

# Musicking in a Japanese Distillery Context: Product Branding through Audience-less Performance and Community Music Making in Amami Ōshima

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## Abstract

The Amami islands 奄美群島 in southwest Japan are known as a location that produces a distilled liquor called *shōchū* 焼酎. One company, Amami Ōshima Kaiun Shuzō 奄美大島開運酒造, which is located in Uken Village 宇検村 to the southwest of the island of Amami Ōshima 奄美大島, showcases two distinct types of musicking. One is ensemble Japanese drumming (*taiko* 太鼓) played by the company's employees and incorporating a dynamic performance practice standing for traditional Japan; and the other is mediated Western classical music, which is played against the tanks of one of the company's brands of *shōchū* labelled *Rento* れんと (slow) to aid the distillation process. Unlike the *taiko*, the classical music is not actually played for an audience per se, nor for or by the factory workers, but to the *shōchū* itself. Both styles of music represent contrasting musical traditions and express cultural flows in different ways, including across continents, islands, cultures, and performance contexts. This paper reflects on these musical practices, giving particular attention to the place of music in and for the factory, but with contrasting purposes, and illustrating a process of product branding through audience-less performance and community music making.

**Key words:** Amami, audience-less performance, classical music, community music, musicking, *shōchū*, *taiko*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The musical setting that is the subject of this paper is a Japanese distillery, Amami Ōshima Kaiun Shuzō 奄美大島開運酒造 (hereafter AOKS), which produces *shōchū* 焼酎 (a type of Japanese liquor).<sup>2</sup> In this cultural environment, two main types of music are found: Western classical music, which is played to the alcohol in its tanks during the distillation process of the company's brand of *shōchū* labelled *Rento* れんと (from the Italian word, *lento*: “slow”), and ensemble Japanese drumming (*taiko* 太鼓),<sup>3</sup> which is practiced by the factory's employees. The discussion questions the function of each type of music, helping to comprehend its purpose within and beyond the distillery. Why are the sounds of European classical music played in a Japanese distillery context? What does such music mean when it is played to nobody? What role do the drums have for the factory and for the local community? Both represent contrasting musical traditions and express cultural flows in different ways, including across continents, islands, cultures, and performance contexts. In this context, their musical styles and functions reveal much about the distillery in its village setting.

The Amami Islands 奄美群島 in Kagoshima Prefecture 鹿児島県 are known for their production of *shōchū* (KAGOSHIMA SHOCHU MAKERS ASSOCIATION 2025). AOKS is located in the southwest of the largest of the islands, Amami Ōshima, in a settlement called Yuwan 湯湾 in Uken Village 宇検村 (Uken-son), a village of 1581 residents (as of 2025) (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> The company specializes in its production of *kokutō shōchū* 黒糖焼酎, a type of brown sugar *shōchū* particularly known in the Amami Islands. As noted on the company's website, the business was established in 1996 and as of 2023 had 60 employees. At first, the company was based in Naze, the



Figure 1. Map of Japan showing the location of Uken Village in the southwest of Amami Ōshima. Source: Google Maps, 2025.

- 1 Initial study for this paper was undertaken in 2012 during Henry Johnson's research fellowship at Kagoshima University. Follow-up study has been undertaken by Kuwahara Suelo in the form of personal communication with AOKS, including management, employees and former employees. The authors are especially grateful to IMAI Shūichirō 今井秀一郎 and ODAGIRI Takashi 小田桐傑 for their cooperation in our survey. Unless otherwise noted, sources of information in the article were gathered with permission over this period, and are included anonymously in this article.
- 2 See further the company's website at <https://lento.co.jp/>. The *kanji* (Chinese-derived Japanese characters) for the company's name means: Amami Ōshima (the largest of the Amami islands), Kaiun (better fortune) and Shuzō (distillery).
- 3 Also referred to as *wadaiko* 和太鼓 (Japanese drumming).
- 4 See further the village website at <https://www.uken.net/home.html>. Uken Village occupies a wide geographical position on the island with a number of settlements, with the distillery located in the main village area that also houses the village office at the upper end of the Yakeuchi Harbour.

main city on the island, but moved to Uken Village the following year.

