



The August issue of *The Japan Society Review* opens with reviews of two books, both dealing with the modern history of Japan from a political-diplomatic perspective. First, the Japan Society Chairman Sir David Warren writes about Robert Morton's biography of A. B. Mitford, one of the earliest British diplomats in Japan, who served in the Legation from 1866 to 1870. Next, Sir Hugh Cortazzi reviews the memoirs of *Oswald White, Consul in Japan, 1903-1941: Oswald White's Memoir "All Ambition Spent"*, edited by Hugo Read. White came after A.B. Mitford, serving as consul between 1903 and 1941.

This issue's historical approach also extends to literary fiction, starting with Harry Martin's review of *Hidden by the Leaves*, a novel written by S.D.L. Curry and set in early 17th century Japan. The narrative follows a Catholic priest and two of his clergy who, defying the religious persecution of the time, remain in Japan to help their community. In a more contemporary setting, *Slow Boat*, reviewed by Alice French, takes a diary-like form to tell of the protagonist's experiences

of Tokyo, and of his relationships with his three different girlfriends.

In the cinema section, our reviewer Roger Macy writes about the documentary *Node*, directed by Japanese filmmaker Koike Atsushi. The film was screened by the Japan Society last February in a joint event with the Royal Anthropological Institute and offers a careful ethnographic study of a depopulated village, Hironawara, in the forested hills northwest of Kyoto. This issue also includes the review of Katabuchi Sunao's *In this Corner of this World*, an animated film which focuses on the everyday life of young woman in wartime Hiroshima.

Closing *The Japan Society Review*, our music reviewer Laurence Green explores the sounds of the new album of Joji Hirota and The London Taiko Drummers. Creating taiko music in a new contemporary style, Hirota and his band maintain the grace and high energy of the instrument's traditional heritage.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Sir Hugh Cortazzi, Poppy Cosyns, Alice French, Laurence Green, Roger Macy, Harry Martin and Sir David Warren.

(Image by Moé Sekiya)

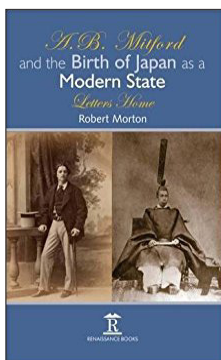
A. B. Mitford and the Birth of Japan as a Modern State: Letters Home

by Robert Morton

Renaissance Books (2017)

ISBN-13: 978-1898823476

Review by Sir David Warren



Algernon Bertram ("Bertie") Mitford was one of the earliest British diplomats in Japan: he served in the Legation there from 1866 to 1870. He was born into an aristocratic family of letters. His great-grandfather William wrote a five-volume *History of Greece*, and one of his mother, Lady Georgina Ashburnham's, ancestors had attended on Charles I on the morning of his execution (the family retained the King's bloody shirt as a keepsake, until Mitford's grandmother inadvertently washed it). Japan was a small element of Mitford's life, but his occasional writings on the country reached a wide audience in Britain and helped to fuel the enthusiasm for things Japanese in the 1870s and 1880s. Mitford himself left the Foreign Office in 1873. He was a success as Secretary to the Board of Works (appointed by Disraeli) from 1874 to 1886, when he resigned on inheriting an estate and a fortune from his cousin. Thereafter, he concentrated on rebuilding the estate and garden, and on his writing, publishing his memoirs in 1915, by which time he had been elevated to the peerage as the first Baron Redesdale. He died the following year at the age of 79. He was an affectionately-regarded member of the aristocratic society of his time: 'he had the dandy's charm', as his admirer Edmund Gosse wrote in his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Robert Morton's excellent and readable biography gives a sympathetic portrait of the man and an evocative study of his life and times. Mitford, like his friend and colleague Ernest Satow, was an eye-witness of the events leading up to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. He had arrived in Japan after the clashes at Kagoshima and Shimonoseki, in which Britain and the other great Powers had asserted their rights under the commercial Treaties they had forced the Shogun's administration to sign as the country opened up in the 1850s. The foreign Powers' focus was now on enforcing trading links. The Shogun's government was weak, in the face both of foreign pressure and of the rebellion of the *daimyo* (feudal lords), loyal to the Emperor. Some *daimyo* were determined to follow the Emperor's call for the foreign barbarians to be expelled.

