

“A Musical Journey Beyond All Borders”: Musical and Cultural Border-Crossings of Toronto Japanese *Taiko* Ensemble Nagata Shachu

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Figure 1: Nagata Shachu

In this article, I focus my attention on the phrase “a musical journey beyond all borders”, which is taken from the biography of Nagata Shachu, a professional Japanese *taiko* drumming ensemble based in Toronto, founded in 1998 by Canadian-born *taiko* artist Kiyoshi Nagata. Described by John Terauds of the Toronto Star as “one of the world’s most interesting Japanese *taiko* drumming ensembles”,¹ Nagata Shachu has performed across Canada, the US, and Italy in various music festivals, cultural events, and concert series. As a member of Nagata Shachu from 2002-2007, and from 2012 to the present, I have had the privilege of being involved as a performer, composer, instructor, and witness to its musical transformations and cultural exchanges through the years.

One aspect of Nagata Shachu that has always interested me is the way in which it balances itself

between its role as a presenter of this ancient and symbolic instrument, and as a contemporary world music ensemble operating in the complex cultural landscape of Toronto. Through an interview with artistic director Kiyoshi Nagata, and through reflections on my own experience with the group, I hope to present some of the ways in which musical and cultural border-crossings take place, and also reflect on whether we indeed partake in a journey beyond *all* borders.

The Japanese *taiko* drum has existed in Japan for over 2000 years, and has been used throughout its history at all strata of Japanese life, from Shinto and Buddhist rituals to social and celebratory gatherings, and as an important instrument in traditional art forms such as *kabuki* and *noh* theatre. But Japanese drumming as an ensemble-based, concertized art form that most people today are exposed to, known

as *kumi-daiko*, is a relatively recent development that can be traced back to the post-WWII era. A Japanese jazz drummer, Oguchi Daihachi, virtually invented the style of having a group of *taiko* drums performing different layers of rhythms together, the same way that a jazz drummer would play various patterns on different parts of a drum kit. In the late '60s and early '70s, pioneering groups such as Ondekoza and Kodo established the philosophy and the kind of intense physical style of playing and training that has since become symbolic of *taiko* drumming, setting stylistic and technical standards for the groups that followed. Today, there are thousands of *taiko* groups across the world that have interpreted the musical, spiritual, and communal power of *taiko* drumming in diverse ways.²

As mentioned, the phrase “a musical journey beyond all borders” is taken from the ensemble’s biography, which is available on the group’s website, and often used in press releases and news articles. The full sentence reads, “Combining thunderous, primal drumbeats with subtle, intricate rhythms, the ensemble is able to produce a wide spectrum of sound. Featuring a vast array of Japanese *taiko* (including the massive O-Daiko), gongs, bells, wooden clappers, shakers and bamboo flutes, Nagata Shachu will take you on a musical journey beyond all borders.”³ Part of the inspiration for this article comes from the realization that I have for years taken this description for granted, and, despite being a member of the group, have rarely reflected upon what it really means or represents. Having grown up in the immensely multicultural environment of Toronto, I never really questioned the fact that musical borders and boundaries are constantly being crossed, because it seems to be a natural part of life as a musician here. But as I reflected on these words, many questions arose. For example, how does the group establish its borders in the first place, and where exactly are they? How do different groups of people who work with us, such as presenters, promoters, and the audience, recognize the borders or whether they even exist? How does the group cross these borders through such factors as membership, compositional practices, concert programming, marketing strategy, and, last but not least, musical and artistic direction? How do these factors influence each other? Does Nagata Shachu in fact cross *all* borders, and if not, what kind of limitations exist, how are they determined, and who determines them?

The group description was written a long time ago by Nagata himself. In my interview with him, I asked about this statement, and the motivations behind his choice of words:

First of all, I guess because I’m Canadian born,

and because our group is a Canadian group that consist of not just only Japanese people ... we cannot be presenting what we call “authentic Japanese music”. And what we do is largely influenced by our individual backgrounds, and by the city we live in, Toronto, which is, as everyone knows, one of the most multicultural cities in the world. So, we’re largely influenced by all these different cultures and ethnic communities. So even if we try to write something [and] say, “Oh, this is Japanese music”, I think sub-consciously we’re still writing stuff that is very close to our hearts, so ... if you listen to our music, even though it might sound Japanese, you’d hear a lot of influences. There’s African influences, there is Indian references, kind of tihai motifs and all that stuff. Occasionally we don’t just use Japanese instruments, whether it’s Chinese gongs or woodblocks ... so I think that’s what I mean, even though people might be seeing something that’s Japanese drumming, the performance itself and the music itself might remind them of another country or another place, so I think that’s where it came from. (Nagata 2013)