The theoretical orientation of this article concerns the notion of “musicking” (SMALL 1998). Rather than focusing on an audience-based performance that is typical of performers acting for an observing audience, the two settings discussed in this article are an audience-less performance within the factory, and community music making through the company’s *taiko* that are housed within the distillery. While disparate fields on the one hand, they are linked through company intervention, how they contribute to product branding and by sharing a musical connection.

The application of SMALL’s notion of musicking in this article helps to show how music can function within a distillery through audience-less performance and through the company in community music making. The two settings are diverse, yet interconnected and offer insight not only into product branding through music, but also such spheres as music and non-human elements, cultural borrowing and musical hybridity. At the core of SMALL’s theory is the breadth of music-related connections:

I have proposed this definition: *To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.* We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies who set up the instruments and carry out the sound checks or the cleaners who clean up after everyone else has gone. They, too, are all contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance. (SMALL 1998: 9)

With this conceptual framework, therefore, the factory workers contribute to the audience-less performance, just as consumers of the product engage in musicking in the broader sense of the term.

There are many spheres of community music making (BARTLEET and HIGGINS 2018). The communities covered in this paper are constructed in part through the intervention of the factory. From the broad factory community to the *taiko* group community, and their inherent interconnection, there is a distinct top-down social process that contributes to cultural construction. These settings are further expanded to other communities, including through the consumers of the factory’s product, factory links to the village of which it is a part, and to the locations where the drum group performs. Indeed, as VELEN points out, “community music is always shaped and defined by particular social settings” (2008: 6). In the AOKS setting, therefore, product branding is dependent on different spheres of community music making: in the distillery, locally and beyond.

This paper addresses audience-less performance and community music making in a Japanese distillery context by focusing on musicking and product branding. The discussion explores audience-less performance and community music making in two sections of the article. The first focuses on the use of Western classical music played to distilling *shōchū* rather than a human audience, but necessarily involving the idea of musicking. The second

explores community music making, which highlights the function of a Japanese drum group to promote the company to which it belongs, and also showing interconnections with Western classical music for this particular Japanese traditional drumming group.

As the researchers and writers of this article, Kuwahara Sueo and Henry Johnson bring complementary positionalities to their collaborative research on Amami and island studies more broadly. Kuwahara contributes an insider's perspective (Japanese and Amamian), rooted in his upbringing in the Amami islands and his frequent return for ethnographic fieldwork. His scholarship, shaped by an anthropological interest on the effects of globalization on island societies, together with much research across Japan's southwestern archipelago, brings lived understanding to this collaborative study. In contrast, Johnson's long-standing engagement with ethnomusicology, Asian Studies and island studies positions him as an outward-looking scholar who approaches Amami within a broader approach concerning island worlds. His role in the study helps in developing cross-regional dialogues and methodological frameworks that connect Amami to global discussions about identity, culture and islandness.

Together, their positionalities create a research partnership that navigates both local and global spheres of interpretation. Their collaboration not only enriches the study of Amami by integrating ethnomusicological, anthropological and island studies approaches, but also models the value of cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary research partnerships in island studies more broadly. By foregrounding Amami as a site where global processes intersect with local histories and cultural practices, the authors help expand approaches to the field with a contribution that expands knowledge of island cultures.

### **Audience-less Performance**

One of AOKS's spheres of musicking concerns the idea of an audience-less mode of performance with Western classical music played against the sides of the *Rento shōchū* tanks rather than to an audience (Figure 2). As a result, factory workers, visitors and consumers more broadly participate in music production, distribution and consumption, rather than through traditional modes of presentation and spectatorship. Based on SMALL's (1998) theory, in the distillery setting, musicking is embodied in the social processes that facilitate an audience-less performance, and even within the ritual consumption of the silent product that has music at its source. In other words, rather than listeners responding to sound that is performed to them, whether live or recorded, musicking in this setting extends the notion of music performance to encompass non-human actants, though always mediated through human agency.