Others, including some younger samurai who had illegally travelled and studied abroad, saw the value of acquiring Western know-how as they forged a new and united Japanese nation. The British, and their main rivals the French, had to promote their interests in a volatile and uncertain environment, where it was not clear who was in charge or how the struggle for power would play out.

There was an element of the adventurer and dilettante about Mitford. As a young man about town in London, his social contacts – he was a friend of the Prince of Wales – had taken him effortlessly into the Foreign Office, although he had chosen to serve in China and Japan, well outside the traditional charmed circle of European Chancelleries. He was an excellent linguist, as Satow observed in his memoirs, and clearly also a brave and resourceful man. The Minister under whom he worked in the Legation, Sir Harry Parkes, left Mitford alone and in charge of the British representation in Osaka from March to July 1868, after the Powers had presented their credentials to the newly-restored Emperor Meiji; he discharged his responsibilities very capably. He was also interested in, and sensitive to, the strange and unfamiliar culture in which he was now living and working. The assorted collection of stories and sketches he published in 1871, *Tales of Old Japan*, was admired by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lafcadio Hearn; and his eye-witness account of a *hara-kiri* – the first published in English – was quoted approvingly by Japanese authors. While he gave an exaggerated impression of Japan as a country of great violence and bloodshed, he also helped to give British readers a more human sense of the Japanese people, rooted in a respect for their values and culture.

Mitford's actual career as a diplomat was brief. The policy of the British Government in the pre-Meiji period was one of strict neutrality between the Shogun and the *daimyo*, and while 'it is reasonable to speculate', as Robert Morton writes, that Mitford may have interpreted this flexibly, and sent encouraging signals to the *daimyo* that a challenge to the Shogun would not be unwelcome to the British, there is little evidence that he was a figure of real influence. Mitford's reactions to Japan are often superficial: he recast the most disobliging of them in his later writings. Shortly after his arrival in Japan, he wrote to his father: 'I hate the Japanese. Treachery and hatred are the only qualities which they show to us'. Six months later, he is still complaining: '[Japan] is the most overpraised country I ever saw ... and as for the people, my contempt for them is boundless'. In his memoirs, however, he

intimates that he fell in love with the country more or less at first sight, after the inevitable disappointment of arriving in this new fairy land in the pouring rain: '...suddenly coming in full view of Mount Fuji ... I was caught by the fever of intoxication ... which burns to this day, and will continue to burn in my veins to the end of my life'. There is a sentimental streak in his attitude to Japan. He describes the *hara-kiri* he witnessed not as a horrific mediaeval ceremony, but as an act of self-sacrifice of which a Victorian gentleman could approve, and the violent *ronin* marauding around the country as 'somewhat disreputable knights-errant'. His values are those of the Victorian aristocrat – traditional and conventional. He bounded between extremes of enthusiasm and revulsion. The man he was working for, Sir Harry Parkes, slightly caricatured in this book as no more than a belligerent brute (although he was generous in his appreciation of Mitford's work), was a harder-headed and ultimately shrewder judge of where Britain's interests lay and how to promote them.

In telling Mitford's story, Robert Morton draws not only on his published writings and official records, but also on his letters to his father, uncovered in the 1980s by Sir Hugh Cortazzi. His use of multiple sources is expert, and he wisely structures the book so as to focus on Mitford's years in Japan, in which he was an engaging observer of a fascinating and tumultuous period of change. And he draws a portrait of Mitford which is fair and judicious, giving full rein to the man's generosity of spirit while not ignoring his other qualities. Mitford was louchely typical of his era in several ways. In common with many young foreign men in Japan, he had a Japanese mistress and fathered an illegitimate child; and although he had a long and

successful marriage, with nine children, he also had many affairs, including it is believed with his wife's elder sister, which may possibly have made him the father of Clementine Hozier, who married Winston Churchill. It is unfair to attribute to him the racist attitudes of his two ghastly grand-daughters, Unity Mitford and Diana Mosley: he was not an anti-Semite. But the admiring introduction he wrote to the pro-Aryan writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain's book, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, can most kindly be described as an unwise hostage to fortune, not least as many years later it enabled Hitler to tell the two Mitford girls what an honour it was to be visiting the grave of Wagner with the grand-daughters of the great Lord Redesdale. He later retracted his admiration for Chamberlain. But the episode was typical of Mitford's impetuous inconsistency where other writers would have proceeded with greater care.

