Meaningful Music-Making in a Casual Social Environment: An Ethnographic Study of an Amateur University Taiko Ensemble

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Abstract

Although taiko drumming in America has been investigated by various researchers, from many different lenses, research is absent in this field that studies taiko ensembles at an amateur level. This ethnography aims to discover the meaning and values within the music-making of people who participate in Tora Taiko, a group of amateurs that specialize in Japanese taiko drumming, on the Princeton University campus. This study analyzed the actions and words of this amateur taiko ensemble as a lens for music education, through participant observations, interviews, and artifact collection. Themes of group identity and environment building emerged that showed the strength of the group as a cohesive unit. The ensemble represents a fusion of Japanese and American values that use music as a medium for musical, cultural, and social engagement. The success of the group in its ability to execute complicated musical patterns, without any prior musical training, in a meaningful way, points to a bigger picture, for music education, of people's innate musical ability and their desire to make music in social, supportive contexts.

Keywords: taiko, meaningfulness, culture, social music-making, cultural fusion

Taiko ensembles, traditional drum ensembles that stem from Japanese culture, have continued to grow as a popular art form in America. In the 1960s, a Japanese man brought taiko drumming to America because he wanted to expose it to the American population. After the initial reveal of taiko in America, taiko ensembles appeared in various locations and forms across the nation. The West Coast has the largest population of professional taiko ensembles, such as with San Jose Taiko and San Francisco Taiko Dojo. Smaller amateur taiko ensembles are in schools, universities, and local communities.

In North America, Taiko ensembles have been researched extensively in a variety of different areas. Ahlgren (2001) talks of the race, gender, and sexual identity created in these environments. Powell (2003, 2004, 2006) investigated embodied experiences, learning environments, aesthetic education, and Asian-Americans' identity within these ensembles. Tusler (2003) focuses on the feeling of power that participants in taiko ensembles may feel and how this can transfer to self-identity and world outlook. A common thread in all of these research studies was the sole investigation of taiko ensembles at a professional level, such as with the consistent study of San Jose Taiko. These professional taiko ensembles, often, had a strong or strict sense of the culture. Any diversions away from the Japanese traditions tended to be deliberate and extensively thought out for a specific purpose.

Although there is extensive research at the professional taiko level, there is a lack of research in lower-level groups, such as university taiko ensembles. In a university setting, the members of these ensembles could come from a multitude of cultures and backgrounds. The participants, as they are students, would not be professionals, or experts, in the art form. These are people who would participate in taiko as a small portion of their lives. They would not

necessarily even have to be musicians or have formal music training. It would be similar to if an average citizen chose to participate in a community ensemble.

In this research, I will investigate how a university taiko ensemble is affected by the environmental context, and how this interacts with the foundational ideas of taiko ensembles. I will look at how the difference in context, the participants' dedication, and the people can affect the ideas represented in the current literature. Do students participate for the same reasons that professionals do? Do amateur taiko ensembles stay true to the practices of taiko drumming? Can the students still gain the benefits that Powell describes without strict adherence to the art form's principles? These are all questions that arise from the contemplation of taiko in a new context. An amateur, collegiate taiko ensemble may show how taiko can transform within American communities with an entirely different demographic and setting.

Literature Review

Taiko drums are Japanese drums from Chinese and Korean influences, from as early as the 6th century. Taiko drums were used for religious rituals or ceremonies when first discovered in Japanese folklore. Throughout history, taiko drums were used extensively in Shinto and Buddhist religious ceremonies, in local festivals, and folk music accompaniment within rural parts of Japan. In the 12th century, feudal Japan saw the creation of many new art forms. These included the theatrical forms of Noh and Kabuki plays, in which taiko drums accompanied the performers. Taiko drums continued to be heavily associated with religious and festive contexts during this time, on top of their introduction to various art forms. There were hints of taiko ensembles in festival celebrations, with different kinds of taiko drums being played together as a group. These ensembles did not emphasize the taiko drum as the main feature, as they often accompanied vocals or a melodic instrument (Bender, 2012).

While taiko drums continued to appear throughout Japanese art forms and society, their development laid relatively stagnant for an extended period of Japanese history. Artists continued to use taiko drums in familiar ways. In the middle of the 20th century, after World War II, the government of Japan attempted to revive the traditional and regional Japanese folk cultures to slow down the cultural influences of Western societies. Through social and cultural transformation and the emphasis on local communities, taiko drumming resurged in the form of ensembles. Bender (2003) suggests that a new form of neo-folk cultural identity emerged in Japan, which people began to associate within this era. This new identity revolved around the revival of folk elements but featured innovations with an emphasis on collaborative groups to celebrate culture. Taiko drumming ensembles in modern Japan have become a distinct form of traditional cultural expression.

In 1968, shortly following the founding of taiko ensembles in Japan, the first American taiko group began in the American city of San Francisco. The creation of this group paved the way for taiko as a significant form of expression for Asian Americans in the United States. Taiko resonated with the sansei generation of Japanese-Americans in a time where racism towards Asian-Americans was very prevalent. Taiko drumming ensembles expanded across America, with groups appearing in many different cities around the nation (Konagaya, 2001). As taiko expanded through America, taiko ensembles shifted from a religious focus to that of a more celebratory one (Asai, 2005). This community continues to grow as taiko gets more exposure and attention, especially from the Asian Americans who do not wish geographical barriers to become cultural barriers (Konagaya, 2001).

