Sokobayashi

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When Tanaka Seiichi – a Japanese immigrant who had come to Northern California in 1967– attended the 1968 Cherry Blossom Festival in San Francisco, he expected an environment like the raucous festivals of his youth in Nagano prefecture. However, the festivities consisted of little more than a parade featuring, in Tanaka's words, pretty girls wearing "beautiful kimono, and walking nicely" (2005). He was disappointed by the quiet atmosphere of the festivities, but at the same time he found himself motivated to create "the beat and rhythm of the festival drum with which he had been familiar in Japan" (Otsuka 1997, 25). The following year (1968), Tanaka and his friends put together a performance for the festival: he played a drum borrowed from a local Buddhist temple while his friends carried around a mikoshi.[1]

That same year, Ishizuka Yutaka (later known as Mochizuki Saburo) and members of Sukeroku Taiko came to San Francisco while accompanying a singer on a tour of the western United States. After a performance, Tanaka and two other young men asked Ishizuka to teach them the Sukeroku performance style. Agreeing after some initial trepidation, Ishizuka and two other members remained in San Francisco for two weeks to give lessons to not only the three young men but also to a number of people who came to watch the open sessions held in the Japan Center in San Francisco's Japantown (Mogi 2010, 39). When it came time to return to Japan, the Sukeroku Taiko members were unable to ship the drums back with them, so they left the equipment with Tanaka. This gift gave him the foundation for a taiko ensemble: "an ō-daiko with a naname stand, 2 chū-daiko, and a basic set of shime-daiko" (Mogi 2010, 39).[2]
Bolstered by this experience, Tanaka returned to Japan for three months in the following year (1969). He traveled to Nagano Prefecture, where he had grown up, and asked to receive instruction from Osuwa Daiko founder Oguchi Daihachi. In his youth, Tanaka "had been enamored by Osuwa Daiko" (Otsuka 1998, 45). When he envisioned the types of sounds that could be heard at a festival, one of his memories was "a group playing various taiko drums" that was most likely Oguchi Daihachi's group (2005). However, as a child he had not been allowed to join the group, for in the early days of Osuwa Daiko Oguchi limited it only to family members and a few immediate friends. However, when Tanaka returned in 1969 Oguchi changed his mind and decided to teach him, due in part to Tanaka's fervor for the art form (Oguchi 1987, 241, Aigner 2002) After studying with Oguchi for a short time, Tanaka returned to the United States and again performed at the Cherry Blossom Festival.

Tanaka Seiichi at the 1969 San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival.
Gift of San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Japanese American National Museum (2005.97.2). Used With Permission.

Bolstered by these experiences, Tanaka and his friends formed the San Francisco Taiko Doukoukai (doukoukai 同好会means “club” – literally, “an association of like-minded people"), later described as a “recreational group for Japanese youth” (Otsuka 1997, 25). The use of the Japanese term “Doukoukai " is reflective both of practices in San Francisco’s Japantown, where many older businesses and organizations used Japanese terms, and of the fact that the majority of early members were Japanese immigrants with Japanese as their primary language. It was a gathering place for these immigrants, a way to establish a social circle. That is not to say that the group was restricted to Japanese immigrants, however, as from the beginning of the group’s history its membership included Japanese-Americans and even people not of Japanese or Asian descent.

However, Tanaka soon moved beyond viewing taiko performance simply as a social activity, or something that could fill the sonic space of the San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival, and decided to dedicate his life to the musical genre. He saw playing the taiko as a way to contribute to the community, having observed how the crowds reacted when he played the drum.[3] At the same time, however, he saw in the art form a new path similar to his original goal of teaching martial arts in the United States, believing that “a focus on people and accessibility was something that taiko, more than other traditional Japanese art forms, could offer” (Yoon 2007, 11).