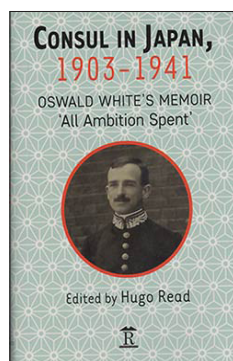
Robert Morton handles all these difficult areas with good sense. He also writes fluently and accessibly: this is a book which can be read without a detailed knowledge of the complex politics of Japan as it began to open up to the outside world in the 1860s. He tells Mitford's story with a sense of proportion. Mitford was not a profound analyst of the dramatic developments through which he lived. But he was a sympathetic observer of Japan, and his affection for it helped to build greater knowledge of Japan among British people and a deeper understanding of the country. And his official and personal papers give us a lively impression of a historical moment of great significance. Robert Morton's biography is a fitting memorial. §

Consul in Japan, 1903-1941. Oswald White's Memoir 'All Ambition Spent'

edited by Hugo Read

Renaissance Books (2017)
ISBN-13: 978-1898823643

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi



Readers should not be put off by the tittle of this book. 'All ambition spent' suggests a disappointed man and a dull life in a far off corner of the globe. In fact the book contains much of interest to the historian and to anyone concerned with the international relations of Japan in the first half of the twentieth century.

Oswald White first went to Japan in 1903 as a 'student interpreter' in the British Japan Consular Service. In Japan he served in Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagasaki and Osaka. He had two stints in Korea. His final postings were as Consul-General in Mukden and at Tientsin ending in 1941. From these posts he observed the evolution of Japanese foreign and economic policy.

Those of us who have experienced the postwar scene in Japan and have studied Japanese in different circumstances may be amused by some of his comments on language study, the work of consular officers in his era and their role in relation to trade.

His final chapter on Anglo-Japanese relations, which was written in 1941 while he was on leave in

Canada, is well worth reading carefully. It contains many points, which are still relevant today.

He had retained his liking for Japanese people, but had no illusions about Japanese motives and behavior in East Asia. He noted that 'Japan never showed any particular consideration for British interests. It was significant that wherever she gained control, British trade faded out of the picture'. (p. 200) The Japanese were, he thought, 'very self-centered' and 'do not readily see the other man's point of view'. 'When the time comes that another nation blocks what he considers his natural expansion then to him it is the other nation that is the aggressor!'

He is, however, just as scathing about British policies in the Far East. In the decade from 1930 to 1940 Great Britain had fallen between two stools. 'Its tactics were either too strong or not strong enough. It scolded Japan in season and out of season for its doings in China but it merely succeeded in infuriating her'.

White drew attention to Austen Chamberlain's comment that the British 'decide the practical questions of daily life by instinct rather than by any careful process of reasoning'. He thought that the British tendency to inspiration at the critical moment had been 'apt to result in British officials at different posts pulling in different ways. .. with disastrous results'. Here he was no doubt thinking of the open

disagreements in the 1930s between the British missions in Peking and Tokyo.

In a swipe at appeasement he declared that 'Our old doctrine of the balance of power, our opportunism, our tendency to range ourselves in recent years on the side of lost causes and then watch them go under all give the impression to outsiders that we are unprincipled'. This approach and our attempts at playing one country off against another had led, he felt, to Britain being seen as 'old and cunning' (in other words as 'perfidious Albion').

He was critical too about the lack of foresight in the formulation of British policy towards Japan. He noted that in our desire to maintain our established rights, we had 'no definite plans, no strategy and, as a result, the tactics we have devised at the eleventh hour have not been wisely chosen'. In his view 'we carried on as though we were still living in the good old days when a protest backed with a threat of action could carry the day'. But we had neither the will nor the means to take effective action. Our threats were seen as empty and as 'we climbed down all along the line' our bluff was called.