An essential point that Konagaya makes about taiko in North America is that it has diverted in various directions based on individual perspectives and opinions. Some Japanese

Americans want to emphasize the tradition and authenticity of taiko in terms of its Japanese roots. In contrast, others want to move towards a transformative form of taiko that accommodates and aligns with the communities and traditions of America. Asai (1995) highlights the amalgamation of Japanese traditions with American values in his discussion of composition for taiko ensembles, which is an American innovation in Japanese art. In America, a hybrid style of taiko has emerged that combines aspects of Japanese and American music.

The concept of identity, specifically with the Asian American demographic, was a prominent theme in the research of North American taiko ensembles. These ensemble communities were places where Asian Americans could explore their own cultural, gender, or sexual identity. Ahlgren (2011) explored sexual and gender identity in these ensembles through taiko's emphasis on power and androgyny. The characteristics of taiko performers often go against the stereotypes of Asian Americans. Taiko groups gave this demographic of people a place to express themselves amid racial prejudice and judgment. Taiko ensembles have become an art form in which Asian-Americans can connect with their ancestry and heritage (Konagaya, 2001). Some taiko ensembles chose to approach the art form from a transnational sense. Therefore, Asian American identity started falling in the background in favor of a focus on accommodation and transformation of the art form.

Identity has shaped taiko ensembles in North American settings and served as one of the reasons why they exist in the first place. As Konagaya (2001) points out, taiko surfaced and multiplied in America due largely to the desire of Asian Americans to have an outlet for cultural expression and exploration. In Powell's (2003) research of taiko ensembles in California, she found that these communities can use artistic methods as a means for social and cultural practice. As in, participants got an idea of broader social and cultural contexts through the experience of

the ensemble. Now, over 50 years later, taiko drumming in America has moved far beyond the initial reasoning of only cultural engagement. Taiko drummers in America have found their own identity in taiko as it has transformed, even with non-Asian American ensemble members. It is beginning to go beyond an engagement with Japanese culture for Asian Americans, to a newer art form that encompasses many cultural backgrounds and perspectives. These ideas can affect how taiko ensembles rehearse, perform, think, or use Japanese taiko drumming traditions. In many cases, authenticity has been pushed slightly aside to include more people or do what works best for that specific group or learning environment (Powell, 2003). Powell believes that taiko's engaging nature will encourage participants to explore facets of their individuality in a social or cultural sense.

Beyond their identity as a taiko player, a large part of participation in a taiko ensemble is the physical sensation and embodied feeling. Concepts that came up consistently in the research of taiko ensembles were ki and kata. They are considered essential parts of the process of learning taiko. Ki, the spirit behind individual participants, forces the player to think of their body in space, their relationship with the drum, and how they move in that space. Kata is a series of orchestrated movements that allow for aesthetic motions and a sustained embodied connection to the music. Taiko utilizes these concepts as a way to emphasize engagement and connection to the mind and body. In these concepts, Powell (2003) suggests that taiko ensembles teach embodied knowledge to their participants, which is the idea of integrating the feeling body with mindful feeling. In another study by Powell (2006), she accentuates the importance of participant observation in the study of taiko ensembles because so much of the art form depends on embodiment. She understood the notions of ki and kata, only because she participated. It became clear to her how they affect the body and mind's interactions with the music and space around

them. Additionally, this gave insight into how the participants construct meaning within an ensemble that emphasizes embodied knowledge.

Another experiential part of taiko is the feeling of power, both sonically and visually. Tusler (2003) describes the concept of power as a combination of kata, ki, energy, and spirit. Taiko drumming is an art form in which the participants play large drums, quite loudly, with expansive motions that move through a wide range of space. Kiai shouts taken from Japanese martial arts are used to give the performer even more power and further engage the body. With the combination of all the loud music, Kiai, and large bodily movements, the performer has a commanding presence in performance. Tusler believes that power and confidence are ideas that work in conjunction during a performance. Essentially, he means that more confidence means more power in the player's presentation. This correlation draws from the fact that Tusler found, in his research of taiko ensembles in California, that taiko performers often applied the feeling, or idea, of power back to themselves in their own identity. The players would start to envision themselves differently in terms of personal power. However, the power of taiko ensembles holistically, he found, came from cohesiveness and willingness of the ensemble to embrace the ideas and other members of the group instead of each individual's power. These findings suggest that the feeling of power in taiko drumming comes from the innate power of the art form and the community of the ensemble as a unit (Tusler, 2003).

The art of taiko drumming has evolved and adapted through the generations while holding on to its traditional Japanese roots. In America, we see a variety of approaches to taiko ensembles in terms of traditions, authenticity, and purpose. Nevertheless, throughout all these groups and their participants, we can recognize the themes of identity, culture, and feelings of power as common factors. These themes are explored in each ensemble differently; some facets

emphasized over others. Taiko, in America especially, will continue to change as an art form as more generations pass, and people continue to make it their own.

This study will contribute to the above literature through the investigation of a Japanese taiko drumming ensemble in an American context, within a university setting. The purpose of this ethnography is to discover the meaning and values within the music-making of people participating in Tora Taiko. This group specializes in Japanese Taiko drumming, on the Princeton University campus. The following questions were the guide of this research: How does this music-making group develop Japanese culture within its small community? How does this affect the nature of the group and how its participants interact? How does the university setting affect the social dynamics and environment of the group? Why does this group perform together, and how do they view one another? Is it more of a competitive outlook or more of a family outlook?

