

# YAMATO: The Drummers of Japan return to Wortham Center for the Performing Arts

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Special to Citizen Times  
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To Masa Ogawa, the ancient art of Japanese taiko drumming is more than just music — it's a representation of humanity's power, strength and creativity.

"The drumbeat, like the heartbeat, is the very pulse of life and the epitome of the Japanese spirit," explained Ogawa, who grew up in Nara Prefecture, Japan. "Taiko gives people the chance to feel that energy. When we play taiko, we are striking our own heartbeat, (which) then synchronizes with the heartbeats of those who listen...allowing people to feel an even stronger connection to their inner strength, physically and mentally."

Originally interested in visual arts like painting, graphic design and glass-blowing, Ogawa fell in love with taiko drumming through sheer coincidence, an act of fate that led him to create the now-internationally acclaimed troupe, YAMATO: The Drummers of Japan.

"One day in 1993, my mother discovered a huge taiko (a style of Japanese drum) in the shrine of our village, and she encouraged me to do a performance with this taiko for the shrine festival," Ogawa said. "Together with some friends, I composed a piece and participated in the festival. It was a wonderful experience for all of us. At the time, we had no intention of continuing taiko drumming, but after the festival, we received many requests from neighbors to perform at other events. We accepted all of them."

As time went on, members of this original group began leaving their regular jobs to focus instead on the taiko performances — and that's when Ogawa realized that he and his friends were now a professional troupe. Soon after, in 1998, YAMATO participated in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The following year, they embarked on their first world tour. "Since 1993, we have given nearly 5,000 performances in 55 countries," Ogawa said.

Standing tall as the centerpiece of YAMATO's performances is a large Odaiko drum, weighing over 500 kilograms (over half a ton). Surrounding the Odaiko are dozens of taiko drums of various sizes and unique character, illuminated by sparkling and vibrant lights. The troupe's newest performance, "Hito no Chikara" — coming to downtown Asheville's Wortham Center for the Performing Arts on Feb. 12 and 13 — examines humanity's evolving relationship



**YAMATO: The Drummers of Japan, a Taiko drumming troupe, perform Feb. 12-13 at Wortham Center for the Performing Arts. WORTHAM CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS**

with technology and artificial intelligence, asking, essentially, "Can AI do this?"

Though AI has proven itself in the realm of replication and recreation, artists like YAMATO prove there's no match for the human soul — or for the power of witnessing our own collective strength.

Known for their physical endurance, the drummers of YAMATO train daily to meet the high-energy demands of their performances. "Every morning, they wake around 6 a.m. and run about 10 kilometers through the mountains or rice fields," Ogawa said. After running, they practice shadow drumming — called *suburi* — swinging their drumsticks 3,000 times in the air before even touching a drum. After breakfast, the musicians follow basic exercise routines, building up their strength, then break

for lunch before drumming until dinner. Living together in Asaka-mura, practice and training is the drummers' way of life — a level of artistic dedication that artificial intelligence is unlikely to reproduce.

"When we finally perform, we carry all of these efforts and emotions with us, playing with our full strength," Ogawa said. "It doesn't feel like we are just presenting something we brought with us — it feels like we are creating that day's performance anew."

"We often say that we want to share our energy — but in truth, we also want to receive yours," he continued. "That's why every YAMATO member is truly looking forward to meeting you. Come to the theater and let us feel your energy!"

YAMATO: The Drummers of Japan daytime Student Series performance for

grades K-12 will be held at 10 a.m. Feb. 13. This performance is currently waiting list only. The Student Series is open to school groups, homeschoolers, community groups, families and the public. \$12 for individuals; \$11 for groups of 10 or more. Make reservations at [worthamarts.org/yamato-the-drummers-of-japan-student-series](http://worthamarts.org/yamato-the-drummers-of-japan-student-series) or call (828) 257-4530, Ext. 1.

## Want to go?

**What:** YAMATO: The Drummers of Japan

**When:** 7 p.m. Feb. 12-13

**Where:** Wortham Center for the Performing Arts, 18 Biltmore Ave., Asheville

**Tickets:** \$65, age 15 and younger \$22, [worthamarts.org/yamato-the-drummers-of-japan](http://worthamarts.org/yamato-the-drummers-of-japan)