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Japanese-style drumming resonates for local taiko groups

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Members of Michigan Hiryu Daiko (Flying Dragon Drummers) are, back row, from left: Gerren Young, Carolyn Koebel and King Chang. Middle row, from left: Kat Koto, Esther Vandecar, Miro Koshio, Wyatt Harris, Miza Timmer and Heather Bergseth. Front row: Lillia Bistrek.



Forget Ringo Starr and Buddy Rich — if you want to see a drumming spectacle, check out Esther Vandecar and her taiko drum teams.

Taiko are Japanese drums played in performance by a team of drummers. In such a performance, drums of various sizes — from 6 feet in diameter (so big, they're rarely moved) to the size of a hardcover book — are spread apart on a stage so every performer has a place to stand. Taiko drummers hold their bodies in specific poses and strike the drums not only at the same time as other drummers on the team, but also with the same range of motion.

“Taiko is half martial arts and half music,” says Esther Vandecar of Kalamazoo, who has been teaching taiko in Southwest Michigan since 2011.

Now an instructor at Kalamazoo College, Vandecar directs both the Kalamazoo College Taiko Drumming Troupe — a 14-person junior team of drummers made up of Kalamazoo College students, local high school students and community members — and the Michigan Hiryu Daiko (Flying Dragon Drummers), a six-member group of taiko drummers that performs around the state. These groups are two of only three taiko drum teams in the state, Vandecar says; the other is based in Novi.

Vandecar was one of the founding members of Fushicho Daiko Dojo, a group in Phoenix, Arizona, before she moved to Southwest Michigan to be near her children, grandchildren and other family members. She also created a taiko team comprised of children that performed at this summer's Kalamazoo County Fair.

Vandecar discovered taiko at a 1987 concert in Japan, where she was living at the time. Friends there “wanted to show me something I'd never seen before,” she said. They took her to a performance by Kodo, possibly the most famous taiko group in the world. Kodo is known not only for its drumming, but also for its onstage garb: The male performers sometimes wear a headband and a loincloth and nothing else.

“When the lights came on, there were 10 huge drums and 10 naked men,” Vandecar says. “I thought I went to heaven. I found my niche.”

Taiko starts with the kata, or poses. Drummers kneel in front of the smaller drums and lunge forward or squat in front of the larger drums. The drummers hold their bodies in position while swinging their arms and drumsticks. While the loincloth is one option, most of the time taiko performers wear robes and have bare feet or wear soft shoes. Some drumming is accompanied by bamboo flutes, hand cymbals or other instruments, and the drummers will sometimes shout, as if they're practicing karate.

“It's a great workout, almost like being on a sports team,” says Gerren Young of Kalamazoo, a Hiryu Daiko member for three years.

A team can have almost any number of drummers. When Hiryu Daiko performs at West Michigan area schools, the group can be just two or three performers. The famed Kodo team has 32 drummers.

“A member of my group (Young) is a Western-style drummer, and another is a West African-style drummer,” Vandecar says. “They just want to experiment with drums.”

Young, a former percussionist with the Kalamazoo folk band Neon Tetras, says the two kinds of drumming are very different. A taiko performance is more like a drum line in a marching band. “It emphasizes the mind-body-spirit connection more than playing fast,” he says. “It's about 75 percent visual and 25 percent audible.”

Like any art form, taiko takes time to learn. Vandecar's classes run 12 weeks or more, during which time students learn kata, proper drumming techniques and basic Japanese language skills. Vandecar owns some of the smaller drums and drumsticks; the larger drums she uses are stored at Kalamazoo College because they are too big to easily haul around.

Well-made drums are costly, starting at about \$3,000 and ranging up to \$10,000 or more. Vandecar has constructed her own drums, which cost about \$1,000 each in materials and take a week to make. The body of the drum is made out of wood, and the drumhead consists of rawhide, which is soaked in water to stretch over the drum body. Vandecar says she's had to fill her bathtub to soak the rawhide when building some of the larger drums.

Young, a professional woodworker and drum maker, made an 18-inch-diameter taiko drum for Vandecar by reshaping an old wine barrel to get the right form. Making the drumhead tight was a challenge — he had to use car jacks to get enough pressure to push the body of the drum into the rawhide.

"You only get one shot at making a drum," Young says.

To learn more about Hiryu Daiko, visit its website at taikomichigan.com or its Facebook page at facebook.com/MIHiryuDaiko.

Information about the Kalamazoo College Taiko Drumming Troupe is available at reason.kzoo.edu/music/Ensembles/International_Percussion.

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