The San Francisco Taiko Doukoukai’s early repertoire included many pieces taken from the catalogs of Osuwa Daiko and Sukeroku Taiko; works like “Suwa Ikazuchi,” “Hiryū San-dan Gaeshi,” and “Yodan Uchi” formed the core of performances. At the same time, however,

Tanaka also began to compose new works for his group that combined the various performance styles he had learned. One such work was “Sokobayashi,” written in the early 1970s.

“Sokobayashi”

“Sokobayashi” is named after “Sōkō,” the word for San Francisco used by first-generation Japanese immigrants to the United States (issei). The name “Soko” came from a transliteration of San Francisco using Chinese characters – Sō-hō-shi-ku-kō (桑方西斯哥) – which was later reduced to Sō-kō; the name can still be found in many Japanese-American businesses and institutions across San Francisco. “Bayashi,” meanwhile, is the Japanese word for festival orchestras. The naming evokes regional festival music traditions in Japan, which often combine place names and “-bayashi” (for example, Edo-bayashi, the music of Edo, the old name for Tokyo).
Dedicated to that first generation of Japanese immigrants that supported the Japanese-American community, “Sokobayashi” was created in response to Tanaka’s own discovery of the history of Japanese immigrants in the United States.[4] He wanted to give something back to that group that was so overjoyed by his performances at the San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival and other community events, noting that he would watch them smile with tears streaming down their faces.[5]

Video: Cal Performances Fall Free for All 9/30/12 - San Francisco Taiko Dojo

“Sokobayashi” reflects Tanaka’s early taiko experiences; in it, he combines elements from both Osuwa Daiko and Sukeroku Taiko performance practices. The primary ensemble is similar to that used in the Sukeroku Taiko “Oroshi Daiko”/“Shiraume Daiko”/“Matsuri Daiko” suite: four nagadō-daiko, plus a shime-daiko and an ō-daiko (albeit in this case the ō-daiko is placed on the ground and played vertically like a nagadō-daiko rather than on a horizontal stand).[6] The nagadō-daiko are placed on the slanted naname stands used by Sukeroku Taiko, further placing it within that Tokyo Shitamachi festival performance lineage. At the same time, however, Tanaka also added elements taken from Osuwa Daiko – most prominently, the tettō (a metallic, pipe-like instrument created by Oguchi Daihachi) and the fue (rarely used in Sukeroku Taiko repertoire, but found in some Osuwa Daiko pieces). Furthermore, the use of the ō-daiko is closer to Osuwa Daiko practice than to Sukeroku Taiko, playing an ostinato with occasional accent that highlights the rhythmic melody (as compared to within Sukeroku Taiko, when the ō-daiko is used in a more ‘melodic’ role).

The Music of “Sokobayashi”

“Sokobayashi” begins much in the manner of Sukeroku Taiko’s “Oroshi Daiko”: a series of rhythms rolls are passed around the ensemble, often involving rolls that with an accent and then rising in volume before reducing to a quiet roll played underneath the subsequent patterns. Many of the short rhythms that immediately precede each roll in this opening are the same or