Methods

This study took place at Princeton University, an ivy league university located in Princeton, New Jersey. The university is in a relatively upper-class town with strong support for the arts within the community and the university. The university has a diverse and vast demographic of students that spread across a wide variety of different majors and specialties. Beyond academics, the university has a vast array of extracurriculars that students can partake in outside of their classes, including hobby groups, clubs, musical ensembles, and more. This ethnography specifically investigated a taiko drumming group named Tora Taiko, within the Princeton University community. This ensemble only meets once a week on Friday evenings for an hour and a half. Their member count recently doubled to 14 members this past year, although

the members in attendance at each rehearsal was inconsistent. I decided to study Tora Taiko due to my prior interest in Japanese culture and the art of taiko drumming, the locational proximity, and the time availability for observations.

In my decision to study this group, I chose a qualitative approach to investigate the complexities of the interactions within the group and be able to find the subtle underpinnings in their actions. I wanted to know the group's individual perspectives and how they interweave into a bigger picture of who the group is and why they do what they do. Within the qualitative research traditions, I chose to do an ethnography of this ensemble because an ethnography would allow for intimate interactions and observations with the group members. Through these observations, I interpreted the group's beliefs and behaviors that allowed for a greater understanding of the group's identity and environment.

In using a qualitative ethnographic research design, I observed three Friday evening rehearsals. I conducted two semi-structured interviews with two of the group participants, Lisa and Sharon, over two months. I have decided to use pseudonyms in this study for anonymity and confidentiality. Lisa is the group's recently inducted vice president, although she has only been a part of the group for less than a year. Sharon is the group's President, with this as her fourth year as a part of the ensemble. During my observations, I talked casually to all the group members and, occasionally, participated in the rehearsals. For artifacts, I collected images of some of the group's rehearsal markings, promotional posters, and social media pages.

During this study, I monitored my subjectivity through reflection during observations, member checking during interviews, data triangulation, and subjecting my study to peer review. I was able to provide detailed descriptions of the group and the participants through data collection from a variety of perspectives and sources. My positionality in this study is that of a white, male

college student, pursuing music education, with a previous interest in Japanese culture and taiko drumming.

I transcribed interviews and field observations with Trint, a transcription software. I analyzed the data using NVivo, a qualitative research tool, to code and sort the data thematically. Once I had coded the data, I used MindMeister, a mind mapping program, to make diagrams of the major themes and their sub-themes. The diagrams allowed for a visual representation of how the themes intertwined and interacted with each other.

Results

It is a Friday night with five minutes until the 8:00 pm rehearsal in the underground rehearsal hall for Tora Taiko at Princeton University. I am the only one here so far, as I wait outside the locked door. A few minutes pass and the President of the group runs up to greet me, entirely out of breath. She reaches for the door. Locked. "I think Steven has the key," Sharon sighs. More members pour into the tightly packed hallway as the minutes spill beyond 8:00 pm. "Well, I guess we can just start here then!" Sharon exclaims. She plops her backpack down on the ground and pulls out wooden dowels and packages of sandpaper. Everyone sits in a circle and starts to sand the dowels as they engage in loud conversation while showing each other's songs and videos. Everyone is sanding new Bashi, the drum sticks used for taiko drums, for the group to use.

Twenty minutes go by, and Steven stumbles down the stairs with bags full of bubble tea as everyone cheers. He finally lets us into McAlpin Hall. The group floods into the rehearsal room to continue to sand the Bashi. As we enter, the trash from the Princeton Glee Club covers the floor and chairs from when they ordered Panera the night before. Without a thought, some people grab an empty Panera box and start to sand into it. More members join in and continue

their work on the dowels as Evan plays some music off of a laptop. Steven begins to hand people their custom bubble tea orders. Earlier in the day, they requested what they liked via the group's GroupMe chat. People trade off the chance to play music as the minutes continue to fade into the late Friday night.

The music rehearsal never comes, as they put aside the whole night to bond and sand new Bashi for the group. A "ritual in becoming a taiko player," Steven called it. Groups form as conversations about school, life, and taiko swirl around the room. Steven and another boy drift to the back and start to write and discuss advanced mathematics on the chalkboard as they continue to sand. Sharon and I talk about our lives as students as the night continues to pass. She tells me about some of the history of the group and some of its previous members.

As time passes, the sound of music shifts to funny YouTube videos as the clock passes 10:00 pm, even though rehearsal was supposed to end at 9:30 pm. Nobody noticed for a while, encapsulated in companionship and the creation of the perfect Bashi. Eventually, people notice the time and realize they need to go. People trickle out one by one over the next little bit of time, as Sharon starts to clean up. They wave goodbye and make hearts to each other in the above window as they leave the building, one by one, back into the outside world, until next week. Throughout my data collection, I uncovered three main overarching themes: group identity and the environment's two facets: its casualness and its social aspects. As all of these ideas relate to the environment or aspects of identity, there was a significant amount of overlap and co-operation between the themes that revealed further sub-themes that subtler. In this section, I will explain how these themes presented themselves and how they interweaved across my data collection.

