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[Embodying Empowerment: Raging Asian Women's Toronto Taiko Festival](#)

Written by Sara Constant Category: [General Music Discussion](#) Published: 09 August 2017



Their name kind of says it all.

Raging Asian Women – RAW – is a Taiko drumming collective of East and Southeast Asian women based in Toronto. Founded in 1998 and largely self-taught, RAW is part of a modern, North American reclamation of Japanese Taiko – where a big part of that reclamation has to do with countering stereotypes of who Asian women can be. RAW is a music ensemble, but they're also an activist group, and a feminist collective – and this month in Toronto, they're also organizing the second edition of the Toronto Taiko Festival, a three-day-long exploration of Taiko as an art form, educational tool, and vehicle for social justice.

“RAW really started with a simple idea of shattering the stereotype of the Asian woman as being meek and quiet and subservient,” says RAW member Young Park, who serves as the festival director. “RAW traces its lineage through the North American Taiko movement’s unique history, one that is integrally linked to the Asian American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s when Asian Americans and Canadians mobilized en masse around issues of racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. RAW, as a group, advances this movement by being the intentional embodiment of empowered Asian women on stage together. This is just a fancy way of saying that by playing big drums in a powerful way as Asian females, we are empowering others to find pride and strength in who they are.”

Park, who joined the ensemble ten years ago, came to Taiko through classical music and dance. “My background is in classical viola, and I was also the artistic director of my own dance company in Cleveland for 12 years,” she says. “Joining a Taiko drumming group (with both drum playing and movement) was a natural fit for me, as well as having the experience to lead and organize large projects like the festival.”

RAW organized the first edition of the Toronto Taiko Festival back in 2012, so this second edition, running from August 25 to 27 of this year, has been a long time coming. As part of the planning process, Park travelled to the 2015 North American Taiko Festival in Las Vegas, and also participated in a residency on Sado Island, Japan, where she lived with apprentices and studied with artists from the renowned Japanese Taiko ensemble, Kodo.

It’s clear that RAW’s mandate has always centred around community building and empowerment – much of which involves working with other marginalized artists within their local Asian Canadian, feminist and queer communities – and the festival reflects this focus. Guest artists who Park is bringing to this year’s festival include Mark H. Rooney, a Scottish-Japanese performer who was a leader in the creation of collegiate Taiko programs on the east coast of the United States; PJ Hirabayashi, a second-generation Japanese American who was a part of the Asian American movement in the 1970s, and who will be hosting a public forum on her activist initiative TaikoPeace; and LA-based Taiko artist and educator Joe Small.

“And of course, RAW could not organize a festival without an Asian queer woman representing!” adds Park. “That [will be] Kristy Oshiro, who is one of the fiercest Taiko players in North America.”

The artists, alongside local Taiko groups, will present workshops and classes throughout the three days, culminating in “Bang On!”, a final concert on the evening of Saturday, August 26.

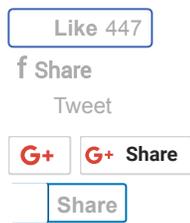
“When I met with many of the Taiko groups in the region, almost a year ago, many of the practitioners wanted a space and time to be able to connect with each other, to share ideas, exchange skills,” explains Park. “By organizing the Toronto Taiko Festival, especially the workshop component, regional Taiko players have a chance to meet each other, learn from fabulous international artists, and learn new Taiko skills.”

And the final concert of the festival, she adds, will see local groups’ work with one another truly come to fruition. “The concert is an opportunity for the regional taiko groups to share the stage together – in true community fashion.”

The second edition of the Toronto Taiko Festival, organized by Raging Asian Women (RAW), runs from August 25 to 27, 2017, in Toronto. Details and ticket information can be found at www.torontotaikofestival.org.

Sara Constant is a Toronto-based flutist and music writer, and is digital media editor at The WholeNote. She can be contacted at editorial@thewholenote.com.

Update, Thurs Aug 17, 2017: A previous version of this article stated that Park lived and studied with Kodo; in fact, she lived with Kodo apprentices and studied with Kodo members.:



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