The playing of music or use of sonic vibrations in similar settings is found elsewhere in Japan and beyond, and especially pertaining to aiding reduced production times (ADADI *et al.* 2025). It should be noted that the practice of playing classical music in *shōchū* and *sake* (a type of alcoholic beverage) distilleries during the fermentation process continues to be observed in various regions of Japan (and also in some food processes involving fermentation). In this context, music becomes one element of the multisensory ecology of

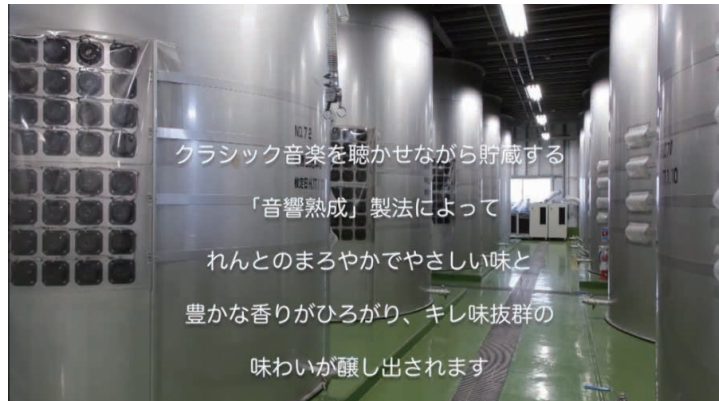


Figure 2. *Rento shōchū* tanks showing special speakers to the left. Screenshot of one of the company's promotional videos. The text notes: "The 'acoustic aging' method, whereby *Rento* is stored whilst exposed to classical music. This brings out a mellow, gentle flavour and rich aroma resulting in a crisp, exceptional taste." Source: AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ (2023). Courtesy of Amami Ōshima Kaiun Shuzō; used with permission.

liquor making, contributing to both workplace ambience and locally articulated beliefs about its potential influence on fermentation dynamics. For example, the *sake* producer, DEN'EN SHUZŌ (2025), notes their use of Western classical music since 1990, where transducers placed against storage tanks convert music into vibrations. Here, the music of composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart is played, the use of which is explained by the music having a wide variety of sounds, instruments and qualities. In other countries, too, the playing of music during winemaking, whether in Chile or other wineries around the world, is believed to enhance the quality of the product (CORAVIN 2022). For example, at one winery in Italy, the owner comments that "they take advantage of the mechanic energy of the sound waves to produce micro-vibrations on the surface of the casks in order to improve the exchange of oxygen in and out of the cask" (CORAVIN 2022, see also BERLAGE 2023, KOMATSU 1991, MARUYAMA *et al.* 2025, TRIPEAT 2024).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of musicking helps highlight the physical practices, gestures, routines, and skills enacted by factory workers, visitors and consumers. With such a conceptual framework, two distinct areas of agency can be identified: (1) in the distillery where workers become the facilitators of the music through embodied action (whether audible to them or not); and (2) in the sphere of consumption, where consumers participate in embodied reception through acts of drinking, tasting or ritually engaging with the product. These processes reconfigure performance as a practice not dependent on an attentive audience, but instead as something materialized through bodily acts of agency, and with each signifying the musical setting that is integral to *shōchū* production, branding and consumption at this distillery.