Both Nagata and I have always recognized that the multicultural exposure and influences within Toronto are an essential element in the group’s cultural and musical identity. As Nagata Shachu has always placed an emphasis on “producing innovative and exciting music that seeks to create a new voice for the *taiko*”,⁴ its repertoire can be seen as one of the main artifacts of border-crossings that occur within the group. I also asked Nagata, the main composer for the group, about his personal influences:

Actually, when I was writing a lot of old repertoire, I was really influenced by the Toronto Tabla Ensemble, like, “Teiryu” (2002) or “Gokan” (2001) ... “Teiryu” especially, when I was hearing a lot of what they were doing and how they would play with rhythms and feels and stuff like that. Also, I was influenced a lot by Steve Reich, and it’s not so direct, but I just really loved what [he was] doing, and I think somehow that was a big influence. And, at the time, in the '80s and '90s, African drumming was huge too, that was the flavour of the decade kind of thing, and so I heard a lot of really great African drumming and, so, those were big influences outside of *taiko* music. Within *taiko* music, I was always influenced by Kodo. Kodo was just huge for me. But even pop music, you know, I was a big Rush fan, I loved AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, The Who, and all of those groups had what I thought were really great drummers. (Nagata 2013)



Figure 2: Nagata Shachu performs at the Four Seasons Centre in Toronto.

Other than Nagata, other members have assimilated their own fields of training and influences into their compositions, adding to the variety of its repertoire. My own compositions for the group thus far have been inspired by ideas from electronic dance music and the South Indian drumming tradition. Current members Tony Nguyen and Akemi Akachi, both trained in the Western classical tradition (Akachi possesses a master's degree in Music Composition), have each composed a piece for the group this year, reflecting their unique compositional style and background. Senior member Aki Takahashi, who was born and raised in Japan, on the other hand, has incorporated many "Japanese" elements into the group's performances, such as the use of the three-stringed *shamisen*, folk singing, and even traditional Japanese costumes, but has also composed complex *taiko* pieces with titles like "14-14", "Orbit", and "Kaleidoscope", which are very far removed from any cultural or stylistic reference. Composition, then, is one of the main expressions of the group's border-

crossing. In my view, Takahashi's contribution in particular, with her incorporation of *shamisen* and folk singing, has helped the group cross borders in an almost opposite direction. While members such as me and Akachi and Nguyen integrate our contemporary and non-Japanese influences into our original compositions, Takahashi has brought some of the cultural roots of Japanese *taiko* back into the group. This, in turn, connects the group's border-crossings with the audience's by reinforcing the nostalgic sentiments of Japanese audience members, as well as through connecting non-Japanese listeners and viewers to a foreign culture.

I have also wondered about the nature of our concert programming and how Nagata's decisions in that regard can be seen as a particular way of crossing borders. In addition to performing at festivals and concert series, Nagata Shachu produces a full-length, annual year-end concert in which it premieres new works and bring together old and new repertoire under particular themes. As part of a North

American concert-going culture in Toronto, I feel that we often take many practices for granted, from the convention of writing concert programs, intermissions, pre-concert activities and obligations such as media appearances, press releases, interviews, producing merchandise, to the very idea of presenting Japanese *taiko* drumming on a concert stage. Extra-musical factors such as these directly affect artistic decisions such as the choice and order of repertoire, length of compositions that we write, visual and spatial organization (including stage moves), and how we think about how our audience will experience the music. I think these factors are particularly significant in the context of world music performances, where the traditional environments in which these idioms develop are very different from those of the concert-going population. I suggested to Nagata this idea of our concerts being a site for border-crossings, and his answer not only revealed an assumption about the diversity of the audience, but also brought forth some of the necessities that a world music group like Nagata Shachu must consider when operating in a multicultural, urban environment such as Toronto:

That's a really good point ... One thing I've always said is that we're not catering to only Japanese audiences. In fact, if you go to one of our concerts, you're going to see [that] the vast majority of people in the audience are not Japanese. It's kind of weird but I sometimes feel the Japanese community doesn't really support us. For example, we went to that shamisen concert, and it was like, "Wow, where are all these people from?" We never see these people in our shows. So, we definitely consider that the people in the audience aren't automatically going to see a Japanese [song] title, for example, and know what it is, so we take time to make people realize what the songs are about in the programs, and, yes, to make it accessible. I think we write very challenging and very sophisticated music, but at the same time, I think when we write stuff, we're always kind of aware of how [the audience] will respond to this new music. It's not like we're going to write whatever we feel like and we don't care what the audience thinks. At the same time it's a balance – we're not trying to make it so light and fluffy so that it [appeals to?] the lowest common denominator. (Nagata 2013)

Another way in which Nagata Shachu has engaged with border-crossings is in the cultural and gender makeup of its membership. Of the 20 individuals who have performed as full-time members with the group throughout its 15-year history,

only eight have been of Japanese background, including Nagata himself, with two other members being half-Japanese. The ethnic backgrounds of former and current members include Anglo-Canadian, Italian, Serbian, Chinese, and Vietnamese. And for an art form which has traditionally been predominantly reserved for men but is increasingly popular among women, it is significant that exactly half of all current and former Nagata Shachu members have been female. There was even a period when the group consisted of Nagata and four female members. Of the group's cultural mix, Nagata pointed to multiple factors, including some pragmatic and environmentally determined ones:

I mean, it's manifold. One is out of necessity – there's not a big Japanese population in Toronto, that's one thing for sure. The other thing is even if there were, among the Japanese people, I'm looking at musical skills too, and for me that's always been an important part of what we do, is people who are strong musically. And then the other part is [whether they are] very committed, [so] it would have to be a combination of both. And again, because we're in Toronto, I've got that openness that anyone can join if they have that musicality, commitment, and also the physical fitness aspect ... I want people that are in relatively good shape. And ... people of the right attitude. So, those are really hard things to find. [But]... if I brought in someone who's Canadian, someone who's not Japanese, and even people who are Japanese, I [also] want them to have a good understanding of Japanese culture too, so that there's knowledge. (Nagata 2013)



Figure 3: Nagata Shachu performs at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre.

Earlier I presented the question of whether there are in fact conditions or limitations to this alleged “musical journey beyond all borders”. After interviewing Nagata, I realized that this question relates to finding and recognizing these borders in the first place. Another related line of inquiry might be: do we, as time goes by, reset the borders that we have crossed, and/or create new ones? Regarding this, Nagata gave some thought-provoking insights:

As you know, the development of *taiko* as a performing art is rather a new thing, so even what most groups are doing, you can't call it traditional, or you can't necessarily call it “authentic”. The only “authentic” kind of *taiko* drumming there is may be found in kabuki theatre or *noh* theatre, or in *matsuri bayashi*, performed in traditional festivals and all that. But ... having said [that], I really think our group really kind of looks at tradition and looks at culture, and looks at people. Aki [Takahashi], for example, who knows a lot about traditional music ... that's where I guess you could say we want our foundation to be, and I think once you've got a good foundation, then, it's really okay to explore other musical genres. But I think ... you're talking about perception of audiences, I'm guessing a lot of people probably look at us as one of the more what they would call ... “*TAIKO taiko* groups”, you know what I mean? Because there's groups like On Ensemble, or *Taiko Project*, groups like that, which are a little bit more cutting-edge, so people might see us and go, “Oh, they're more like a *taiko* group than anything else”. (Nagata 2013)

In comparison to the two “cutting-edge” groups mentioned above, Nagata Shachu can indeed be perceived as a more “orthodox” *taiko* ensemble, in the sense that we rarely incorporate non-Japanese instruments into our performances, choosing to create our sonic palette mainly with traditional Japanese instruments, giving us a more “Japanese” rather than “fusion” sound. By contrast, the California-based On Ensemble, while making the similar claim in their biography “to take the ancient instruments of *taiko* into new realms”,⁵ regularly incorporates instruments such as didjeridoo, drum kit, cymbals, and even turntables into their performances, even though the members of the group are also recognized as well-established *taiko* artists and teachers in the American *taiko* community. *Taiko Project*, also based in California and sharing personnel with On Ensemble, describes itself in a similar way to Nagata Shachu, aiming to “seek not only to entertain audiences, but also to inform them about the history and integrity of

taiko as an evolving art form”.⁶

Although a comparison of *taiko* groups and their border-crossings is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to make note of the idea that all of these groups claim to offer musical journeys beyond many borders, and it is interesting to note how they each define their own boundaries and border-crossings, sometimes on their own terms, and sometimes in comparison to other groups. Nagata articulated his views on collaborations and musical fusion:

I've seen some really bad collaborations, in Toronto and elsewhere, where you get two artists and they're not really firmly grounded in their own art forms, and they collaborate, and it's just neither here nor there. Like someone playing *taiko* but they're playing it as if they're more suited for congas or drum set, and you're going, “Well, there's just a novelty that they're playing the *taiko* drums even though they're not playing *taiko*-type rhythms or they're playing it in a non-*taiko* way.” I don't see the point in those kinds of things either. That's why it's very hard, a lot of times people want to collaborate with us, and then they go, “Well, can you play that quieter? The *taiko* is overpowering us,” But, you know, the nature of the *taiko* is it's loud, right? And ... part of the collaboration is that you have to accept the sound of the *taiko* for the way it is, and the rhythms for the way [they are], but if you're asking me to play something that's not within a *taiko* idiom, I don't always see what the point is of the collaboration. (Nagata 2013)

The initial idea of exploring “a musical journey beyond all borders” was to see, essentially, the ways in which Nagata Shachu adapts and functions within the multicultural landscape of Toronto and its world music scene. As revealed in my interview with Kiyoshi Nagata, some of these processes are conscious and deliberate, while others were integrated into the workings of the group less consciously, through the environment and sometimes out of necessity. The notion of crossing musical and cultural borders is such a common theme and mission statement of world music groups that it can become a hazy catchphrase that many take for granted. What's interesting to me is examining the particular ways in which individual artists or groups engage in these border-crossings. Although it has become a catchphrase even within Nagata Shachu, it seems that Nagata himself has never lost sight of his initial artistic mission:

You've probably heard me say this many many times, when I'm making an announcement to the

audience, that we play the traditional *taiko* drums, which [have] been in Japan for 2000 years. But what we try to do is kind of create our own music, to give a new voice to this ancient instrument. I say that almost all the time, I don't even think about it. So, I want them to know that *what we are playing is very old, but what we are saying is very new*, in that ... typically in any show, we might play "Miyake" or "Yatai Bayashi" and ... We try to let the audience know ... this is more of a traditional-style piece, or this is a new composition called "14-14" or "Pulse Progressions"... Obviously by the title, people will know that's not traditional, so it's good to give that good balance of old and new, but we always try to let them know that we're trying to say something new. (Nagata 2013)

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that this brief exploration into the idea of "a musical journey beyond all borders" is just that – brief, and with ample room for further exploration and reflection. Kiyoshi Nagata, as an individual, is one example of an artist who works within the musical tradition of his own ethnic background, and Nagata Shachu is just one example of a world music group based in Toronto that, despite its effort to cross musical borders with its largely original repertoire, operates with a relatively purist and traditionalist approach. To my knowledge, there is yet to be a comprehensive study of the Toronto world music scene as a musico-cultural unit. Understandably, this so-called "scene" is composed of such an immense diversity of artists, idioms, ethnic backgrounds, and professional identities, that one of the first challenges to such a study may be in establishing who or what constitutes this scene and where the ethnographic boundaries should be drawn. I hope this brief study can serve as a small step towards a clearer understanding of the complex factors that give rise to the unique, diverse, and beautiful music that is created in Toronto.

Nagata Shachu continues to celebrate its 15th anniversary in 2014 with two brand new collaborative performances at the Harbourfront Centre. More information can be found at www.nagatashachu.com.

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Notes

¹ Terauds, John. "What's On Disc." *Toronto Star*; E15, September 15, 2005.

² For more information on the world *taiko* community, the *Taiko* Community Facebook page is a great place to start. Includes event updates, activities, discussions about many technical and social aspects of *taiko* drumming.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/taikocommunity/>

³ "Nagata Shachu." Accessed Dec. 2013.

<http://www.nagatashachu.com/nagata-shachu/>

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ "About On Ensemble: Contemporary *Taiko* Quartet."

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⁶ "Concept – Mission Statement." Accessed Dec 5 2013.

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