



WAILUKU HONGWANJI MISSION CHOIR: First Hongwanji Choir on Maui Formed in 1940's

By Joan Tamori

In October of 1999, Wailuku Hongwanji Mission, a thriving Jodo Shinshu temple on Maui, was to celebrate its 100th birthday. As one might expect, major plans were being established for the Centennial Celebration which also involved the inclusion of affiliated organizations to participate in some manner. At this time my involvement in church affairs included being a dharma school teacher as well as an organist at Sunday morning services. However, when the discussion arose about the occasion, a spark was kindled within me as I, for some time had a yearning to form a choir. As an elementary school teacher, I had taken some music workshops as well as a workshop in conducting a children's choir. In my heart, I felt that my prerequisite for volunteering to do this was my love for music. I contemplated only for a moment and then made my decision. What better way to go forth than to have a choir sing to help commemorate this momentous occasion? Hence, I seriously began talking with members who loved to sing, at the same time attempting to obtain information about the temple ever having had a choir. I learned that a choir did exist in years past and that there were original members along with new members who were excited about starting up again. Little was I to realize that this venture would become a new chapter in the history of our temple's choir of being born again.



In August of 1947, 41 members of the Wailuku Hongwanji Mission Choir stood proudly with Helen Yoshikane, Choir Director, on the stage of Baldwin High School Auditorium on Maui after winning FIRST PLACE in the STATE YBA CHOIR CONTEST.

The origin of the Wailuku Hongwanji Mission choir goes at least eight decades back to around the mid 1940's. In an interview with a few members of the original choir of which two are still members of the present choir, fascinating events were unfolded. With pen in hand and a eager listening ear, I chatted with Ms. Itsuyo Kusuda, Mrs. Masae (Kusuda) Murakami, and Mr. S. Stanley Okamoto. I felt the excitement and nostalgia in their voices and detected their happiness through their eyes and smiles as they recollected their experiences.

According to Mr. Okamoto, after World War II ended in 1945, the Buddhist churches were permitted to gather. Thus, around that time, a group of musically talented and interested YBA members got together under the leadership of two women who were first and second grade teachers at Wailuku Elementary School as well as Sunday School teachers at Wailuku Hongwanji Mission. Together, Mrs. Helen Yoshikane and Mrs. Yone Yamada became the driving force in starting a choir. They taught the members various gathas in the gatha book (black) as well as many old time favorites in a music book called "America

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What Is Buddhist Music? (II)

By Francis Okano

More than a decade ago, I asked ministers, “what is Buddhist music?” What is the purpose of Buddhist music? If the Music Committee’s task is to promote Buddhist music, we should at least know what we mean by “Buddhist music.” Ministers were generous in their response. They replied, in summary, that Buddhist music is music that encourages deep hearing and collective hearing; that it praises the Buddha Amida; that it shows appreciation. They suggested Buddhist music expresses deep joy from the well of the teachings and traces its origins to sutra chanting.

I’ve appreciated their responses then and since, because they subtly pressed me to clarify the question. While I was motivated to define Buddhist music, the more I thought about it the more I realized my interest was not in “defining” Buddhist music per se but in identifying what it is about Buddhist song that makes it Buddhist.

Once re-cast, the question answered itself. Sometimes one can become so overwhelmed, as I was, by the sheer versatility and expressivity of western musical harmony – as in the hymn-like gathas adopted by the Hongwanji in the last century -- that one easily overlooks a more basic element of Buddhist song -- its lyrics. Though you and I may pay little attention to the meanings of the verses when we are busy singing them, are not the words the reason for lifting our voices in unison in the first place? For while melody, harmony, and rhythm speak most directly to our feelings, only words can narrate teachings, conjure metaphor and imagery, and articulate aspirations – in unifying faiths, institutions, or nations. When done beautifully, the result is art worth enjoying. And so, as one minister put it, among the first Buddhist music historically was the sutra chant, in which ages-old scriptural praise – transmitted from India, to China, to Japan – was enhanced by tonal and rhythmic embellishment. If so, the modern gatha – Buddhistic verses sung to melody and harmony -- may surely be seen as an extension of chant. And in both sutra and gatha, what is Buddhist is the meaning of the verses we chant or sing. To no surprise, therefore, *that* is what makes Buddhist song Buddhist.