This particular idea of musicking relates to the notion of an integral vs. accidental

5 Further, the sounds of a Japanese *orugōru* (musical box) are used as background music during the *miso* 味噌 (a type of soya bean paste) fermentation process at one factory (MIE COOP 2011).

audience, as discussed by SCHECHNER (1976) in connection with ritual and aesthetic theatre. As Schechner explains, “[p]erformances for accidental audiences are designed to fit convenient time-slots; ritual performances allow their audience to demonstrate their devotion by pilgrimages, duration, and/or ordeals” (14). The mediated music played against the *shōchū* tanks, along with the ritual behaviour of touring the factory, tasting the alcohol and consuming the product, provide examples of a broader musicking process, not to produce a music performance for an accidental audience (i.e., those attending performances), but rather unfolding as a ritualized practice.<sup>6</sup>

As well as the practice of playing music to distilling *shōchū*, the very type of music being played should be questioned. Is there a particular type of music that has a better effect on the *shōchū* than another type of music? Does the music have a particular local meaning? Reflecting the historical adoption of Western classical music in Japan, the music played against the *Rento* tanks is from the Western classical tradition. This type of music is very much an established part of Japanese musical consciousness, having been incorporated into compulsory education from the late nineteenth century (GALLIANO 2002), and its use in an Amami liquor factory offers an example of musical adoption and recontextualization, thereby demonstrating the depth of its integration into Japanese culture. As discussed later, while producing a distinctly Amamian product (i.e., *shōchū*), the brand connects music both as a label imbued with musical meaning and with musical sounds associated with that label. In other words, a clearly Amami product is branded through sound and text that carry non-Amami associations.

As a musical tradition that is very much a part of the national musical consciousness, the presence of Western classical music in the Amami Islands is not unusual. However, two factors about its use in AOKS offer further insight into its presence in a *shōchū* distillery. In Japanese music scholarship, Western music is often dichotomized with traditional Japanese music, creating a *yōgaku/hōgaku* division respectively. Within each category there are subdivisions that help show the diversity of music in Japan (JOHNSON 2024), but the division itself reflects other cultural dichotomies, including food (*yōshoku/washoku*: Western food/Japanese food), clothes (*yōfuku/wafuku*: Western clothes/Japanese clothes) and rooms (*yōshitsu/washitsu*: Western rooms/Japanese rooms). On another level of analysis, the use of Western classical music in this setting becomes most evident through the labelling of the distillery’s premier brand, *Rento*.

*Rento* has been an AOKS brand since the start of the company. The name of this product is a Japanese transliteration of the Italian word “lento” (slow), which is very much associated with Western classical music as a musical marking of tempo. The “slow” connection between music and product is that for about three months, Western classical music by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven and Vivaldi is played through special speakers attached to the sides of the *shōchū* tanks to enhance the distillation process (AMAMI

6 Ritualistic behaviour is further found with the water used for the *shōchū*, which is sourced from natural underground supplies from a nearby sacred mountain, Yuwandake 湯湾岳 (Amami’s highest mountain), thereby connecting the product to the natural and spirit world (<https://lento.co.jp/product/lento/>).

ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ 2025a). The label of this brand reflects the slow distillation process, and is further reinforced by the style and source of the music associated with the term, thereby creating a novel musical link between the product and its production process.

These processes contribute to the broader musicking that is taking place, whether in the interventions needed to produce *Rento* or in the consumption of the now sonically silent product with inherent musical relationships. As SMALL notes:

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. These are important matters, perhaps the most important in human life. (SMALL 1998: 13)

AOKS makes much of the *Rento* label and its Western classical music connections and relationships (Figure 3). This is evidenced in marketing, media and through factory tours. For example, for visitors to the distillery, AOKS notes:

During a factory tour, you will be guided through the manufacturing process of the Amami black sugar *shōchū* brand, *Rento*. One of the features of *Rento* is that it is slowly aged for about three months using “acoustic aging” [*onkyō jukusei* 音響熟成], in which Western classical music such as symphonies is played from speakers attached to the storage tanks. Please feel free to touch the tanks and experience the acoustics. After the factory tour, enjoy a *shōchū* tasting experience in the showroom. (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ 2025b [translation by authors])

The practice of using sonic vibration through music as a means of enhancing distillation is made much of by AOKS in their marketing. They note that “Musical vibrations stimulate yeast activity, reducing the size of water molecules and improving the flavour through a pseudo-aging effect. They also reduce the alcohol smell and sharpness, resulting in a smoother taste” (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ 2013 [translation by authors]). As pointed out during one interview, the vibration is the main point of the process, not the music:



Figure 3. *Rento* label marketing in the distillery. Photo by Henry JOHNSON (2012).