His conclusion that there was 'some truth in the criticism that we never forget and we never learn' sadly resonates today. §

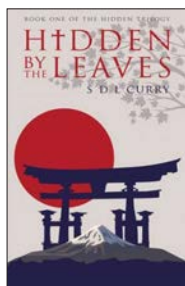
Hidden by the Leaves

by S.D.L. Curry

Book Guild Publishing Ltd (2016)

ISBN-13: 978-1911320173

Review by Harry Martin



Japan in the early 17th century can be seen on a par with modern day North Korea in terms of its self-imposed isolation, trade restrictions and political paranoia. The Shogun of the time, Tokugawa Iemitsu, had revoked previous policies on international trade and movement of foreign nationals, enforcing in place strict commercial regulations and outright banishment of foreigners outside the specified trading ports in Southern Japan.

This period of national isolation, or *sakoku* in Japanese, coincided with the ongoing expansion of Christian missions within Japan's borders, a movement which was aggressively and brutally suppressed at the time, resulting in mass persecution and the creation of a clandestine religious community. It is in this dramatic

historical theatre that S.D.L. Curry's *Hidden by the Leaves* is set.

Book one of the author's new 'Hidden Trilogy', the story pursues Catholic Father Joaquim Martinez and his two junior clergy who have defied the Shogun's banishment laws and remained in Japan at great risk to help their oppressed Christian converts and the community to which they belong. What ensues is a remarkable yet brutal story of good vs evil, tracing the persecution of Catholic communities from the provincial towns of Kyushu to the trading ports of Osaka and Nagasaki and finally the Imperial majesty of Edo at the peak of Tokugawa rule.

The prose is vivid and illustrative in its depth of description, creating a pictorial sense of medieval Japan in both its beauty and its unbelievable brutality. This is clearly the work of a passionate and exceptionally well-informed historian who can at times draw the reader so far into the descriptions of torture and mutilation that the pages become uncomfortable to read. S.D.L. Curry's writing imparts the sense of desperation and fear that

the characters, and their historical counterparts, must have felt during this tumultuous time.

However, despite the factual historical context, this is very much a work of fiction with the writer's empathy felt throughout. The theme of good vs evil is, at times, almost comically strong, with the ever-virtuous Catholic Father and his flock fighting against the injustice of the nefarious shogun and his villainous regime. For me, this provoked the desire to consider the other point of view – that of an island nation fiercely protecting its borders from foreign invasion

and fighting for the preservation of its own endemic culture. This might also be an interesting alternative perspective to explore.

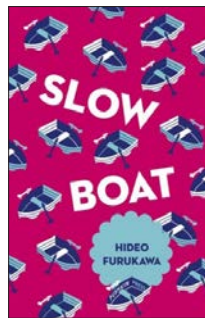
All in all this is an exciting, if bloodthirsty, work of fiction which explores a less romantic and gentle period of Japanese history. The universal theme of good vs evil brings warmly to light the resilience and bravery that can be found in times of desperation, and the historical context might inspire some readers to delve further into the background of Japan's relations with the wider world. §

Slow Boat

by Furukawa Hideo
translated by David Boyd

Pushkin Press (2017)
ISBN-13: 978-1782273288

Review by Alice French



'This is my botched Tokyo Exodus, the chronicle of my failures' begins the anonymous narrator of Furukawa Hideo's latest novella, *Slow Boat*. The story is a self-reflective, at times self-loathing, journey through the protagonist's experiences of Tokyo, and the three girlfriends that characterise this journey. As is typical of Furukawa, the story straddles the real and the imagined, dipping in and out of the narrator's memories, musings and dreams to create magical realism that would not be out of place in a Murakami novel.