Group Identity

The members of Tora Taiko have created a collaborative sense of identity through each of their contributions. This sense of identity for the group came from a combination of traditions and the personalities of individuals. "I think we have all contributed a bit of our personality into the group," Sharon told me. The group built a community in which everyone has fed into the "personality of the group," as she called it. Even though this taiko ensemble was only six years old, traditions of friendship, inside jokes, and rehearsal practice were foundational to how the group viewed itself as an entity. The group's members viewed the overall unit as having affected the ensemble's considerations in performances and rehearsals. The vice president, Lisa, stated that they try to "remain true to who the group is," in their deliberations of what to include or where they choose to perform. In a promotional poster, the ensemble described themselves as "a warm, friendly, goofy, loving bunch who would like to share [their] unique brand of camaraderie with others." This phrase showed the group's confidence in what, or who, they are.

The passion they had for what they did was a substantial part of this identity. Sharon would shout at passersby, telling them to stop in the rehearsal by yelling, "TAIKOO!" Members, new and old, were met with excitement and joy as they arrived for rehearsal every week. The leaders of Tora Taiko would cheer for the newer members when they performed a pattern or song, successfully or if they achieved something difficult for them. Sharon would jump up and down as the drums became more in sync, and the percussive sounds started to bounce around the room. The group overflowed with zeal, with each member's passion manifesting in unique ways. Some members were meek, but determinate, as not everyone could match the outward exuberance of the President.

Strength and power are traits that are quintessential to the identity of a taiko player. However, these are qualities that the members of Tora Taiko struggled back and forth through the exploration of their group's personality. During their weekly warm-up, Steven shouted out exercises, stretches, and movements. Everyone marched in an uneven circle with thoughts of perfecting their posture and adherence to Stephen's orders. They used the first 20 minutes to find their balance and push their muscles to the limits. "You should feel very rooted, or you should feel powerful," Sharon said calmly as the circle continued. Many of the members of Tora Taiko believe that strength is the foundation of taiko players. "Cause you need to be able to hit pretty hard," Lisa explained, "and to be in control of yourself." However, when members of the group compared themselves to professional taiko ensembles, they would say that they did not have the same power as "real" taiko players. After rehearsal, Sharon explained the intensity of professional taiko players' intensity and of what they are capable. She compared her group to the professional ensembles by stating, "We are, like, flipped over trash bins and just kind of goofy."

The perceived lack of strength and power in what the group does leads to the theme of tradition. Sharon described the group's goofiness as something she wanted to preserve, as she had "tried to keep that tradition," for the course of her presidency. Even with the group's short history of only six years, every aspect of what they did had tradition woven into it. Tradition was the foundation of who they were and why they did what they did. "I think we tend to hold onto many traditions in the club," Lisa revealed to me, as she contemplated her weekly rehearsals. When I talked to Lisa about the group from six years ago, she explained that "that was where the traditions of taiko [originated], as well as, the semi-traditions of the group, like the structure of rehearsals." As the members of the group changed, traditions flowed in and out. Sometimes, before rehearsal began, Sharon reminisced aloud about previous iterations of Tora Taiko, when

she was a newer member. "We used to all walk back together as far as we could before our paths diverged, and we would talk into, [this] place, where if you talk it echoes." While tradition was foundational to the group, some of it was reasonably malleable. "As the years have progressed, little bits have gotten added," Lisa explained in regards to the group's various traditions. New members, sometimes, came along and brought new taiko traditions that the group implemented, purely because they wanted to. While open to changes to the ensemble's traditions, members of the group relied on foundations of the group's past for guidance.

Since this ensemble's foundation is within a musical art that stems from Asia, the traditions vary vastly from the ensembles that primarily lead Western music. As each rehearsal began, the group gathered in a circle and bowed their head to the floor. "Yoroshiku onegaishimasu," a Japanese phrase used to say thank you before something occurs, which roughly translates to "please treat me kindly," was said in unison with a pause of silence afterward. A rhythmic language called kuchi shoga was used throughout the rehearsal to teach rhythm patterns by setting beats to Japanese syllables. They used kuchi shoga combined with Western musical symbols that they knew, such as dynamic markings or repeat signs.

During songs, the players shouted Japanese words called "Kiai" as rhythmic parts of each piece. The rehearsals ended with a similar ritual as the beginning, but this time with the words, "Arigatou gozaimasu," a Japanese expression of deep gratitude. Beyond these small cultural inclusions, Japanese cultural immersion was somewhat absent. "We inherited it from whoever did this," Sharon said when asked about the club's Japanese traditions. When the ensemble did not use Japanese taiko traditions for technique or rehearsal framing, the group focused more on themselves than the culture of the art form. "I feel the less you use Japanese, the more appropriative it seems," Sharon said with a hint of worry. "We still kind of try to make ourselves

aware of that fact." While the group chose to rely on local traditions, most of the time, rather than Japanese traditions of taiko drumming, they expressed a desire to represent the culture respectfully still. Although this does not mean that participation in the group was a culturally enriching experience for the members. When asked whether participation in the taiko ensemble increased her interest in Japanese culture, Sharon stated, "it hasn't made me look into it that much more."