When water molecules wrap around alcohol molecules, the taste becomes softer. That's why different sizes of vibrations are needed—big, small, strong, weak. Orchestral classical music naturally provides this broad range. So instead of only using Mozart, for example, we use many composers like Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, Vivaldi, etc. We believe 100 or 1000 songs are better than one. (pers. comm. 2025)

In order to achieve the desired outcome, the factory uses a special CD player that can hold 240 disks, the recordings of which were actually pre-selected by the manufacturer of the CD player (not by the distillery). The disks are not changed by the distillery as this might affect the *Rento* label, and they believe such a range of Western classical music covers a wide spectrum of vibrations that helps the fermentation process.

However, in one experiment and collaboration with singer-songwriter, Ishinoda Natsuyo 石野田奈津代 (female, b. 1980), the musician worked with village children to compose the song, “I Love Uken Village” (I LOVE 宇検村). The song was then transmitted through a transducer into a 100-liter tank at the distillery, although on this occasion for just one day, which resulted in a limited-edition version of *Rento* (ISHINODA 2012). Reinforcing musical connections, AOKS has also welcomed musicians such as pop musician NAGABUCHI Tsuyoshi 長渕剛 (male, b. 1956, mainland Kagoshima Prefecture) and folk singer KIZUKI Minami 城南海 (female, b. 1989, Amami Ōshima) who briefly played their music against a tank, although for only a few hours, as well as a live classical music concert in front of the tanks. None of these musical events affected the quality of the product, but they help show how musicians and live music have been attracted to AOKS in connection with the product, and how the distillery has built on its musical brand.

As shown in the next section, the distillery's *Rento* label and connection with Western classical music are given further significance when connected to a factory-based and distinctly Japanese-style drum group that also performs to the wider village community.

### Community Music Making through Taiko Performance

AOKS has a distinct presence in Uken Village. It is a prominent local employer, its factory is a visible feature in the village's landscape, and its product does much to promote the area more broadly in Amami and further afield. As well as the music that is played to the *Rento shōchū*, the factory has another sphere of musicking in the form of a *taiko* group (Figure 4) that functions as a social and cultural activity for employees, promoting the factory and its community links, and promoting the company's brand (JOHNSON and KUWAHARA 2013). Classical music and *taiko* music are quite different. The latter is typically loud and therefore serves a distinctly community role for the factory's musicking, rather than having any direct connection to *shōchū* fermentation.

*Taiko* groups are associated with a range of social settings in Japan (BENDER 2012). These include educational institutions, community groups, religious organizations revival groups, and professional ensembles. Such groups provide a national sphere of *taiko* performance that expresses Japanese drumming as a major contemporary musical practice in the Japanese

soundscape. The existence of such a group in a company setting is not unique to AOKS, but it is for Amami. Nationally, there are various examples of Japanese drumming being associated with company benefits or team-building. For example, Sanshin Hyaku-nen Yume Daiko 三進百年夢太鼓, which is based at the Fukushima factory of Sanshin Metal Industries 三進金属工業, has a *taiko* group and supports its employees with various social activities and clubs, including baseball and futsal (SANSHIN KINZOKU KŌGYŌ 2023). A slightly different business setting where a *taiko* is present is at Ōtsuka Sōko Kabushikigaisha 大塚倉庫株式会社 (Ōtsuka Warehouse), where, rather than having ensemble drumming, a Japanese barrel drum on a slant stand is struck when making an important announcement to employees (ŌTSUKA SŌKO KABUSHIKIGAISHA 2025). There are also *taiko* groups and businesses who cater for the corporate market, such as Yūranza 遊覧座, which was founded in Tokyo in 2021, which specializes in providing companies with *taiko* performances and workshops for team-building, events, family experience, and nurturing friendships (YŪRANZA 2025).