slight variations of those used in “Oroshi Daiko,” as is the division of the nagadō-daiko players into four different parts.
These rolls are interwoven with kakegoe in the style of Sukeroku Taiko, continuing the connection to “Oroshi Daiko,” but one addition to the model is the inclusion of the tettō within the nagadō-daiko – shime-daiko progression.
After several series of rolls, with the space between each player getting smaller with each cycle (much like in “Oroshi Daiko”), the ensemble briefly pauses before the ō-daiko player begins a steady ostinato that is soon joined by the tettō.
In this moment, the piece moves from its Sukeroku Taiko inspiration to becoming more akin to the style of Osuwa Daiko. The o-daiko and tettō provide a rhythmic framework via their ostinato, occasionally providing some accents. At the same time, Tanaka also makes an addition to the performance styles of his teachers. Meanwhile, the fue provides a semi-improvised melody as the rest of the ensemble plays, a practice not found in Sukeroku Taiko’s repertoire and very rarely in the music of Osuwa Daiko. The bamboo flute has a secondary role, however, standing at the back of the ensemble; if not for the use of a microphone, the flute would not be able to be heard over the drums.[7]
On top of this ostinato and fue quasi-improvisation, a rhythmic melody is played on the nagadō-daiko; this follows the practice of using ‘middle’ drums as melody within Oguchi Daihachi’s orchestration scheme.
This melody is repeated twice, accompanied by an ostinato on the ō-daiko, tettō, and shime-daiko. It stands apart from the patterns created by Osuwa Daiko and Sukeroku Taiko through a greater emphasis on off-beat rhythmic patterns; while there were off-beat rhythms in Sukeroku Taiko and Osuwa Daiko pieces, the frequency of such rhythms in “Sokobayashi” – along with regular movement between the rim and drumhead – causes the piece to stand out from its predecessors. At the same time, there is a great deal of choreography in a performance of the melody; much like in many Osuwa Daiko pieces (such as “Suwa Ikazuchi” and “Hiryū San-dan Gaeshi”), spaces in the rhythm are filled with various movements – most prominently, diagonal points and circular movements with the hands and arms. The movements, meanwhile, hearken back to the choreography of “Shiraume Daiko.”
After a second repeat of the melody, there is another pause, before the tettō re enters at a faster tempo. This begins a series of interplay between the tettō and nagadō-daiko, in a fashion similar to the nagadō-daiko/shime-daiko interplay of Sukeroku Taiko’s “Matsuri Daiko.” The nagadō-daiko plays a fast, quiet ostinato, adding accented rhythms that interchange with the tettō rhythm.[8]
This then leads into a series of improvisations by each player as the rest of the ensemble provides the ostinato. Tanaka is typically the last player to improvise, with the solos starting fast and loud and gradually getting softer and sparser. Eventually, he ends his improvisation, pausing momentarily before reentering once again with the fast ostinato from the beginning of the section. “Sokobayashi” then concludes with a restatement of the melody (accompanied by the fue, who is generally silent during the drum solos), performed at the same tempo as the solos. The increased speed gives this melody a greater degree of intensity, echoed in the ō-daiko ostinato played at this new tempo. After the final note, all players move back into a pose position combining both Osuwa Daiko and Sukeroku Taiko styles – the tettō and shime-daiko

players point their arms in the air, much as Oguchi Daihachi does in many Osuwa Daiko pieces, while the nagadō-daiko players bring their arms back into a pose used often by Sukeroku Taiko.

From Osuwa & Sukeroku to the Tanaka Style

While “Sokobayashi” draws heavily from the performance styles learned by Tanaka in the late 1960s in terms of orchestration, instrumentation, and choreography, there is also a degree of intensity in a performance of the piece that cannot be found in Osuwa Daiko or Sukeroku Taiko repertoire. This can partially be attributed to the number of drummers featured in performances, as Tanaka fully adopted Oguchi Daihachi’s approach of having many drummers playing at the same time, but it is also due to a more forceful and physical performance style developed by Tanaka as he added in elements from his martial arts background. Players yell loudly and often in support of those that are improvising, a far cry from the spare, rhythmic vocalizations utilized by Sukeroku Taiko. Furthermore, players often jump and move around as they play, putting their entire bodies into hitting the drum. While Sukeroku Taiko and Osuwa Daiko both integrated movement into their performance style, this is something different, more an expression of emotion and the physicality of playing the drum than a preconceived choreographic action. This development of new performance practices would be continued by Tanaka throughout the 1970s.