Slow Boat takes a diary-like form, and is divided into nine different sections (boats) of our narrator's 'Tokyo Exodus'. We start with his school days, and the struggles he faces as a 'dropout' at an 'alternative school'. Unable to find friends, he unexpectedly clicks with a talkative girl in the grade above him and she becomes his first girlfriend. Alas, the relationship is not to last, and the girl returns home after the summer; our protagonist loses touch with her as soon as she crosses the border of Tokyo into Yamanashi Prefecture. Our damned hero's second sexually charged teenage romance is no more successful; he narrowly misses the opportunity to escape to Miyakojima with his girlfriend in an adrenaline-fuelled race against time that ends with a violent train brawl. Following this low point, things seem to be looking up. The narrator becomes the proud owner of *The Power of Kate*, a trendy Tokyo café tipped for great things, and soon falls in love with the young "knife girl" who works in the kitchen. This relationship is yet again not to be, however, and

does not translate to a ticket out of Tokyo. The café is destroyed in a freak accident and the knife girl wins a place at an American university and he lets her go, resigning himself to a lifetime trapped in Tokyo. Thus, Furukawa's protagonist has three chances to escape his hometown, and fails every time.

The saving grace of *Slow Boat* is Furukawa's ability to make the relatively dislikeable narrator seem simultaneously accessible and eccentric, giving the reader insights into his most fleeting and profound thoughts. At regular intervals, we are returned to his recurring dream, featuring the CD *On a Slow Boat to China*, which is also the name of one of Murakami Haruki's short stories, by which the book's title was inspired. Although unable to find a way out of the city, our protagonist does find some respite from reality in his dreams. The text is also interspersed with short stories by the narrator's friend, Nohara Kaku, seemingly filling the void formed when he cannot find any words himself.

Although the novella is at times melancholy and perhaps laboriously introspective, Furukawa prevents it from becoming overly dark by injecting some sporadic humour, for example with the narrator's obsession with his first girlfriend's 'boobs' and the unfortunate misnaming of his café, which was intended to be called *The Power of Hate*. The colloquial style of his prose also gives the story a lighter feel, making it easy to dip in and out of.

As in his recent *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure*, Furukawa is therefore able to make a reflective, potentially heavy-going story not only readable but very enjoyable. However, *Slow Boat* offers much more than a quick Saturday afternoon read. The protagonist's desperate attempts to leave Tokyo, and eventual realisation that he will live and die there, as it houses 'the roots of my soul', leaves the reader wondering what exactly the city represents. Is

it self-identity? Japanese society? Perhaps it is even a metaphor for Furukawa's battle with writing itself; the narrator repeatedly complains about language, claiming that 'the Japanese language is nothing but

lies'. Whether you get on with the erratic and ill-fated protagonist or not, therefore, *Slow Boat* is bound to leave you engrossed in self-questioning. Kobayashi Hideo would be proud. §

Node

directed by Koike Atsushi

Review by Roger Macy

In early 2017, the Japan Society in London put on three evenings of screenings of films with the Royal Anthropological Institute, curated there by George Barker. Sandwiched between the screenings of Kim Longinotto's *Gaea Girls* and two documentaries related to the Ainu people in Japan was Koike Atsushi's *Node*, a careful, Japanese-made study of a community, which has had no other screening outside of the University of Tromsø, for whom it was made.

Node – there is only an English title, relies entirely on the Japanese dialogue of its subjects. The English subtitles provided were more than an aid, as much better speakers than I were unable to grasp all of the dialect. It's a study of the residents of a depopulated village, Hirogawara, in forested hills northwest of Kyoto.



Image from *Node*

The film starts as it means to go on. After a brief landscape shot, the camera is waiting patiently in an old woman's kitchen. She will speak when she's ready, after she has got us our cup of tea, and begins to tell us how her 70 years of service at the temple started, on the say-so of her brother-in-law. There is no sense of the filmmaker pressing questions; but he isn't entirely inaudible – sometimes the unseen Koike will answer interviewees' questions and let them continue.

That style of patient sympathy with the subject soon told me that Koike was immersed in styles and theories of Japanese documentary-making that foreground

the relationship with the shutai – the subject. They are exemplified in the work of Sato Makoto and Ogawa Pro. As it transpired in the recorded interview with the director shown immediately after the screening (1), this was the origin of the title 'node', in its geometrical sense of an intersection. Koike is objectifying the intersection of the subject and filmmaker.