By the consolidation of the local traditions with the Japanese traditions of taiko drumming, a unique form of taiko, as an art, has been born within Tora Taiko. The group accommodates its members and its environmental context, with its location at a university. The consistent comparison of this taiko ensemble and "real taiko" shows that they believe they have drifted off the traditional path. "It's a fusion thing everywhere you go," Sharon declared, in her explanation of taiko groups in America. Sharon believes they fit within those fusion groups, by blending the Japanese traditions with the American community. This fusion idea was apparent even within their group name, "Tora Taiko," as tora, in Japanese, translates to tiger, the mascot for Princeton University. Tora Taiko viewed their social environment and group identity as essential to their unique version of taiko. "I don't know why that's such an important part of taiko, but it is," Sharon reflected.

Casual Environment

The environment created by Tora Taiko in its rehearsal space has many facets to it that affected the members' experience. These environmental aspects contributed to the group's positives and negatives and the impact it had on the members. One of the aspects of the environment was its casualness or looseness. It was loose in terms of the group's expectations,

preparedness, and experience level. With the group "recently [doubling] in size,...[to] about 14," most people knew the others on a personal basis. The small size allowed for the group to do things directly for its members, such as when they bought bubble tea for everyone based on individual orders. The casualness of the environment set a precedent for the social context. The group canceled rehearsals in favor of bonding activities. Members showed up 30 minutes late and were still met with excitement as they came in the door. While the small number of members created intimate interactions, it was sometimes a point of concern for the group leaders. In casual conversation, multiple people deeply expressed the need for more members. When I initially talked with the group about their participation in my research, they were worried that my observations might scare potential members.

As a whole, the group had low expectations for its members regarding punctuality, commitment, and musical competency. Weekly rehearsals included members coming between 10 and 30 minutes late at scattered points, including the group's leading officers. Sometimes, Steven, the person who held the key to the rehearsal room, was even late to rehearsals, forcing the group to wait outside, in the hallway, to arrive. Some members never showed up at all, but the club members reacted with a sad face rather than one of anger or disappointment. The group only met once a week for an hour and a half beyond performing. Performances were volunteer experiences, with many including as little as three people. As they learned the music in rehearsals, the newer members struggled with the patterns and the drumming technique. The veteran members would drift over quietly and whisper tips to help them improve, or play it for them as an example. People messed up loudly without shame. The leaders continually repeated the material to allow people to catch up and get another chance at it.

With many people entering the group without any experience in taiko, the leaders gave plenty of time for the new members to get used to the feeling of playing the drums and comprehending the musical patterns. In a university environment, in which there are high expectations for almost everything, including extracurriculars. Some of the members found solace in the lack of expectations. "We just chill an hour and a half a week, and we can goof around for the first 15 minutes," Lisa said happily, in a comparison of Tora Taiko to some of the other musical ensembles on campus. "This is, like, just...we're kids having fun on a Friday night." There were times when some of the leaders expressed slight concern about the low expectations set forth, even though they were the ones who created that kind of environment. "They used to pay attention more," Sharon whispered to me during a rehearsal in which a few of the members talked over her instructions. There were other times when the leaders had visible expressions of worry on their faces about the number of people that would show up to the rehearsals. In terms of musical competency, despite low expectations for musical quality, the veterans of the group exhibited competent musical skills that included the execution of syncopated rhythms, achieving musical cohesion, and musical phrasing. The veterans encouraged this level of musical quality for the newcomers, although they understood and expected slow progression. It would be wrong of me to label these people as non-musicians or people without musical knowledge, because they expressed all the qualities of musicians, only without traditional training.

Due to low expectations for members, the group tended to avoid, or even forget about, performance preparation until the last moment. Lisa laughed, "I had learned the piece that I played about a week before we performed it." With performance rarely mentioned at all in rehearsals, performance preparation was something at the back of the minds of the members. "I

think it's because we are so linear in our thought process," Lisa explained, "that we're just like, oh, we'll figure it out when the time comes, and then all of a sudden the time's almost here." On top of low expectations for performance preparation, the group did not seek out or publicize public performances. As shown on their social media page, the group has posted only once in the past year and has incorrect contact information listed. Despite their lack of social media presence, Sharon told me that the group consistently got performance requests on their Facebook page. However, this does not mean the group chose to take those opportunities. "I usually don't respond to them because I'm an idiot and can't respond to things on time," she laughed.

Due to the members' lack of experience with the art form or music in general, the environment tended to be casual in the ensemble. Most of what the members knew about taiko drumming and music, as untrained musicians, lay in tradition and what had been passed down. Many of the members "never had heard of taiko before" they joined the group, so they were not sure if they were correctly following the practices of Japanese taiko drumming."There's not much we know about the practice of taiko, so we just, uh, hold on to whatever we do know...We just inherited it from whoever did this," Sharon sighed worriedly, amidst concerns of cultural appropriation. Also, there were no members with any previous musical training, besides participation in secondary school ensembles, the newer members were dependent on the veterans for musical guidance. With no members with any musical training or cultural context, the group was left in the dark with tradition as their only light to them guide them.
 Even though the environment was so rooted in casualness and looseness, some of the group's members became defensive when members decided to leave permanently. The tight-knit nature of the ensemble painted members who quit permanently as a traitor to the group. "You should interview him about why he quit," Sharon slyly remarked when talking of one of the members

who decided not to come back this year. While the group was understanding of failure, lateness, and time conflicts, this understanding faded away when people decided to leave the ensemble forever, even if their reason may be warranted. Not at all of the members found that same tight-knit community environment, but usually, that resulted in their decision to leave the group. This defensiveness was somewhat contradictory to the casual environment that the group had established.

