

Copyleft and the Future of Taiko

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We play taiko at a crucial moment in our music's history. 60 years after Oguchi formed Osuwa Daiko, the artform of kumidaiko is just starting to leave adolescence, to root itself in North America with sustainable numbers of players, making inroads into popular culture, and reaching audiences with rising expectations. With each concert, television appearance, and movie soundtrack, kumidaiko is making its way into the guarded circle of enduring arts, the circle of violin lessons, soccer practice, and anime. It is an exciting time to be a taiko player.

But it's an exciting time in a small pond. Kumidaiko is still a minor player in world music; a niche within a niche. The improvement of our art will require growth. We need more players and more creativity. We need kids in garages starting taiko bands. How many thousands of ballet dancers does it take to produce Baryshnikov?

There are some of us who would like to adopt the conventions of the larger music world. They argue we need to become "professional", that we need to learn the business of music production, and that the growth of taiko should follow the growth of commercial music. I believe they are misguided. While professional music must be our role-model in many things, its business model is not to be copied. The music industry is dying.

In its final throes the industry has lashed out at file sharing, suing music downloaders and sending cease-and-desist letters to musicians. It tries desperately to hold on the pre-internet days of distribution. This is not the industry I want to mimic.

I want us to do the opposite: I want us to share. I want us to formally release our music under licenses that empower taiko players to build upon each others' work. I want the taiko community to be at the forefront of music collaboration. While we are already a generous and supportive bunch, what I am proposing is different than the status quo. This is more than just putting videos online and not enforcing our copyrights. We need copyleft. We need to build a vibrant repertoire of copyleft music.

Copyleft is the term we use for licenses that empower others to share. The creator of a work can use a copyleft license to explicitly allow others to share, to modify and build upon the work with one important rule; any additions or changes to the work must also be copyleft licensed. This is known as the "share-alike" rule. It is at the heart of free/libre/open-source software, some

of the most successful and diverse collaborations in the history of humanity. Copyleft has made GNU/Linux, Wikipedia, and the internet possible.

I dream of a future when new taiko groups have access to a treasure-trove of refined, high-quality taiko music from which to learn and find inspiration. I want budding taiko composers to have the ability to build upon and tweak great taiko works, and use them in performance and other empowering ways. I want our audio and video recordings to be mashed up by non-taiko artists. I want a vibrant, profoundly creative taiko culture.

I believe that exciting, organic things happen when people can create freely. When we have a critical mass of copyleft music, the website designers among us will create an online clearinghouse for our music, the music teachers among us will challenge our taiko pedagogy with essays and videos, and the undiscovered genius composer among us, just on verge of writing her first piece, will take the plunge with the help of our repository. But these are only the advancements that are easy and that I can imagine. The most exciting advancements are greater. GNU/Linux, Wikipedia, and the internet were not designed. They evolved within an infrastructure that enabled and encouraged sharing and collaboration.

This crucial moment of growth in our music's history coincides with a larger global shift, a revolutionary transition to the importance of information. While steel was the fundamental resource of power and progress in the 20th century, information now underlies the 21st. We are moving to a world in which the most important activities of production occur not in factories, and not by individual initiative, but in communities sharing information. This is tremendously good news. Because while steel tended to enforce hierarchy and widen the gap between rich and the poor, information can be shared. Information, of which music is one part, is special. Thomas Jefferson understood the difference. "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me." Ideas, and for our purposes, music, like fire, can be shared infinitely.

Imagine if with the push of a button one could copy a loaf of bread like one can copy music. If one could make a million loaves of bread this easily, what would be the moral stance to let anyone starve? In this 21st century society in which information is the most crucial social, economic, financial, and political force, we needn't let anyone starve.

We are musicians. We believe that music is an integral part of humanity. We believe our creation of music is a valuable contribution to society. Our generation has the remarkable luck of playing taiko at a time when our music, our ideas, and our creations can be a democratizing, empowering force. Join me. Learn about copyleft. Share.