But there are other nodes. It becomes apparent by the second scene that, as in traditional Japanese villages generally, there are frequent intersections between the living and the dead. And in this current era, there are intersections between the chronically depleted population of the village and those whose livelihood has taken them away from the village but still have connections to it. On returning from a shrine, one neighbour reports to another on an extended burglary of a home that had gone unnoticed.

The reasons hereabouts for depopulation are connected to forestry – the initial impetus for Koike's investigation of the village. Forest monocultures project their one moment of harvesting into the future, with little in the way of interim labours or reward. A couple report that the price for their 20,000 trees isn't worth the felling. That speaks of our global value placed on environmental resource. With no history of monetary income, old people there have missed on pension entitlement.

Koike's reticence was taken to its most patient extreme in the takes with a single old man who recounts his war experience, interspersed with remarks about the dos and don'ts of fishing. He recounts that



Image from *Node*

killing the enemy used to seem normal, that he even boasted of it. Without a break, those running away from him have become 'farmers'. They leave a baby in their house, which he feeds. A long pause is uncut and we're back to fishing. I couldn't have resisted asking more.

A 100-day death commemoration contrasts strongly with the interviews. The returned emigrants speak in a more recognisable Japanese, formal for the occasion. The son of the deceased, the new family head, welcomes and thanks the guests. A ceremony is chanted; to which family members rotate a circular rope from hand. I suppose each family member, resident or non-resident, is a node on this circle. With no cuts in the filming, we see a small boy evolve from amused fascination, to sleepiness, and to sleep itself, at which point he is silently carried away to the next room by the new, and modern, family head.

We simply close with a few more fishing tips. But between each scene are punctuation shots. Some depict local scenery but many depict an equally patient toad, who finally catches his meal.

The film to me seemed eminently a calling-card for Yamagata, the biennial documentary film festival that arose out of the original Ogawa Pro. But it was never accepted there. So it remains in the memory purely of the Japan Society and callers by appointment at the Royal Anthropological Institute. §

Notes

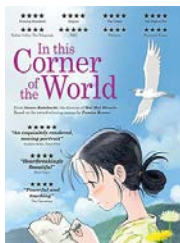
(1) With thanks to Akiho Horton, who recorded an interview with Koike-san in Japan that was shown after the screening.

In this Corner of the World

directed by Katabuchi Sunao

Released 28 June 2017

Review by Poppy Cosyns



72 years after US airforces dropped The Little Boy nuclear bomb, former Ghibli employee Katabuchi Sunao explores this devastating historical event through a wonderfully vivid new story. *In This Corner of the World* – adapted from Kono Fumiyo's manga – follows the life of Suzu, a hopelessly dreamy young woman more focused on her sketchbook than the spectre of war that looms over her home city – Hiroshima.

The start of the film follows Suzu from childhood through to her marriage to port clerk Shushaku, an event which forces her to leave her tight-knit family and relocate to the neighbouring city of Kure. Katabuchi presents the film in a dream-like, painterly haze, forcing the audience to engage with Suzu's distracted

perspective. This approach is at times disorientating, but as the events of the film unfold, this familiarity with Suzu's outlook lends real pathos.

Aside from the absorbing and emotionally affecting narrative, this is a film of breathtaking beauty, the sketchy, hand-drawn style reminiscent of *My Neighbors the Yamadas* and *Princess Kaguya*. As in the latter, there is a spirit of experimentation to the animation and during what is perhaps the film's most harrowing scene, the animation degrades to a scrawl and colour is stripped away entirely.

While constant air raids, food rationing and crippling inflation are reminders of the film's context, the majority of the scenes are comfortingly banal episodes of Suzu's daily life, as she negotiates the dynamic of her husband's family and embraces her new role as housewife. This is a remarkably human story and the mechanics of war are kept very much to the background. §

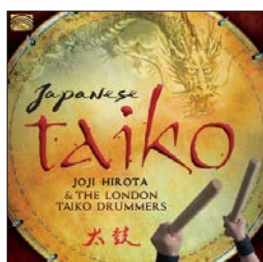
Japanese Taiko

performed by Joji Hirota & The London Taiko Drummers

ARC Music

Release 28 April 2017

Review by Laurence Green



or in reverse, help people understand the will of the gods, and were considered invaluable instruments in everyday life.'