The *taiko* group at AOKS is called Kaiun Daiko 開運太鼓 (signifying the factory and *taiko*: “better fortune *taiko*”).<sup>7</sup> It was formed in 2007 by AOKS for its employees and as a way of linking the distillery to its wider community (village, island, consumers) (pers. comm. 2012). Kaiun Daiko has several functions. It offers employees a means through which to create closer bonds through music making, in a similar way to internal employee cultural or sports clubs that aim to improve employee motivation and satisfaction (KIM *et al.* 2013). A study of the group’s activities helps illustrate further spheres of cultural transmission and community music making.

At the time Kaiun Daiko was established, its musical instructor wasn’t a company employee, but worked at Taken Junior High School 田検中学校. This teacher, HONDA Akiko 本田章子, had prior experience with *taiko* and was pivotal in establishing the group’s repertoire and performance practice. Even though she was transferred to another junior high school in Kagoshima Prefecture in 2010, the group has continued without a new instructor and builds on community connections.

Kaiun Daiko uses a range of drums of various shape and size, including barrel, frame and cylindrical drums (see also the drums to the back of the distillery’s showroom in Figure 3). Players dress in black T-shirts and pants, *jikatabi* 地下足袋 (footwear), and sport a colourful *happi* ハッピ (jacket) with the group’s name printed on the front, along with the wording “Kokutō Shōchū” 黒糖焼酎 (brown sugar *shōchū*) representing the distillery’s main type of liquor. The back of the *happi* has the word “Rento” れんと, standing for the company’s main type of *shōchū*. The ensemble also includes a conch trumpet (*horagai* 法螺貝), which is typically used to open one of their pieces.

AOKS has a significant role in the village. As well as creating jobs for the local community, the company holds events that celebrate its presence and products. For example, the company held its Rento Kura Matsuri れんと蔵祭り (Rento Storehouse Festival) in

7 Also read Kaiun Taiko. This is the everyday name for the group. The full name, Yakeuchi no Kaiun Daiko やけうちの開運太鼓, as given by the chairman, WATARI Hirofumi 渡博文 (d. 2024), is sometimes used too. The name Yakeuchi 焼内 is after the bay (a network of inlets) to the west of the factory. The word Kaiun means good fortune and is used as an auspicious term.

2018, which celebrated the company's commitment to the local community. The event included various cultural activities as well as free tasting of the company's signature label, *Rento*. The festival was also held the following year, which was opened with a performance by Kaiun Daiko and followed by other performances including *shima-uta* (island songs), a song contest and dancing (AMAMI SHINBUN-SHA 2019).

Even from early in their existence, Kaiun Daiko has contributed musically to many civic and community events. For instance, in January 2009, the group played at the opening of the Prefectural Road Yuwan Bypass (KŌHŌ UKEN 2009: 6). Further, in 2010, thirteen members (eight men and five women) took part in a community performance to celebrate the opening of the Suko Bridge 須古橋, playing two pieces (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ KUROUDO BUROGU 2010a). More recently, Kaiun Daiko has still been active in the broader community, including performing in 2025 in their village for an international summit on the grey-faced buzzard (NIHON SHIZEN HOGO KYŌKAI 2025).

Kaiun Daiko sometimes performs further afield on the island. It played at Amami Park in 2008, playing three pieces, including the piece “Ukare Kenmun”, which, as discussed later, includes two extracts of Western classical music (AMAMI-SHI DAYORI 2009: 6). This was the group's first time performing outside Uken Village, and they played at the same location at the 2009 Amami Taiko Festival 奄美太鼓祭 (JOHNSON and KUWAHARA 2013). Such community events help promote not only *taiko* performance more broadly, but also the distillery at which the group is based (NANKAI NICHINICHI SHINBUN 2009). However, it should be pointed out that the drums used by the group have wider Japanese origin and don't have an immediate Amami significance. That is, other types of drum are viewed as distinct to the Amami islands, such as the *chijin* チジン (JOHNSON 2019), or to the broader island region, such as *eisā* エイサー drums. Regarding such local and regional drums, there are some groups in Amami, and in Uken Village, that use them in community events.

