

Noh Tenko 天鼓

(“Heaven’s drum”)

This noh is based on a legend from ancient China about a youth named Tenko, literally “heaven’s drum”, who possessed a drum which had fallen down from heaven. Rumors of this magnificent drum reached the ears of the emperor who ordered the youth to bring it to the palace. However, the youth refused and fled with the drum, and when he was at last captured, was punished by drowning. The drum was then given to the emperor, but strangely no one could make it sound.

In the noh, the emperor orders the youth’s father be brought to the palace to have him strike the drum. He does so and it makes a beautiful sound. As a result, a worship service is held for Tenko’s spirit and the spirit appears and dances.

Author: Possibly late play by Zeami Motokiyo (1363?-1443?), or by an unknown author of the mid-15th century.

Scene: Near the Lu estuary in Han dynasty China, at the palace of the Han emperor, then on the banks of the Lu estuary.

Category: Fourth category miscellaneous (Chinese theme) play, both present-time (first-half) and phantom (second half) noh in two acts, gaku “court” dance piece without taiko in Kanze and Hôshô schools and with taiko in Komparu, Kongô and Kita schools.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): an imperial minister.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): Ôhaku, the father of Tenko. Wears a dignified old man (akobu-jô or ko-jô) mask.
- Ai-kyôgen (interlude actor): A servant.
- Nochijie (second half shite): Tenko’s spirit arisen from the Lu waters to dance in front of the emperor. Wears a youthful sprite (dôji or jidô) mask.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki entrance: An Imperial Minister enters to nanori-bue solo flute, announces himself, and tells of the old couple, Ôhaku and Ôbo, who had a child when the wife had a dream of a heavenly drum by which she became pregnant. They named the child Tenko (“Heaven’s Drum”) and later a real drum fell down from heaven. The news of this exquisite drum reached the emperor who demanded it be brought to him. But the child Tenko refused to give it up, ran away with it, and was eventually found and drowned in the Lu estuary. The drum was taken to the palace but no one could make it sound. The Minister is on his way to summon the boy’s father to the palace and have him strike the drum.
2. Shite entrance: Ôhaku enters to issei music, sings of his worn-out body, and grieves over the loss of his child who died before him.

3. Waki/Shite exchange: The Minister tells Ôhaku about the drum which won’t sound and orders him to appear at the palace to beat the drum. Ôhaku reluctantly obeys thinking that they intend to kill him to which the Minister refutes. The chorus for Ôhaku sings of how he will go to meet His Majesty, no matter what the result.
4. Waki/Shite exchange: The Minister encourages the frail-hearted Ôhaku as they approach the palace. Ôhaku sings that if it does sound it will be a token of his child. The chorus sings of having this old body strike the drum.
5. Shite’s seated narration: Depressed at the loss of his son, Ôhaku, with the chorus for him, sings of the pangs of separation extending to eternity, his wish to transcend life’s sorrows, and his dread of the hour when he must beat the drum.
6. Shite’s movement: The chorus and Ôhaku, in exchange describes how the time to strike the drum has come, and how Ôhaku gathers his courage, approaches, and strikes it. The chorus sings of the wonderful sound that pours forth touching the heart of even the Emperor.
7. Shite’s exit: The Minister declares Ôhaku will be richly rewarded and that prayers will be given for his son’s spirit. He has a Servant take Ôhaku home. The Servant says that the sounding of the drum is a certain sign of the bonds between parent and child.
8. Ai’s speech, Waki/Ai exchange, Ai’s announcement: The Servant retells in details the story of Tenko’s birth, the real drum which came down from heaven and that Tenko possessed, Tenko’s defying the imperial command to hand the drum over, and his being found and drowned. The Servant then reports back to the Minister who asks him to announce the prayer services to be held.
9. Waki waits: The Minister sings of setting up the drum on the banks of the Lu estuary and beginning the orchestral prayer service.
10. Nochijite entrance: The spirit of Tenko enters to deha music, and sings of being called by the prayers from the underworld where he is being tormented and punished.
11. Waki/Shite exchange, Shite’s dance: The Minister tells of seeing a spirit rise from the surface of the water. The spirit declares himself, then is asked to confirm his identity by beating the drum while celestial beings manifest themselves. The chorus describes the drum sounding and the waves beating on the shore to join the orchestral service. Tenko performs an elegant gaku court dance.
12. Final scene: The chorus describes the beauty of the autumn night and how Tenko spends the entire night dancing on the waves until the bell sounds signaling the dawn. [Richard Emmert]