'As in many other cultures, Japanese drums were used to communicate the people's pleas to the gods,

Joji Hirota's words set the scene for a world caught between two divides – people and gods, the sacred and the everyday, old and new. It is a world defined by this intoxicating mix, a soundscape for which this – his third album of taiko music – becomes a kind of experimental playground for exploring the

range and flexibility of the instrument. Blending the essence of tradition with the inherent power of the taiko as a 'performance art', this CD serves as an excellent introduction to both the skill of Hirota and his players as musicians, but also a striking reminder of the warmth and richness of sound that can come from the taiko as an instrument.

For the uninitiated, the word 'taiko' is the Japanese for 'big, fat drums' – but they can in fact come in all shapes and sizes, from a modest 15cm diameter right up to a jaw-droppingly immense 140cm. Taiko music is rooted in the deep tradition of Kabuki and Noh theatre, as well as Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, and while this sense of taiko as a kind of 'folk music' persists, it has seen a surge of popularity in recent years as a dramatic, exciting performance art.

Musicians like Hirota have been at the forefront of this revolution, reinvigorating the instrument's repertoire as part of concerted push abroad – introducing the taiko to a new, younger generation around the world. Enter the London Taiko Drummers – who accompany Hirota on this disc, and have been performing alongside him for over six years now. Indeed, for Hirota, this collaborative aspect is in many ways a key motivator behind the release of this CD, which he sees not only as a way of preserving their hard work, study and practice for posterity, but also as a stepping stone to even greater levels of skill in the future.

Going by the music displayed here, the years of discipline have definitely paid off. Hirota and his team capture a real depth of sound that, for all its natural percussiveness, never feels like it's pounding its way into your head. Rather, the passion and energy of the players flows out across twelve individual pieces that come together to paint a complete picture – chapters in story that slowly unfurl the more you listen. One of the wonders of taiko music is that it operates on many distinct levels, offering hidden depths as you unpick the various elements that make up the 'wholeness' of the finished sound.

Much of the CD is rooted in the raw, elemental feel of nature, with tracks like 'Haru no Ibuki' (Spring

Breeze) and 'Chikyu' (The Earth) surging with a powerful energy that really captures the sheer essence of natural life in its purest form. Hirota's music has frequently featured in film and TV – including the Wildlife Survival documentary series as well as Martin Scorsese's recent film 'Silence' – and the cinematic, widescreen feel of many of the tracks here is plain to see. Much like a director will carefully select and frame shots to best capture a feeling or emotion in a scene, so too does the pulse and flow of the taiko music here; one minute fast, another slow, all contributing to a highly organic feel that echoes the rhythms of the human body itself.

We are treated to a widening of the musical palette in 'Kokiriko', a charming harvest song from Ishikawa, Toyama prefecture, that slows the pace down to a rhythmic to-and-fro chant, accompanied by an elegant refrain played on the shakuhachi flute. Once again, the feelings of nature remain very much at the fore – a nostalgic feel of the passing seasons allowing a moment for pause and reflection amidst the more frenetic material elsewhere on the CD.

Special mention has to go to the accompanying booklet too, which serves as an excellent primer for the music; including an introduction from Hirota himself, biographies for all the players, translations of the track titles and lyrics, as well as an overview of other taiko and Japanese folk music releases from label ARC Music. The result is a package that, much like the music itself, is full-bodied and deep in flavour – one that rewards repeat listening and an appreciation for the finer details.

Throughout, the skill of both Hirota and The London Taiko Drummers is on ample display – for those new to taiko drumming, this CD makes for an excellent introduction, and for those more familiar with the instrument, the flexibility and richness of the material is sure to offer particular delight. Hirota's personal manifesto centres around creating taiko music in a new contemporary style that also maintains the grace and high energy of the instrument's traditional heritage, and based on the evidence here, we couldn't agree more with his approach. [S](#)

Interested in writing for The Japan Society Review?

Please write to alejandra.armendariz@japansociety.org.uk with examples of your work and information about your knowledge of and interest in Japan.