Kaiun Daiko's repertoire comprises a small number of pieces, but the pieces not only reveal knowledge about cultural transmission and community music making in the distillery setting, but also link directly with the factory's brand. The group's drums are Japanese, but not unique to Amami; the group is an example of community music making, but here it is based at a commercially driven factory and links to the broader community; and the group's repertoire is based on the factory's main labels.

During fieldwork at the factory in 2012, the company provided a DVD of the drum group that included excerpts from performances and interviews with the group's composer, Honda Akiko, and the female choreographer, YAMAMOTO Takako 山元孝子 (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ n.d.). As noted in the DVD, the chairman of the factory, WATARI Hirofumi 渡博文, had previously heard *taiko*, but was not a player. As he liked the sound of the drums, he wanted to create a group at his distillery. Although he was very much an amateur, at that time he met Honda and Yamamoto, who would direct the group's music and choreography respectively. Watari asked Honda to write music that was unique to Amami for the group to play. The result was a repertoire of four pieces, lasting less than 20 minutes: a short opening piece, “Tsunagi” つなぎ (Connection), and three main pieces named after the factory's labels: “Ukare Kenmun” うかれけんむん (Boisterous Kenmun), “FAU” ファウ (From Amami Uken-son)

and “Rento” れんと (Slow) (JOHNSON and KUWAHARA 2013). The pieces were composed with the founding of the group, and no new songs have been added since that time.

On the group’s video, “Tsunagi” introduces the set. Lasting just over two minutes, the piece gradually builds up speed with interlocking drum patterns, as well as call and response patterns. The piece blends seamlessly with the next one, the base-beat of which commences at the end of “Tsunagi”.

The piece “Ukare Kenmun” is named after Kenmun ケンムン, a playful Amami spirit (*ukare*: boisterous). The piece creates an image of this cheerful spirit who gets excited after drinking too much *shōchū*. The piece has a festive feel with a shuffle pattern played on a small drum (*shime-daiko* 締め太鼓) and gradually increases tempo. There are also *okedō-daiko* 桶胴太鼓 (cylindrical drum) players, syncopated rhythms, choreographed drum stick movements, tapping of drum sticks together, and vocal interjections (*kakegoe* 掛け声) throughout. At around three-and-a-half minutes in duration, the piece is relatively short, gradually increasing in tempo, and introducing a range of compositional and performance techniques, well representing an image of Kenmun.<sup>8</sup>

The next piece, “FAU”, has a title that is an acronym standing for the English words “From Amami Uken-son.” It is a fast-paced, lively piece played on two *shime-daiko* in unison. The story behind the piece is that if you drink a lot, you get drunk quickly, and when you get drunk, your conversation goes haywire. The drums add to that feeling with their rhythmic patterns. Again, this is a relatively short piece, lasting just under two minutes.

Watari notes that because the company is the newest of the 27 *shōchū* companies in Amami, he wanted to do something different with his brand. He considered different musical terms and liked the idea behind the word “Rento” (slow). He thought the title was a perfect fit for their *shōchū*, which is also considered easy for women to drink. The label’s distinct blue bottles also add meaning to the brand, signifying Amami’s sky and sea, and also matched by the colour of the *taiko* players’ *happi* jackets. “Rento” is by far the longest piece in the group’s repertoire, lasting about nine minutes and forty seconds, and thereby signifying the importance given to the label. The piece is considered a theme song of the group (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ n.d.).

