

JAZZ NOTES

It was a gamble, but East thrillingly meets West in Miyumi Project

By Howard Reich
TRIBUNE CRITIC

More than 30 years ago, bassist-bandleader Tatsu Aoki took an artistic gamble: He began combining facets of ancient Japanese music with freewheeling jazz improvisation.

Though rudimentary, those first cross-genre efforts of his, in his native Japan, eventually blossomed into the Miyumi Project, now widely recognized as a groundbreaking merger of music from East and West.

Because Aoki moved to Chicago in the late 1970s and quickly set about developing his Asian-American experiment, the Miyumi Project has become a symbol of Chicago-style jazz innovation. Its rough-and-tumble sound, embracing everything from funk backbeats to blues vocals to avant-garde improv, has attracted audiences across the city and around the globe.

But due to economics, Aoki usually presents a small-scale version of Miyumi, which acquired its official name in the late 1990s. The tiny budgets of most jazz clubs can't support more than a compact group of Miyumi musicians: a few instrumentalists, a couple of *taiko* drummers, an occasional singer.

Come Friday evening, however, Aoki will get to stretch out, leading a dramatically expanded Miyumi Project at Steppenwolf Theatre, as part of its genre-bending Traffic series. When Aoki takes the stage of Steppenwolf's Downstairs Theatre, he'll be joined by a dozen instrumentalists, a consortium of

TATSU AOKI'S MIYUMI PROJECT
"East Meets the Rest"**When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday**Where:** Steppenwolf Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted St.**Price:** \$40; 312-335-1650

teenage *taiko* drummers and others, for a program aptly titled "East Meets the Rest."

"Only a few times in my life do I get to present all that Miyumi is," says Aoki.

The opportunity is important, explains Aoki, because it enables him to explore a broad swath of Japanese musical culture, while merging it with the rhythms of his adopted American home. Listeners fortunate enough to have seen the Miyumi Project in its full glory—at the Asian American Jazz Festival in 2001 and at Millennium Park in 2006—will not soon forget the gripping power of this work.

Imagine incendiary jazz horn solos, thunderous Japanese percussion and searing blues vocals (provided by longtime Aoki collaborator Yoko Noge), and you have a rough idea of the sonic force of the Miyumi Project.

At a European concert last year, listeners heard "*taiko* drums speaking the universal language of the heartbeat," writes Lauren Deutsch in her illuminating liner notes to Aoki's newest CD, "The Miyumi Project Live in Poland" (Southport Records). They witnessed "the graceful arcs of wood-in sticks moving as if in one breath by master drummers ... Tatsu Aoki's steady bass line anchoring the dual flights of Mwata Bowden's searing baritone [saxophone] chasing Francis Wong's taunting soprano [sax]."

For the Steppenwolf show, Aoki and friends will offer extended excerpts of his first great Miyumi suite, "Rooted: Origins of Now" (premiered in 2001), its intriguing sequel, "re: Rooted" (2006), and new vocal material developed by singer-pianist Noge.

Audiences often ask Aoki what the word Miyumi means. It literally means, he says, a "beautiful bow," of the kind that a bassist would use.

But it's also the name of his youngest daughter. When Miyumi Aoki was born, 10 years ago, it "really made me think that now we are an immigrant family," says the bassist.

"It made me feel I have migrated here and my life is here now. ... It was kind of an important moment of my life."

And one that has produced a distinctive, often thrilling music.

Also worth catching:

Jeff Newell's New-Trad Octet plays: 9 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Saturday at the Green Mill Jazz Club, 4802 N. Broadway; \$12; 773-878-5552.

Mwata Bowden's Sound Spectrum performs: 9:30 p.m. Saturday and the Great Black Music Ensemble appears at 6 p.m. Sunday at the Velvet Lounge, 67 E. Cermak Rd.; \$10-\$20; 312-791-9050.

The All-City Jazz Band Competition, featuring several of Chicago's best high school ensembles begins: 9 a.m. Saturday at Simeon Career



A show at Steppenwolf will allow Tatsu Aoki and company to stretch out. "Only a few times in my life do I get to present all that Miyumi is," he says.

Academy, 8147 S. Vincennes Ave.; free; phone 312-427-1676.

