

Welcome, wild boar

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By Maggi Smith-Dalton
GHS
Fri Jan 19, 2007, 11:01 AM EST

Beverly -

The Peabody Essex Museum's welcome to the Japanese New Year last Saturday was all energy and excitement. A multigenerational crowd poured into the atrium at noon on a rainy, raw afternoon and were immersed immediately in the power of the season — Japanese style.

Odaiko New England members Mark H. Rooney and Juni Kobayashi kicked off the festivities with thunderous, body-resonating rhythm, respectively swinging two thick sticks (bachi) against the taiko (drums). Shouting kakegoe (drum calls) as they played. It was an appropriate beginning to the Year of the Wild Boar.

"The year of the wild boar is full of energy and excitement," said Peter Grilli, president of the Japan Society of Boston.

Since the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in Japan in the 1870s, New Year's Day has been celebrated on Jan. 1. Celebration of the Japanese New Year, Oshogatsu, however, lasts for many days and is traditionally observed as a sacred time.

This important holiday centers around family, tradition and ritual. Proper appreciations of "first things" done, heard, felt and seen during this season are important.

Many of the traditional activities of the Japanese New Year holiday have familiar purpose, common to most world cultures: cleansing and purification from the remnants of the year just past; use of talismans and symbols of luck, peace and hopes for prosperity; preparation of special foods and religious ceremony.

And worldwide, music, crafts, dramatic arts and games are part of the annual embrace of the new.

Midori Oka, museum educator and associate curator of Japanese art at the Peabody Essex, always keeps those shared purposes in mind.

While honoring the essential and truly unique beauties of a Japanese New Year, her hopes are for connection.

"I was raised in a very culturally-diverse environment in Japan, and my purpose is really to bridge cultures," she says.

New Year celebrations will be annual events at the PEM. This year's effort was cosponsored by the Japan Society of Boston, the oldest Japanese society in the United State. Yoichi Suzuki, the consul general of

Japan in Boston even made it to Salem for the event.

Suzuki arrived in late afternoon at the PEM to assist in the public demonstration of the traditional mochitsuki (rice pounding) and preparation of mochi (rice cakes).

"This year is going to be very wild," he told the crowd.

Suzuki says that artistic celebrations go a long way toward fostering other exchanges between cultures.

"To use the very popular word 'soft power,' these kind of exchanges have the power to attract. They establish a relationship of mutual attraction which is the ultimate sort of diplomatic and idealistic tool ... and the best, I would think."

And that "soft power" was evident throughout the day.

The Taiko performance was followed by a traditional Japanese-style Shishimai (lion) dance, performed by Stephen Long who studied and perfected his art while living in Japan.

Children and adults alike streamed into the PEM's classroom space to create lucky Daruma dolls. These round little figures, named in honor of Bodai Daruma, founder of Zen Buddhism, are weighted on the bottom so they always return patiently to their upright position, in memory of his persistence in meditation.

Oka, the museum educator, enthralled families with her storytelling using traditional kamishibai cards.

In the dimly-lit Japanese Art Gallery, the glowing talents of koto artist Ryuko Mizutani charmed a rapt audience with the softly-persuasive power of this most elegant of courtly instruments.

The koto has 13 silk strings, and a body made of two pieces of wood — one hollowed to create a sound box. It is played with fingerpicks on the right hand, usually made of ivory (sometimes plastic), and has adjustable bridges to allow for changes in tuning.

Mizutani, who grew up in Japan, and studied at Connecticut's Wesleyan University displayed some impressive artistry as she plucked, stretched, swept and glissanded the strings in several traditional and contemporary pieces.

Although the weather was cold and gloomy inside the art, music, dance and food all combined to christen this Year of the Wild Boar with warmth and color.

Maggi Smith-Dalton is a correspondent for The Salem Gazette.

Jim and Maggi Dalton

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ABOUT JIM & MAGGI

Jim and Maggi Dalton perform music of popular/vernacular, folk and cultivated traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic and British Isles repertoire. They specialize in music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings and voices.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual and ongoing research in which the two delight. They also perform original songs and compositions.

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date, and have designed a full spectrum of programs which they present nationwide. They have been featured often on radio and television. (PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers and magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer & Courier-Post*) They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) and countless local and regional venues nationwide.

They have served as artists-in-residence at various colleges, public history sites, community and educational centers, presenting series addressing American history and other topics in the humanities, using music as the core of each session.

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Multi-instrumentalist *Jim Dalton* is an educator, conductor and award-winning composer and arranger.

As a performer, he specializes in historical and ethnic playing styles on a variety of plucked string instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, mandocello, Renaissance lute, bouzouki etc.

He also plays piano, organ, recorder and tin whistle.

In addition to duo performances with his wife, soprano and guitarist Maggi Smith-Dalton he maintains an active career as a freelance musician -- playing in chamber music ensembles, jazz and world music groups and in opera/theater and symphony orchestras.

He is a member of the New England Mandolin Ensemble.

His compositions have been performed across the U.S. and Canada and in Europe.

His choral composition, "The Rocky Road to Dublin," won first prize in the 1997 Toronto Camerata Competition. Two of his pieces for carillon have been published in anthologies by Fenwick Parva and the Friends of the Albany Carillon.

His composition for solo mandolin, "Gifts of the Bard," is published by Wolfhead Music.

His works are available through these publishers and Singing String Music Publications.

Jim is on the faculty of The Boston Conservatory, teaching music theory, ear training and world music courses for both the Music Theory and Music Education Departments. He has written articles for Blues Revue Magazine and is the author of *Mandolin for Beginners*, published by Workshop Arts, Inc./Alfred Publishing.

He is a frequent guest lecturer on topics such as composition, choral arranging and Irish traditional music. In the 2004-2005 year Jim received a MACRO research grant (Univ. of Wisconsin) to study and analyze palindromic compositions in concert music repertoire and presented this work at the 2005 Macro Musician's Workshop in Madison, WI.

Singer and musician, independent scholar, author and educator, *Maggi Smith-Dalton* has sung as a soloist with choirs and choruses both here and abroad, acted and sung in professional theater productions and produced/participated/performed in radio and television projects and programs.

She is a frequent guest lecturer -- on the integration of humanities and the arts, on folklore, and on American music and history, to name a few topics.

She has given lecture/demonstration programs at the college level (i.e., The New England Conservatory, The Boston Conservatory) and in numerous professional-development courses for educators and teachers at all grade levels.

Maggi enjoys an active performing career, which, after eleven years of work in cabaret, musical theater, and nightclub singing, has included more than two decades of concert performance nationwide and abroad, in partnership with her husband and as a soloist with choirs and in concert.

In addition, she authored a prize-winning short story and writes often for newspapers and magazines (including history and cultural/arts/educational feature articles, and a regular history column for the *Salem Gazette*).

Maggi's work in mainstream media included producing a cable TV series and programming and hosting musical theater, arts interview, and classical music shows for NPR public radio, commercial, and community stations.

A former Chairperson of the Haverhill Cultural Council, Maggi served as Musical Theater Director at Hill House (a community Arts Center) in Boston's Beacon Hill; as Director of "Adventures in Art," a summer arts program; and as a director of children's choirs.

With a background in teaching multiply-handicapped children, Maggi continues interest in and study of music therapy. She is working on a children's book; and is always working on a variety of writing projects.