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SYTE/ON Ensemble March 2, 2007



SYTE/On Ensemble: Taking Taiko and Cerritos to Another Level

By Glen Creason

Judging by the full house, mixed between young hipsters and wise possessors of distinguished gray, the talents of the Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble and the ON Ensemble are not exactly a secret. There was a buzz denoting something special about to happen in the big hall on Friday night and audience volume without the fuel of alcohol sometimes means a lot. This being my maiden voyage with both groups I expected a good Taiko performance, which I got, and then much, much more. Both groups are polished and professional and each performed marvelously basing the proceedings on the ancient art of Taiko drumming. Yet, this was an evening of transcendence by both.

Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble, henceforth known as SYTE performed most of the first half of the show and stayed close to the Kumi-Daiko or ensemble drumming style while adding visual charm and choreography to their songs. Some of the initial pieces such as “Guardians,” and “Hitenko” were dreamy and almost hypnotic but the precision of the four players alternating from contemplative to an increasing rhythm raised the pulse of onlookers without raising the volume. “Dan Dan Batake” was demanding and took side-by-side drumming at a brisk pace dependent on razor sharp timing. “Ramen Ondo” was light-hearted but almost pop sounding, a refreshing change from the intensity of the opening numbers and even included an into the audience foray complete with gifts to a lucky few in the orchestra seats. “Wamblegleshka” brought out eight musicians and pulled out all the stops and instruments from didgeridoo to the O-Daiko as SYTE and ON got it on together for the first time of the night. The finishing kick of “So Du So” was utterly dazzling with choreography and surgical precision between the four drummers. Despite the sophistication of the art form there was an edgy, primal feel to the rapid drumming in unison. SYTE is probably not a group you would want to follow if you were a performer.

Unfazed, the youngsters of ON Ensemble just simply tore up the second half of the show. This is one of the most innovative and musically fresh groups ever to take the stage in the big hall. From the magical sound of the opening “Gengakki” and its 13 string “okoto” playing to the lyrical and delicious “Watashi Watashitachi” the ON ensemble was playing with utterly esoteric instruments vibrant music you could hear on the radio and really dig. When is the last time you heard taiko drumming on the radio? The group could entertain alone on the fevered, four-part groove they achieve with their drums as in “Yama Song,” “Little Man” or the pure energy and synergy of “Zeecha” but they seemed to reaching for the stars on this night. The risky and totally avant-garde combining of turntable, western drum kit and taiko on “Turns” actually made for beautiful sounds and Shoji Kameda’s powerful throat singing on “After Rain” just expanded the now riveted audience’s musical consciousness. This is a very talented and unique group with the guts to take a centuries old art form to another level. This could never be confused with the sometimes dirty word: fusion. The taiko drumming is at the center of the ON performance but glitters like gold when surrounded by so much enthusiasm and polish.