Social Environment

With a small group in such a casual environment, an intimate, the members established a tight-knit social community. Members talked to each other before and after the rehearsal time, filling the space with loud laughter and chatter. One of the members got on the floor to show Sharon the position that she saw a professional taiko player during a performance. When I arrived at the rehearsal, the majority of the members came up to me and introduced themselves and told me that they were excited that I came. "We just chill an hour and a half a week, and we can goof around for the first 15 minutes," Lisa told me, explaining their weekly rehearsal process. Once the rehearsal began, they moved around the circle in the warm-up, shouting inside jokes and animal noises to make each other laugh. Even when the group canceled rehearsal to bond and sand new Bashi, the majority of the members still showed up. For this bonding session, everyone stayed 30 minutes beyond the planned rehearsal time as well, not even registering it as a timed engagement. "These are weird, funny people I like being with," Sharon happily stated. The group had a free social environment that encouraged their "unique brand of camaraderie," as they called it on their poster. Some members of the group even considered this ensemble as a

family. "Never date within taiko, aka taiko incest," Dalia said to me during one of their rehearsals.

The subtle power structure of Tora Taiko lightly framed the social environment. With the consistent two sides of veterans and newcomers, there were always leaders versed in the traditions, techniques, and language of the ensemble. The leaders were the people who created the environmental precedent, preserved the environment, and helped the newcomers adjust and feel welcome into the group. These people served as role models of sorts for the newer members. Sharon shared that, "[she] really looked up to some of the other people in the group," and that contributed to her staying in the ensemble. The veterans of the group did not exert their power or experience over the newcomers. Instead, they tried to help them subtly, for instance, the inclusion of a "self-practice time," where veterans could help the new members individually with the challenging portions. One night, Lisa decided to pull the newest member outside of the room for the rehearsal to teach him one of the songs and get him caught up with everyone else. Thinking of the group as a family, the leaders passed down traditions to each generation, emphasizing preservation. Due to experience, the veterans and the newcomers were distinctly separated. However, that line sometimes blurred, as the veterans did not accentuate the power difference. They treated all members equally.

The context of the group also impacted the social environment. Princeton University sponsored Tora Taiko as a musical ensemble. The group met in the basement of Princeton University's music building. The group members moved from their student lives into taiko rehearsal once a week on Friday nights. In such a large university, some of the members saw the group as an opportunity to make new friends. Many of them stumbled into the weekly rehearsals with moans about homework, tests, and relationships. "Ya know...there's always like some kind

of pressure outside," Sharon shared, talking about the stresses of student life. Some of the members said that the stresses of being a student even carried into extracurriculars. Tora Taiko was one of the few non-auditioned musical ensembles on campus. Members voiced their opinions by saying that auditions "kind of [bring] some nerves or tension into the group because....if [you're] not contributing enough, they could just cut [you] for the next time." They enjoyed that there, the group did not have an audition process. Tora Taiko emphasized a low-pressure social environment that allowed for the members just to be "kids having fun on a Friday night." For them, this environment served as an escape from the greater stresses of university student life. "I really like nothing better than beating the hell out of a duct-taped garbage bin at the end of the week to just be calm and relaxed," Lisa told me, with a smile on her face.

The group's existence in the university context had created two polarizing lifestyles for some of the members, student life and being in the taiko ensemble. Lisa explained that taiko rehearsal on Friday evenings served as "this kind of like...oasis, where it's totally different than anything else," that she did. Sharon said that she "never [feels] pressure when [she's] in here," and wanted to create that environment for all the newer members as well. For some, "there [was] a difference between what [they] [did] in [their] major" and the "black and white" of taiko rehearsal. This "free form" opportunity to make music allowed the members to make music in a supportive and friendly social environment. The group created the environment in which they could say, "I don't have to even think about anything else." Having "that kind of separation" allowed them to enjoy being present at the rehearsal. Even though the stresses of student life still surrounded them, they could relish in the music-making and social bonding, even just for one and a half hours a week.

The group had become something personally significant for its members within their lives, through the environment created within Tora Taiko's ensemble space. "This is a place where I don't have to adjust," Sharon assuredly remarked. The members were able to be themselves here when a lot of them felt stressed or isolated in the university environment. "It's something that I'm looking forward to at the end of the week," Lisa said with a subtle smile. The members described the rehearsal space as an "oasis" and a "sacred space." They wanted the companionship and the experiences. They cared more about that than the rehearsing. They focused very little on performance. By only meeting once a week, the group gave its members something to look forward to. "That's why we bow in and we bow out," Sharon told me, in her explanation of what makes their rehearsal a sacred space. The silence and contemplation during the bowing sealed the space and time that they were together. Sharon elaborated on the significance of the group by saying, "I think for the people who come here and stay, like as members, it's definitely an important part of, I mean, it's an important part of MY life. I don't know about anybody else. If anything, for the memories." Sharon's statement showed that the group's social environment was a catalyst of personal significance for the members.

Discussion

The purpose of this ethnography is to discover the meaning and values within the music-making of people participating in Tora Taiko. This group specializes in Japanese Taiko drumming, on the Princeton University campus. The research questions used are below:
How does this music-making group develop Japanese culture within its small community? How does this affect the nature of the group and how its participants interact?
How does the university setting affect the social dynamics and environment of the group?