As the San Francisco Taiko Doukoukai became more popular and attracted more members, they began to expand activities beyond San Francisco, performing at cultural festivals across California. In the late 1970s, Tanaka changed the group’s name to San Francisco Taiko Dojo (the name by which it is known today).[9] This change reflected both the changing nature of the group – it was less a group of young Japanese friends and more an environment in which members were taught the basics of the burgeoning musical genre of contemporary taiko performance – and Tanaka’s own approach to the art form. The term “dōjō” (道場) literally means “place of the way,” and is used in Japanese to refer to a physical training facility. Reflective of this approach, Tanaka began to require a more strict approach to practices, adopting a hierarchical relationship system commonly found in Japanese martial and performance arts. At the same time, even as the group membership expanded beyond the Japanese immigrants that made up the first generation of members, Tanaka continued to maintain a connection with Japan. As reported by Otsuka Chie, “students also learn several Japanese songs, Japanese writing, and Japanese terms along with learning songs and etiquette” (Otsuka 1997, 28). Students and group members are required to open and close each practice with aisatsu, formalized greetings and words of parting meant partially as terms of respect for the teacher and for your fellow students (commonly used in not only Japanese arts, but in many elements of Japanese society).

Meanwhile, practices grew more and more intense as Tanaka integrated his martial arts experiences into his taiko playing style. Many former members speak of being kicked or hit with a drumstick if they made a mistake, as well as describe long periods of running or playing rolls on the drum that were more tests of endurance rather than exercises meant to develop musical

technique. It caused many to leave the group, but those that remained talk about the experience with a degree of pride, viewing it as a rite of passage of sorts.
Tanaka came to draw more and more from his martial arts background in the development of performance practices for his group, as he came to believe that playing the taiko "demands not only musical skill, but also the acquisition of respect, the training of one's body, and the preparation of one's mind," a concept that echoes tenets found in many martial arts (Otsuka 1998, 47). In time, he would state that his performance style "is not only the skillful playing of percussion instruments, but also the discipline of mind and body in the spirit of complete respect and unity among the drummers," the result of "rigorous mental, physical, and martial arts training."[10] In the United States, this came to be known as the "Tanaka style" of taiko playing, a performance style distinct from those developed by Osuwa Daiko and Sukeroku Taiko.

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Footnotes

[1] http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/interviews/clips/436/ (Accessed October 1, 2017)
[2] The term chū-daiko is one that is occasionally used to refer to nagadō-daiko, owing to the typical size of this type of drum: "chū" means middle, placing it in relation to the ō-daiko ("ō" meaning "large") and the small shime-daiko.
[3] http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/interviews/clips/436/ (Accessed October 1, 2017)
[4] http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/interviews/clips/436/ (Accessed October 1, 2017)
[5] http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/interviews/clips/351/ (Accessed October 1, 2017)

[6] While some performances of this piece feature a larger ensemble, both with more nagadō-daiko or other drums and percussion instruments, this instrumentation is at the core of the performance and serves as the common link for all variations.
[7] The fue part uses a quasi-pentatonic scale using the notes D, E, G, A, and B flat. I call it semi-improvised due to the fact that in performance, certain intervals are accentuated over others, such as a descent from D to B flat and from G to B.
Owing both to the semi-improvised nature of the fue part and its secondary position in relation to the drums (which are the focus of this piece), I will not be including a transcription.
[8] When playing this part, Tanaka typically uses the various parts of the tettō to create different-pitched sounds – high, medium, and low. However, the choice of pitch appears to be improvised; thus, the transcription features only one pitch.
[9] It is unclear when exactly the name change occurred. Otsuka Chie cites a date of 1980 in her history of the group. (Otsuka 1997, 26)
However, the name “San Francisco Taiko Dojo” is used in a 1977 documentary about the group by David Kimura, included in a 2005 DVD published by the Japanese-American National Museum in connection with its “Big Drum: Taiko in the United States” exhibition. (2005)
Given that Otsuka reports that the group was called the San Francisco Taiko Doukoukai at the beginning of its activities, it can be assumed that the change happened sometime in the mid- or late-1970s.
[10] http://www.sftaiko.com/the-essence-of-taiko/ (Accessed October 1, 2017)