

# JAPANESE FESTIVAL SOUNDS

**Art Form: Music**  
**Style: Taiko**  
**Culture: Japanese**

## MEET THE ARTIST:

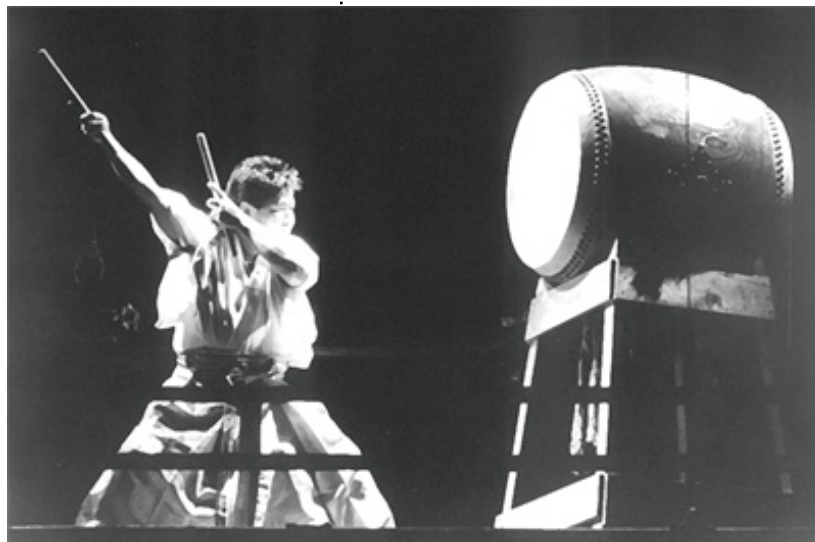
**John Y. Mori** began studying Taiko when he was 19, motivated by a strong desire to deepen his connection to his own Japanese culture and ancestry. Today he is the director of Japanese Festival Sounds and a member of Kinnara Taiko of Los Angeles, a group that combines Taiko with contemporary sounds. Mr. Mori also serves as Producing Director of Performing Arts for the Japanese American Cultural Community Center in Los Angeles. His credits include longtime participation in the jazz group Hiroshima as well as television appearances, participation in festivals, recording sessions and artist residencies. *Japanese Festival Sounds* provides an opportunity for the audience to experience the unique cultural form of drum playing called Taiko. John says, "As we express ourselves, we create new traditions."

*Japanese Festival Sounds* has been presented at countless schools and festivals, including the Olympic Arts Festival, Third World Drum Festival, International Mask Festival and the opening of the National Living Treasures of Japan.

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

*Japanese Festival Sounds* features the ancient art form of Taiko (Japanese drumming). The performers are Japanese-American musicians with custom-made instruments. The intent of the program is to share what makes Taiko unique, the cultural fusion of ancient and modern techniques, and the full impact of Taiko through sound and movement.

About performing, John Mori says, "Here I feel the power of expression. The Taiko teaches me how to lose self...and how to find self. I feel the drum is a form of language that anyone can understand." Students will learn about the history of Taiko, materials used to make them, the names of the different-sized drums, traditional clothing worn by musicians, and the contemporary approach used to play Taiko today.



## PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The history of Taiko is interwoven in the fabric of Japanese history and has been regarded as sacred since ancient times. Originating in ancient India as a part of religious and ceremonial events and celebrations, Taiko eventually found its way to Korea, China and Japan. The drum was first used to drive away evil spirits and pests harmful to crops. It was also believed that by imitating the sound of thunder, the spirit of rain would be forced into action. At harvest time, Taiko was joyfully played in thanks for a bountiful crop. The drums were also used to perform functional duties such as announcing the time or calling special gatherings. Many villages determined their boundaries by the distance the sound of the drum could carry.

Taiko drums are handmade. A single, medium sized drum can take as long as 40 hours to make. It is believed that the spirit of the trees from which the wood came and the spirits of the drum makers and the performers come to embody each drum.

Originally Taiko drums were included in ensembles with other instruments, whereas today's modern compositions showcase Taiko drumming alone. The Taiko style that most people experience is *kumi-daiko* (ensemble drumming), which is basically a Taiko orchestra. Modern Taiko creates sounds that can portray the delicate pattering of rain as well as the power of a typhoon. Movement is an integral part of Taiko, requiring each musician to use his/her body in connection with the drum. Taiko musicians communicate through movement and rhythm.

The power of Taiko is not only in its sound but also in the concentration, discipline and emotion of its performers. Taiko allows us to experience a wide spectrum of sonic and physical vibrations, as well as an artful relationship between sound and silence.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How do the movements of Japanese Festival Sounds relate to the music they make? Do their movements change when they play drums of different sizes?
- How does a Taiko drummer learn to play?
- Why is there no written music on stage?
- How is Taiko different from other types of drumming?
- What kinds of natural images came to mind as you listened to the musical sounds?
- What other aspects of Japanese culture are you familiar with? How are they related to the performance of *Japanese Festival Sounds*?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE:

**Explore the Water Cycle:** Traditionally, Taiko drumming was sometimes used to imitate the sound of thunder that precedes rain. Water on the Earth is always in circulation, starting with the heat of the sun causing water from the ocean to evaporate. The water vapor floats into the atmosphere, condenses to form clouds, and releases water as rain or snow. About 80% of the rain falls in the oceans, but the rest falls onto land. Rivers and streams collect water from the ground and return it to the ocean so the whole cycle can start all over again. The water cycle never ends, but keeps repeating.

Just as the Taiko drummers used their drums to create part of the water cycle, find ways to use vocal and body percussion to create each part of the cycle, using a variety of unified group sounds. Sounds can be any length. Brainstorm ideas, experiment with a variety of sounds, organize and sequence them and then practice and perform.



- Legend:
- Artistic perception
  - Creative expression
  - Historical & cultural context
  - Aesthetic valuing
  - Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- Using several of the following adjectives, write a paragraph describing your impressions of Japanese Festival Sounds:  

timid	exciting	vibrant	bright
listless	expressionless	expressive	dull
strong	concentrated	energetic	
languid	assertive		
vigorous			
- Have your students make a list of the musical and personal skills required to be successful in Taiko (e.g., dedication, patience, focus, listening, strength, endurance). Discuss how you could apply these to your own life.
- Participate in some of your everyday routines and activities with the attitude of a Taiko drummer (e.g., play a sport, do homework, cook or brush your teeth.)
- Visit the following website to learn more about Japan: [www.explorejapan.com](http://www.explorejapan.com)
- Create a poem or story with a Taiko drummer as the main character. Include directions on how to read specific lines or sections so that the traits of Taiko drumming are emphasized. For example:  
Softly like rain  
Strong and steady  
With rhythm  
Broken by silence



## VOCABULARY:

**Bin-Sara or Sasara:** a serpentine Japanese rattle made of plates of wood strung together. The sharp tone imitates the sound of a beetle known as a Semi, which can be heard all over the Japanese countryside in the spring and summer.

**Chappa:** A pair of small cymbals. Used for dance accompaniment and in temple rituals.

**Keyaki:** (zelkova serrata) the best wood for making taiko, a tree native to Japan

**Shakuhachi:** a vertical bamboo flute of Chinese origin used to play classical and folk melodies. It has 5 fingerholes, four in front and one in back.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Malm, William P., *Traditional Japanese Music and Musical Instruments: The New Edition*. Kodansha America, Inc. 2001.
- Artsource® unit on John Y. Mori and Japanese Festival Sounds, Music Center Education Division. Call (213) 202-2277 to order.