

From Olympian to Drummer:

Taiko Training at Cirque du
Soleil's *Mystère*

By Aaron Guidry

When I was in fifth grade, I had a very important decision to make. I could either take gymnastics or be in the band. I chose band. Nearly 25 years later, I am enjoying the best of both worlds.

Six years ago, I auditioned for entertainment giant Cirque du Soleil and won the job as percussionist with *Mystère*, Cirque's first resident show in Las Vegas. Since opening in 1993, *Mystère* has presented more than 7,000 performances for over ten million spectators exclusively at Treasure Island. Commonly referred to as the "flower in the desert," *Mystère* helped pave the way for other Cirque du Soleil creations in Las Vegas and abroad.

The band at *Mystère* consists of eight instrumentalists and two female singers. The music is very dependent on the acts that it accompanies, and for that reason, the show is never quite the same. The format and layout is similar every night, but musical phrases can be extended, shortened, or even cut altogether as cued by the action on stage. Many times, these changes occur on the fly with no advance warning. This allows for a degree of flexibility within the show and keeps the energy raw and exciting. I have yet to grow tired of performing *Mystère*, largely due to the organic nature of live theater and the awe-factor of Cirque du Soleil.

TAIKO AT MYSTÈRE

At Cirque, rehearsals are called trainings, ensembles are called teams, instructors are called coaches, and performers are called artists. In addition to my chair as percussionist, I have several other responsibilities, one of which is Taiko Coach. As a coach, I train artists how to drum and ultimately be cast in the Taiko Team. Music accompanies nearly every act in *Mystère*, with taiko integrated into the Opening and Finale of the show. Approximately a third of the 80-member cast is trained to drum.

During the opening number, six drummers create pulsating rhythms that propel the world of *Mystère* into existence. These rhythms are the vital heartbeat, pounding with excitement as the journey unfolds. For the closing number, a 14-member team performs on various sized drums from the 16-inch shime daiko to the 72-inch okedo daiko, launching *Mystère* into the final celebration of the voyage.

From world-class gymnasts, to passion-

ate dancers, to larger-than-life characters, all artists share the ability to perform before an audience with precision, consistency and, above all, emotion. As Taiko Coach, it is my job to mold artists' hands and ears, to guide them from athlete to musician, and to teach musical qualities from technique to expressiveness. Through astonishing presentation, the *Mystère* Taiko Team represents an elegant strength and the synergy of beauty and power.

Each artist has a track for which he or she is responsible. This track usually consists of two main specialty acts and a variety of cues. If an artist's track calls for taiko, the training process begins upon arrival in Las Vegas for integration into the show. Prior to this, artists have completed a training process called "Formation" in Montreal, Cirque's headquarters. During Formation, artists are coached on skills specific to their primary acts. They do not, however, receive any drumming instruction. Taiko training all happens on-site in Vegas.

Where does one begin when teaching an Olympic-quality athlete the concepts of drumming and, more importantly, musicianship? I joke that it is very much like the days when I taught sixth-grade beginning percussion class, except I no longer have parent-teacher conferences! But seriously, once an artist's track has been confirmed, a timeline is then put in motion to gauge progress and plan accordingly. In fact, artists often ask me to provide them with a set of goals to reach within a certain timeframe. I attribute this

to their competitive background and strong work ethic, as artists at Cirque tend to be very performance-driven.

Just like music students, all artists begin with varying basic abilities, but the training process is generally broken down into three phases. Each phase contains specific goals and objectives that are built upon sequentially. To distinguish between the two taiko acts, the first is commonly referred to as Opening Drums and the latter as Finale Taiko. I will focus on the Opening Drums training process below.

WEEKS 1-2: MOVING THE HANDS

During the initial training period, artists meet with me for at least two 30-minute sessions a week. There are instances when several new artists arrive at *Mystère* at the same time. When this occurs, we meet in a group sessions, but soon after, each artist trains one-on-one. Much like a private lesson, quicker progress is achieved when the focus is on the artist's individual needs.

The concentration for these two weeks is on moving the hands consistently while maintaining a relaxed and fluid range of motion. Exercises focus on hand placement, wrist and arm movement, and evenness of sound from hand to hand. The ultimate goal is to create a repertoire of exercises that will be used as warm-ups in future trainings. These exercises also serve as a springboard in learning the show music for Opening Drums.



Mystère artist Anna Panfilova trains Opening Drums.



PHOTO BY RICHARD TERRINE. COSTUME: DOMINIQUE LEMIEUX. COPYRIGHT CIRQUE DU SOLEIL INC.

