drums was supplied by Woodworks, the only UK based company who specialise in taiko. Although 'ready made' drums are available to order our drums were supplied in kit form together with building instructions - a more economical alternative but involving a substantial amount of work : gluing and shaping the drum body, stretching and sewing the skins and so on. A great result, though, and well worth the effort!

Woodworks (David Samuel)  
Southbank Workshop and Studio  
Southbank Farm  
Shannochie  
Isle of Arran KA27 8SH  
Tel/fax. 01770 820373  
email: dave.samuels@bigwig.net

Our bachi are supplied by Ruth Mae of Nagare Woodturning (contact via Woodworks above).

I am happy to answer any queries you may have regarding drum building or any other aspect of taiko. My e-mail address is [perryj0@schools.mgfl.net](mailto:perryj0@schools.mgfl.net)

Grateful acknowledgements to JFET (Japan 21), Mugenkyo and Jonathan Kirby of Kagemusha Taiko for their guidance, invaluable advice and inspiration.