With “Rento”, there is a link between the Western classical music played during the label’s manufacture and the *taiko* group’s piece with the same name. The piece begins with a thirty-second recorded excerpt of Dvořák’s (1841–1904) Symphony No. 9 in E minor, “From the New World” (Op. 95, B. 178). A conch trumpet is blown at the start to signal to the gods to descend. The drumming starts slowly, reflecting the name of the piece, gradually increasing tempo (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ 2025c). A short excerpt of Western classical music is brought back in near the end, this time being a forty-five second mediated extract from Tchaikovsky’s “Romeo and Juliet (Overture-Fantasia)” (TH 42). At the same time as this extract is played, a player on the largest drum keeps playing a steady beat in the background. At the end of the classical music, the listener is under the impression that this is

8 Connecting Kenmun to the locale, in Uken Village, there is a hall (Kenmun no Yakata ケンムンの館) for visitors and selling local goods and named after Kenmun.

the end of the entire piece, but all the drums begin to play again with a short coda.

Kaiun Daiko has a distinct role in its factory setting. The group has a small yet unique repertoire that performs for the company and to the local community. Kaiun Daiko is an amateur group, but its members perform with much dedication and skill, displaying *taiko* in the southwest of Amami Ōshima and expressing Japanese traditional culture more broadly and promoting a company's brand through active community engagement. As the president notes: "One new discovery through *taiko* was how it fostered harmony among employees. Despite different departments and roles, the *taiko* brought people together. It became an unexpected strength for the company. We hope its sound resonates with the world" (AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ n.d.). Most interesting for the piece "Rento", the music blends Western classical music with Japanese drumming, creating a hybrid performance that not only links to the distillery's label of the same name, but also displaying hybridity through musical adoption and recontextualization, revealing much about Japanese musical practices.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed a range of musicking practices and settings linked to the Amami distillery, AOKS. The sphere of audience-less performance showed the mediated use of Western classical music in a Japanese setting to function primarily as a sonic tool for enhancing the distillation process of AOKS's signature blend of *shōchū*, *Rento*. The existence of this musical style in Japan is not unusual and is an example of cultural adoption, having been localized during a process of Westernization from the late nineteenth century. Its use in the distillery, however, reveals a preference for music with non-Amami and Japanese roots to aid the production of a distinctly Japanese product, and in this case one that is very much located in the Amami Islands. Further, the Western classical music is not performed to an audience in the more typical way such music might be heard, but is played against the sides of the *Rento* tanks to help with the distillation process. However, in this setting, the idea of musicking helps show the range of cultural and social links to the production, distribution and consumption of *Rento* that have musical meaning. This isn't only through the sounds themselves, but also through the name of the label, its marketing and the consumer association of the brand to music.

The other sphere of musicking at AOKS is through the distillery's use of *taiko*. The instruments are played primarily by the workers at the factory, and the group functions to promote the company and take its brand and music to the wider local community. As such, the group represents AOKS and serves as a musical marketing tool for the factory. In connection with the music played, while the drums show broader Japanese influences in that they are known throughout Japan and do not stand specifically for Amami, the music the group plays has distinct features in the local setting.

The group's small repertoire was written to reflect the distillery's brands. The music represents not only the company, but also conveys a character that gives an image of different types of *shōchū*, the pieces being named after specific labels. However, while the audience-less performance noted above and the *taiko* performance involving people and

a live audience might seem a world apart, they link through their shared use of Western classical music. While this style of music is constant in the making of *Rento*, it is briefly introduced through a recording in live performances of the *taiko* music with the same name.

Musicking at AOKS reveals much about musical traditions and cultural flows. It also reveals novel ways of making music, whether for *shōchū* or a live audience. In this setting, therefore, music carries much meaning: it is essential for the making of a type of *shōchū* as a distinct Amami label, it superimposes and juxtaposes diverse musical influences in a commercial process of branding a company and its *shōchū*, and it shows how community and business can be linked through music making.



Figure 4. Kaiun Daiko rehearsing in the distillery. Source: AMAMI ŌSHIMA KAIUN SHUZŌ KUROUDO BUROGU (2010b). Courtesy of Amami Ōshima Kaiun Shuzō; used with permission

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