Variations are created in the moment according to the artist's needs.

Trainings occur in a room with large dance-studio-style mirrors, making it easy to directly monitor motions and match movements. I play along, but also allow opportunities for the artists to play unaccompanied. Playing together quickly develops a degree of confidence, while playing individually gives the artist a soloistic perspective that can then be more easily critiqued. Because self-exploration is such an important part of development, personal playing time is allotted either at the beginning or end of each session.

Of particular note is that during these two weeks, no drums are used at all. The training room has a rubber floor that coincidentally provides great rebound, so it is used as our "drum." While this may seem odd, it is very functional and keeps the atmosphere casual and non-intimidating. The floor and mirrors provide the vehicle for establishing good technical habits that will move artists into the next phase of training.

WEEKS 3–6: LEARNING THE ACT

Weeks 3–6 introduce more rhythms, techniques, and movements that will be used in actual show performance. The artists also begin to train on a real drum, usually of the *nagado* style. Mirrors in the training room continue to be a useful tool in showing the techniques of fluid motion and relaxed body movement. Many times I play directly oppo-

site the artist so that my sticking, movement, and timing can be imitated with more visual ease.

Each artist is given a practice CD that includes audio warm-ups and exercises broken down phrase-by-phrase at three different tempos: slow, medium, and show-tempo. The CD is meant to be used as a resource for play-along between trainings, but it is also used to reinforce listening skills and practice techniques during one-on-one sessions. The training room is equipped with a sound system that allows the artist to hear the audio with ease.

Due to staging and the natural acoustics of the *Mystère* theater, a click is used to coordinate the drumming during the opening of the show. Artists wear discreet in-ear monitors connected to a wireless receiver allowing them, but not the audience, to hear the click track. For this reason, a metronome is used throughout the duration of the trainings. The metronome is also used as a facilitator for ear training, a facet of musicianship that will ultimately factor into the artist's performance. Tempos provide a tangible weekly goal and are gradually increased based on progress.

As more rhythms and patterns are learned, references are gradually made to what is "clean" and what is "dirty." Artists are very familiar with what a clean ensemble statement in their field of specialty feels and looks like; however, they are now asked to determine what a clean ensemble statement *sounds* like. One training method is to play a repetitive

pattern in unison, with the artist following my tempo fluctuations. A variation of this approach is to split the pattern between one of us playing the primary rhythm and the other providing the underlying pulse. Both strategies train artists how to adjust accordingly when any modifications are needed. These exercises also raise awareness of clarity and teach holistic listening skills.

Musical notation is not necessary, and Opening Drums is taught by rote. Generally, counting is in eights as opposed to the standard four beats per measure. The reason for this is two-fold: first, most of the patterns are

in eight-count phrases; and secondly, artists are very familiar with counting in eights due to their background in movement. For artists who are more visual learners, cues are illustrated to represent small groups of patterns and phrases. References are made to note values and their relationships to one another, but learning to read music is not a necessary step in the process.

Inflections of the voice are also used in learning nuances to rhythms. One technique used periodically is to have the artist clap to a pulse while singing rhythmic phrases. This helps to solidify beat alignment as well as develop a feel for the rhythm itself. Another approach is to play and vocalize simultaneously. This facilitates coordination and assists in memorization. Being that Cirque is a multi-cultural company, employing artists from 19 countries at *Mystère* alone, English is not always the first language. Because of this, vocal inflection often provides a great tool for communication when lengthy explanations are simply not practical.

Opening Drums is played seated in a *yatai baishi* manner. This style of movement is essential in providing a visual energy and excitement as the world of *Mystère* gives birth. Just as exercises are used in learning to drum, exercises are also used in learning to drum *and move* at the same time. Choreographed motions are isolated and initially rehearsed away from the drum. A padded wall provides a comfortable back support and physical reference as rocking movements are coordinated

with the drumming. Additionally, hands are separated, giving the artist yet another perspective to draw upon when creating a mental snapshot of the rhythms and accompanying choreography.

Many times, trainings are filmed so that artists can step back, assess, and evaluate progress from an outsider's point of view. Videos of other performances are also compared and used as a standard on which to model. Once a strong understanding of rhythmic passages with choreography and movement is obtained, we are now ready to move into the final stages of preparation for performance.

WEEKS 7–9: EXPLORING THE VENUE

After six weeks of training the artist has become very familiar with a routine set of exercises and, more importantly, how to apply those exercises to Opening Drums. This makes the learning process very streamlined when drawing references to techniques and correcting errors. All aspects of performance, from drumming to movement to listening, are now integrated into one complete thought. With these strong foundations, the focus moves to endurance, consistency, and increasing tempo.