Singer Tammy McCann performs: 9 p.m. Thursdays in May at Pops for Champagne, 601 N. State St.; no cover; 312-266-7677.

Guitarist **Jeff Parker** plays: 8 p.m. Thursdays at the Velvet Lounge, 67 E. Cermak Rd.; \$10-\$20; 312-791-9050.

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Music guide

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CRITICS' PICKS

Advent Chamber Orchestra: The ensemble wraps up its season with pianist Matthew Ganong as soloist in Bach's Keyboard Concerto in A Major. Works by Scarlatti, Rossini and others round out the program.—*John von Rhein*, 8 p.m. Sat., \$10-\$22. *Koten Chapel, Kiekhofler Hall, North Central College, 329 E. School St., Naperville; 630-226-0686, 6 p.m. Sun. Hinsdale United Methodist*

Church, 945 S. Garfield Ave., Hinsdale; 630-226-0686.

Alfonso Ponticelli and Swing Gitan: The spirit of gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt resonates in the work of Alfonso Ponticelli and his band.—*Howard Reich*, 9:30 p.m. Tue.; free. *Quenchers Saloon, 2401 N. Western Ave.; 773-276-9730.*

Tatsu Aoki: A master at merging cultural traditions, the bassist-bandleader presents "East Meets the Rest: Tatsu Aoki's Miyumi Project," as part of Steppenwolf's indispensable Traffic series.—*H.R.*, 7:30 p.m. Fri.; \$40. *Steppenwolf Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted St.; 312-335-1650.*

Bach Week Festival in Evanston: The 35th anniversary season concludes with a pair of all-Bach concerts. At 7:30 p.m. Friday, conductor and harpsichordist Richard Webster is joined by soloists and the Bach Week Festival Chorus and Orchestra for the "Brandenburg" Concerto No. 6. Concerto in C for three harpsichords and Cantata No. 140 ("Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme"). At 10:15 p.m. Friday, harpsichordist David Schrader plays excerpts from "The Well-Tempered Clavier."—*J.v.R.*, \$25-\$35. *Music Institute of Chicago, 1490 Chicago Ave., Evanston; 800-595-4849.*

Bill Porter Orchestra: Bill Porter fronts a great, roaring big band, in

the Sinatra tradition.—*H.R.*, 9:30 p.m. Wed.; \$10. *Green Dolphin Street, 2200 N. Ashland Ave.; 773-395-0066.*

Bobby Broom Trio: Bobby Broom crafts exquisitely poetic solos.—*H.R.*, 8:30 p.m. Wed.; free. *Pete Miller's, 1557 Sherman Ave., Evanston; 847-328-0399.*

Chicago Chamber Musicians: The city's flagship chamber music society concludes its subscription series with a program of string music: string trios by Beethoven and Schoenberg, plus Brahms' Sextet No. 2 in G Major.—*J.v.R.*, 7:30 p.m. Sun.; \$16-\$40. *Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, Northwestern University, 50*

Arts Circle Drive, Evanston; 312-819-5800, 7:30 p.m. Mon. Gottlieb Hall, Merit Music School, 38 S. Peoria St.; 312-819-5800.

Chicago Chamber Orchestra: Long-serving (56 seasons) music director Dieter Kober returns to the podium to continue the orchestra's cycle of Franz Joseph Haydn works in anticipation of the 275th anniversary of his death.—*J.v.R.*, 3 p.m. Sun.; free. *Fourth Presbyterian Church, 126 E. Chestnut; 312-357-1551.*

Chicago Opera Theater at Millennium Park: Here's a historic first: COT becomes the first Chicago opera company to present a live simulcast. At 7:30 p.m. Friday,

Mozart's "Don Giovanni" is broadcast live from the Harris Theater next door on a screen in the park's concert facility. And it's free.—*J.v.R.*, *Jay Pritzker Pavilion, 100 N. Michigan Ave.; 312-704-8414.*

Chicago Opera Theater: John Adams' "A Flowering Tree": The Midwest premiere of the American composer's latest opera, an adaptation of a folk tale from India that is as light as his earlier opera, "Doctor Atomic" (presented this season by Lyric Opera) was dark. Nicola Raab directs, with the composer sharing conducting duties with Joana Carneiro.—*J.v.R.*, Opens 7:30 p.m. Wed.;