Why does this group perform together, and how do they view one another? Is it more of a competitive outlook or more of a family outlook?

All of the themes and sub-themes uncovered in data collection were all interconnected and collaborative. The group's various facets had to all be present for the group to stay the way it was. Tradition underpinned almost everything the group did. The founders of Tora Taiko established a casual rehearsal environment that breeds social interaction, personal significance, and a powerful sense of identity. This environment was something the newer members wished to carry on. The members maintained the traditions in order to accomplish that same environment. The cultural traditions of taiko fit in more subtly, although they did overlap with the local traditions of the group, occasionally. While the group was relatively inexperienced in the culture, they viewed some cultural inclusion and adherence as necessary to the group, as long as it did not overshadow the social and traditional aspects. In addition to the fact that there was a minimal amount of Japanese cultural influence on the group's habits and actions, more cultural depth was not often sought after. Members did not become more interested in Japanese culture through participation in the ensemble, which suggested that the group did little to develop Japanese culture in an American community. Instead, the group used the Japanese art form and cultural aspects merely as a medium for social interaction and music-making.

Tora Taiko represented an idea highlighted in articles by Asai (1995, 2005) and Konagaya (2001). Sharon recognized that their group is a fusion between Japanese traditions and the ideas of American communities. Konagaya told of the paths in which taiko has divulged in America. Tora Taiko has created its path within this idea. Tora Taiko, even, experimented with taiko composition in its previous years, an idea that is uniquely American (Asai, 1995). Konagaya saw this combination of values as transformative and accommodative, rather than

deteriorating. The ensemble had made the Japanese art form relevant to their context and the members of their group. The ensemble still found cultural adherence and respect imperative, as long as that did not mean the sacrifice of what they believe their group required.

The casual environment of the group appeared to be a double-edged sword. The low-pressure environment was foundational to the group, so, for the leaders, that became a difficult thing to disrupt. The low expectations allowed people to try taiko drumming for the first time, be stress-free amongst student life, and have fun in a social context. These were positives for the group and partly why people chose to participate. However, the small number of group members caused a small degree of stagnancy. The leaders appeared to be afraid of pushing a little too hard in fear of losing members. Sharon expressed to me her interest in increasing focus within rehearsals. She did not share this with the rest of the group. She did not want to disrupt the nature of the rehearsal. This potential disruption could have broken the fabric of the group's identity, which may have caused people to leave or newcomers to be scared away. They could not afford this, with such a small representation in the group.

The members wanted to create an environment like this because of the university context. From conversations with members and the group's observations, it was made clear that the environment of Princeton University was highly stressful in terms of academics, extracurricular groups, and social relationships. The stark contrast between the Tora Taiko rehearsal space and the university setting helped members find relaxation and enjoyment on Friday evenings. The group members used the Friday evenings as a time to look forward to during the week in which they could be stress-free and escape student life. This duality created two lifestyles that varied in nature for each member. Due to the university setting, some of the members chose to participate as a means for social interaction. So, a significant reason they got members in the first place was

due to the context. University students wholly made up the taiko ensemble, allowing them to relate to each other in a variety of ways. The context was a catalyst to further social interaction as it gave them things about which to talk. The music-making in the group became significant because it occurred with people that the members found comfort and familiarity.

Another way that the university context affected the group was in terms of expectations. As a cultural music ensemble representing Japanese art form not often viewed in American communities, the community had little, if any, expectations for the group. The lack of expectations means that the ensemble could perform anything they wished, with any degree of quality they wished, as the Western audience had little conceptualization of what a quality taiko ensemble looked like or sounded. Performances were not expected frequently, if ever, from the group. With low expectations from the community and American society, the group had free reign to do as they pleased. This freedom allowed them to design rehearsals more openly and be more casual in their group environment. This openness contrasted with other ensembles on the Princeton University campus, such as acapella groups and choirs, because the Western community had predefined societal expectations for those groups. The absence of expectations for Tora Taiko allowed them to make the music more meaningful to the group members and focus less on precise performance preparation. Society did not pre-describe the identity group, which gave them the chance to create their own group identity.

As shown in the research, the group focused less on performance practice and more on the cultivation of a casual social environment. The focus shift from precise musicianship towards low-pressure music-making caused the environment to be less competitive and more supportive. Due to the small group size and how the group conceptualized their collective identity, the group functioned as a family. The group had generations of members in which traditions passed down

year after year. The air filled with encouragement and motivation rather than pressure or competition. The social connections between members became intimate, and the group had personal significance to the members. The significance came from social interactions and the context of the music-making, rather than the music itself. The music was merely a medium for meaningful musical experiences.

A line began to appear between understanding and betrayal due to the group's conceptualization of themselves as a family. The group was loose, and understanding of its members, in that people could be late to rehearsals, miss rehearsals entirely, or not participate in any performances — the ensemble allowed for inexperience and slow learning as it was understanding of failure. If any members did not conceptualize the group in this way, they might have felt like they did not fit in. Because of this, they may not have found the same degree of personal significance in the group. These members were, most likely, the ones who quit the group permanently. The remaining members saw this as a betrayal, with a lack of that sense of understanding, from before. Even when members quit and had warranted or valid reasons to leave, the members, who viewed the group as a family, interpreted it as a lack of care or interest for the people in the group.