Live tracks that were recorded during actual show performances are now utilized during trainings. These tracks, which are included on the practice CD, contain the click for the artist to follow, the music played by the *Mystère* band, and also the bandleader's vocal cues. Complete run-throughs using the live tracks become a normal part of training. These allow artists to gain a sense of what it will take mentally and physically to perform Opening Drums from beginning to end. Pacing and breathing is also a focus as artists train for endurance.

A big step in this phase is the move from the training room to the stage. Opening Drums is performed with the artists spread throughout the theater and suspended 30 feet above the audience. For this reason, stage trainings also involve non-drumming aspects specifically devoted to the artist's safety. Technicians are on hand to explain general procedures and administer the use of wireless receivers, in-ear monitors, safety gear, and harnesses. Emergency measures are also rehearsed should there be a need to initiate them at any point during the act.

Stage trainings present a new set of chal-

lenges. For one, the artist is now wearing in-ear monitors, allowing the click to be "internal" as opposed to sounding "external" through a speaker, as in the training room. Also, the artist's click is at a calculated milli-second delay from the theater's house system. This delay is used to synchronize the drumming with the band necessitated by a spatial difference between the house speakers and the taiko. Additionally, the drum and artist are now floating, rather than seated securely on the ground, creating new kinesthetic challenges.

Much like going from the practice room to the recital hall, stage trainings present issues that are inherent to the acoustics and environment of the venue. The artist is temporarily placed out of a comfort zone, but quickly learns to adapt by using the listening and technical skills that have been focused upon prior to this point in the training process. Show-condition run-throughs, complete with costuming, audio, rigging, automations, and lighting are rehearsed to recreate a realistic show environment. This training leads artists to full integration into the show.

WEEK 10 and BEYOND: MAINTAINING THE SKILLS

Final details are communicated as artists are given official approval to perform as members of *Mystère's* Taiko Team. Once integrated, an artist remains in the taiko line-up for several shows. This allows time to develop familiarity with this facet of the track, as well as a true sense of drumming within the show environment. Artistic Management will give notes and direction as needed, and a video of every show is also used for consultation in refining the performance.

Should the artist's track call for Finale Taiko, several more trainings will be given specific to the Finale act itself. Exercises used during previous trainings will be further explored as the repertoire of rhythms, movements, and techniques is continually expanded. An additional six to eight weeks of training is usually required, and a similar process of learning, from training room to stage, is applied during integration. While Finale Taiko is a more technical act, the experiences gained through performing Opening Drums are used as a stepping-stone to accelerate this phase of instruction.

Trainings will gradually move from sessions focusing on individual needs to ensemble trainings where the concentration

is on the quality of the act as a team. These group trainings also serve the purpose of allowing back-up taiko artists the opportunity to rotate into the act and maintain their drumming skills. Back-ups are crucial in keeping the production running smoothly in emergencies without sacrificing show integrity. Ensemble trainings are scheduled periodically on an as-needed basis.

Many of the strategies used in the taiko training process at *Mystère* have been borrowed from my teaching experiences as a public school music educator; however, there is no one all-encompassing approach. Adapting the instructional path to an artist's personality and background helps make integration smooth and successful. This flexibility is commonly seen through the transformation of musical vocabulary into more familiar expressions. For example, rather than saying, "increase your dynamic," I might say, "create more energy." Rather than saying, "time accurately through the rests," I might say, "take a breath." And, rather than saying, "subdivide the beat," I might say, "fill up the space." This vernacular creates a level of comfort as artists develop skills that are essentially very foreign.

Just as the artists in *Mystère* never thought they would have a job that required them to play music, I never imagined I would be teaching Russian gymnasts how to drum! Artists welcome the challenge, and for me, experiencing music in this new way has been equally refreshing. Listen beyond your ears, and then, just as I have, you too will come to share a new dimension in your musical journey, wherever that might take you.

Aaron Guidry is the Percussionist and Taiko Soloist with Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère*. Additionally, he serves as Taiko Coach, back-up Drum Set Chair, and Assistant Band Leader. Aaron consults and arranges the wind books for competitive marching bands across the United States and also is the Music Designer for the Crossmen Drum and Bugle Corps. His compositions are published through Yata for Luda (www.yataforluda.com). Aaron holds a B.M.E. from the University of Louisiana at Monroe and a M.M. from West Virginia University. **PN**