

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## TaikoProject: 25 Years of Rhythmic Innovation in Los Angeles

R. Daniel Foster · Tuesday, July 29th, 2025

I first came across [TaikoProject](#) nine years ago when I took a 12-week taiko drum class, which I wrote about for *the Los Angeles Times*. I remember being attracted to the Japanese rhythmic art form because it looked fierce.



TaikoProject celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2025. Photo: Kentaro Terra

Here's what I discovered: taiko required both mental and physical sharpness. There's plenty to keep track of: correct form; knowing the oral musical notation, called *kuchi shoga*; memorizing beat patterns and then counting them out; and keeping time with the foundational beat set by the leader, not to mention keeping in sync with everyone else.

Nearly a decade later, TaikoProject has turned 25, and to celebrate, the 17-member troupe performed at Walt Disney Concert Hall on July 19. TaikoProject was joined by the Grammy Award-winning band [Quetzal](#) and singer and multi-instrumentalist [Sumie Kaneko](#), known for her work with traditional Japanese instruments like the koto (a type of zither) and the three-stringed shamisen.



TaikoProject artistic director Masato Baba plays a bamboo flute known as the shinobue. Photo: Kentaro Terra

Known for its politically and socially conscious music, Quetzal was born during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising and pushback against Proposition 187, which denied undocumented immigrants access to public services (the measure was approved, but was found unconstitutional and was voided).

## Redefining the Sound and Feel of Taiko

TaikoProject, founded by [Bryan Yamami](#) and [Masato Baba](#), has spent the past quarter-century redefining what it means to be an American taiko ensemble. Their fame grew five years after forming, when in 2005, they became the first American taiko group to win the prestigious Tokyo International Taiko Contest, besting all of the Japanese groups in the competition. The Ford Foundation has since recognized the troupe as “One of America’s Cultural Treasures.”



TaikoProject has an ensemble of 17 members. Photo: Kentaro Terra

The Disney Concert Hall performance showcased TaikoProject's signature electrifying blend of intricate choreography underscored by vocals, the koto, marimba, and a bamboo flute known as the shinobue. The evening was at once lyrical and thunderous—there was no need for earplugs, but I remember wearing them when I took lessons.



TaikoProject founders Masato Baba and Bryan Yamami. Photo: Kentaro Terra

The event was also a dual album release party for TaikoProject's new studio album, "25," and their

collaborative EP with Quetzal, “Concrete Saplings.”



TaikoProject drummers. Photo: Kentaro Terra

Over the decades, the ensemble has built an impressive resume of partnerships, having collaborated with Peter Gabriel, Stevie Wonder, Hans Zimmer, Alicia Keys, and John Legend, among others. TaikoProject has performed at the Academy Awards, the Grammy Awards, and on numerous television shows, films, commercials, and music videos. The 2020 Tokyo Olympic Opening Ceremonies featured TaikoProject’s audio tracks.

## Grand Master Seiichi Tanaka



The band Quetzal joined the TaikoProject in the program's latter half. Photo: Kentaro Terra

The group has direct lineage to Grand Master Seiichi Tanaka, considered the father of the art form in North America. Tanaka immigrated from Japan to the United States in 1967, and the next year founded the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, the first such ensemble in North America. Jeanne Mercer and Russel Baba, the parents of TaikoProject artistic director Masato Baba, studied under Tanaka. Their son began playing at age six.



Singer and multi-instrumentalist Sumie Kaneko. Photo: Kentaro Terra

Taiko drums originated in feudal Japan, and were used in Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, as imperial court music, and as a way to inspire troops.

## Classes and Community

The taiko drumming class I took nearly a decade ago has expanded into a roster of offerings. The [TaikoProject Academy](#), housed in a Little Tokyo studio, offers beginner, intermediate, and advanced classes, youth programs, and performance opportunities for students.

[TaikoProject](#), 505 E. 3rd Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013 / The group can also be [reached by email](#).

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