

# TORONTO SUN

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Aki Takahashi, right, plays the traditionally male taiko drums with Nagata Shachu.

## Heartbeat of Japan

T.O.'s Nagata Shachu drummers show feminine touch

It's remarkable what a small woman who was born in a small fishing village on a small island in the Inland Sea of Japan has brought to a T.O.-based drumming ensemble that was made up mainly of lads.

When Aki Takahashi joined Nagata Shachu (formerly the Kiyoshi Nagata Ensemble) seven years back, it was clear to Kiyoshi Nagata, the outfit's artistic director, that she was a force to be reckoned with.

"She has a unique vision that's different from my own, and that's helped expand Nagata Shachu's horizons," Nagata says. "Before Aki joined, we focused mainly on the musical aspect of taiko (Japanese drumming), but she's opened the door by bringing in vocal pieces, the shamisen (a traditional three-stringed instrument) and more movement and choreography on stage."

This will be evidenced when the ensemble premieres its latest production, *Iroha*, tonight and tomorrow at the Fleck Dance Theatre. It's directed by Takahashi, who is also the founder of Ten Ten, a Japanese folk music collective.

"*Iroha* means colour in Japanese," Nagata explains. "When people walk into the theatre, they'll experience and feel the sensation of colour through the various performers, notes and instruments they play. These are not colours in the literal or obvious sense such as blue, red or green, but rather how we can associate colour with nature and in the four seasons."

"Japan has four distinct seasons with various colours and



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emotions attached to each, and all the songs have been influenced and informed by the idea of colour."

Takahashi says that she always see colours when she plays traditional Japanese folk instruments, adding that sometimes they appear note by note depending on her mood.

"It might be something to do with my background," she says. "I was an art student and became a textile designer when I lived in Kyoto. In traditional design, we use seasonal themes using colours and patterns inspired by nature. There are seasons in my music and I really want to bring those seasonal colours onto the stage."

As at every Nagata Shachu performance, the evening will feature thunderous taiko drumming as well as more subtle compositions showcasing instruments such as the shakuhachi (bamboo flute) and shamisen.

"Some of the pieces are celebratory, some are comical, and others more ceremonial," Nagata says.

And, yes, that female energy will infuse the weekend's performances.

"Certain songs are only played by our three female performers and they bring a sense of elegance, grace and refinement (to the pieces)," Nagata says. "The songs that are only played by the men

are occasionally more physical and aggressive."

**NOTE:** Both shows start at 8 p.m. The Fleck Theatre is on the third floor of Queen's Quay Terminal, 207 Queens Quay W. Tickets are \$30 adults/\$25 seniors & students and can be bought by calling 416-973-4000.

Now  
**HEAR**  
This!

**Errol's can't-miss list:**

**1** The Swingin' Blackjacks bring their blues and rockabilly (bluesabilly?) to the Dominion on Queen tonight. \$5. 9:30 p.m. 500 Queen E.

**2** The 12th annual **When Brothers Speak** spoken word concert happens tomorrow at the George Weston Recital Hall at the Toronto Centre for the Arts. 8 p.m. 5040 Yonge St. For tickets, call 416-872-1111 or 647-284-9135, or email [info@upfromtheroots.ca](mailto:info@upfromtheroots.ca).

**3** Treasa Levasseur, Samantha Martin and Shawna Cooper rock the Dakota Tavern Thursday. 10 p.m. 249 Ossington Ave. For more info, call 416-850-4579.