The members found significance in the group because it was a place where they could be vulnerable, without fear of ridicule. The fact that this group was a musical ensemble allowed them to be creative and express themselves in a social context, a place they may have felt more inclined to do so. The people, the energy, and music became significant when the members chose to become a part of the family. If they did not buy into this idea, they often left the group or did not find significance in music-making. While all of these people could have interacted outside of this ensemble, the rehearsals gave them a definite cut time and location in which they could

participate in social music-making. This consistency allowed for meaningful experiences amongst the craziness of the university environment.

The reasons that these group members found meaning in their participation aligned with student perceptions of meaningfulness found by Cape (2012), in her study of high school instrumental musicians. Cape found that students valued opportunities to achieve, just as with Lisa, who said she enjoyed the fact that taiko gave her something concrete that she could complete from start to finish. In Cape's study, students wanted to form and strengthen relationships. Within Tora Taiko, multiple members joined for social interaction. They came to rehearsals focused on bonding, and not the music-making. Students, studied in Cape's research, wished to construct identities as individuals and group members. Her research correlates to when members of the taiko ensemble explored their identities as taiko players and group members. Cape found that students desired to express themselves and communicate with others. Tora Taiko emphasizes collaborative music-making as shown by Lisa and Sharon's desire to express themselves through the music. Lastly, the students that Cape investigated wished to engage with and through music. These qualities were visible in the members of Tora Taiko based on the joy they found in their music-making and performing, and through their passion for the ensemble. Cape also talks of the importance of context in musical experiences and how the context can affect the depth of the meaningfulness and how the meaningfulness comes to fruition. The university environment of Tora Taiko had an immense impact on why the group became meaningful for the members and the degree to which this meaningfulness played a part in their lives.

Through a robust conceptualization of group identity that accompanied an environment of understanding and social engagement, the members of Tora Taiko had personally significant

and meaningful musical experiences. The ensemble performed quality music as amateur musicians, even though the performance of this music was not vital to them. The leaders transmitted musical knowledge through the use of educational and musical skills, such as support and encouragement. The leaders learned these skills through group participation. Some questions that arose from these conclusions were:

- Are the participants in this group self-aware of their individual musicianship and its growth through their participation in the ensemble?

- Does participation in this ensemble increase their desire to participate in music-making beyond the group?

- Is the quality of the music relevant to them as an ensemble, or will they perform with any level of quality and still be fulfilled?

Conclusion

Tora Taiko on Princeton University's campus was a cultural musical ensemble that heavily focused on the members and their experiences rather than the technicalities of music-making. Through meaningful music-making experiences, the participants enjoyed the music-making, even as untrained musicians. The group members grew as people, students, and musicians through their participation in this musical ensemble. In my observations of this group, I realized that music-making does not need to be precise and professional to be meaningful. This group of amateur musicians functioned as a performing musical ensemble that could perform, with amateurs as the music teachers and learners.

The findings of this research suggest that modern music-making experiences can be meaningful without any training in traditional musical skills. A significant degree of music

education bases itself on training students to interact with Western music through traditional methods. This study showed that students were capable of making music without those methods. The members of Tora Taiko demonstrated that people are innately musical and do not need musical training to make meaningful music that is capable of performing.

Another implication of this research is that ensembles do not need to be performance-based to be meaningful or valuable to the participants. While performances served as their primary form of recruitment, most of Tora Taiko had stronger memories of meaningful rehearsal traditions than performances. The group members were more focused on creating the music in a social context, rather than performance preparation. The ensemble setting showed that people want to participate in music-making that takes place in supportive social contexts. The participants were interested in creative activities, but they all wanted an environment with low pressure and understanding of failure. The casual environment of the taiko ensemble allowed people to engage in music-making with the help of others without feeling self-conscious or embarrassed.

Lastly, the findings of this research suggest that societal expectations of traditional Western ensembles limit music-making or student interest in participation. In an environment surrounded by traditional Western musical groups, Tora Taiko had free reign to teach, perform, and learn whatever they pleased within the art form. Western audiences have minimal expectations for a taiko ensemble. Therefore, Tora Taiko could focus on the aspects of the ensemble that made the music meaningful for its participants. In modern music education, the majority, if not all, of school ensembles spend most of their class time on preparation for concerts and performances. This focus on performance is, in part, due to the groups' expectations by the administration, parents, and community. In most American communities, these traditional

Western ensembles must be up to a standard of quality that does not exist for cultural groups. These expectations force ensembles, such as choir, band, or orchestra, to focus on precision music-making rather than meaningful music-making.

In order to further investigate these implications, further research could investigate other musical ensembles in this vein. First, one could look at musical ensembles that are entirely lead by amateur musicians, whether they be student-run or not, in a variety of contexts. This research would allow for a perspective on how meaningfulness can change across contexts, but with untrained musicians. In this research, one could investigate whether amateur music-making experiences could be meaningful for the participants, despite the absence of musical training. Another possible vein of exploration could be with cultural ensembles. Research into more cultural ensembles could reveal if meaningful music-making is consistent without the pressures of Western expectations. These suggestions for further research will allow for a more in-depth perspective into whether Tora Taiko represents a broader picture of amateur musicians and meaningful music-making, or if this is truly a unique case.

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