This of course suggests religious music is largely vocal. The body of oratorios, cantatas, masses, requiems, and hymns of the Christian tradition would suggest so. This is not to deny the importance of purely instrumental music in religious observances, such as the organ preludes of German Lutheranism, the *gagaku* of Japanese Buddhism, or the *shakuhachi* melodies of meditating priests – as aids to spiritual experience. But I cannot help feel that no musical form connects with religious teaching, reinforces it, and beautifies spiritual insight quite as directly as the union of religious text and melody in song.

Locally, the following gatha excerpts sample Buddhist awareness in verse: “*In times of difficulty I say Namō Amida Butsu,/ Doing my best with a calm heart / Thankful for my life as it’s given,/ Living in embrace of Buddha’s Great Light/ Of Wisdom and Compassion.*” [***The Buddha’s Great Light***] “*Bright as is the bloom of life, it will but fade away,/ Who among us is assured an everlasting stay?/ Deep as are worldly mountains I’m caused to cross today,/ Sober, now I see as shallow dream my earthly way.*” [***Song of Impermanence (Iroha uta)***] “*Splendor of an evening sky, filled with countless stars,/ Who can ever fathom its timeless mystery?/ Million eyes, when sparkling bright, in the sable sky,/ Touch my heart, my lonely heart, with serenity.*” [***Splendor of an Evening Sky (Seiya)***]



Sings". Ms. Barbara Yamane was their patient and helpful piano accompanist. The choir met in the evenings and practiced many gathas to introduce to the congregation. They proudly sang wearing their yellow gowns and black bowties at various services, funerals, and other church festivals and so were recognized as an 'official' choir. Wailuku Hongwanji Mission was the first on Maui to have an organized choral group. Subsequently, the other churches started organizing their choral groups.

The choir also went on memorable singing trips to Lihue Hongwanji on Kauai, and Hilo Hongwanji and Kona Hongwanji on Hawaii Island. Most impressive though, as I learned from Mrs. Murakami, was the choir's outstanding performance in the state YBA Choir Contest held at Baldwin High School auditorium on Maui. It was held on August 16, 1947 where each choir was requested to line up in formation on stage, one choir at a time, and sing the same song, **Blue Danube**. The young men and women proudly sang the song in parts as directed by Mrs. Yoshikane and proved their competence by receiving first place in the song contest!

Mrs. Yoshikane eventually moved to the mainland U.S. and thus, the choir lost its capable leader.

Many, many, years later through the leadership efforts of Mrs. Yukiko Tanaka, Mrs. Natsuyo Hayase, Mr. Okamoto, and others, a choir was reorganized in June of 1970. Mr. Lance Jo, band director at Baldwin High School, served as WHM's choir director in the mid 1970's. During the Centennial Celebration for Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii in 1989, choir members participated with other members of Hongwanji missions around the state during the festivities. The choir eventually and regrettably bid farewell to Mr. Jo as he moved to his new residence in upcountry Kula and was unable to devote much time to the choir.

In the late 1980's, Reverend Hiromi Kawaji who had a passion for music and writing, directed the choir after much coaxing by choir members and drummed up the services of his wife to be their accompanist. Gathas, as well as popular Japanese songs were again heard within temple walls.

As noted in the beginning of this article, Wailuku Hongwanji Mission was to celebrate their Centennial in 1999, and therefore a reason for the choir's reorganization became evident once again. Hence, a new choir with many members from the previous choir, quickly formed with fierce and energetic motivation under the direction of yours truly. A choir of approximately 35-40 members was reborn on January 1999. Ms. Florence Tanaka, composer of the gatha, **Homeward I Go**, was recruited as the choir accompanist and co-director.

Since then, choir members have come and gone but the choir remains with 28 strong today with new members freely joining in as it provides a place of musical comfort and excitement. Many choir members have attended all five statewide Choralfests joining together to form a massed choir of approximately 110 singers each time. With each participation, the choir returns rejuvenated and shares their repertoire of new and moving gathas during services and other occasions. 2007 was a very significant year for it was at this time that an accompanist with exceptional musical talent joined the choir and touched everyone with his beautiful piano/organ accompaniment skills. Mr. Dale Sugiki became the choir's accompanist and director's assistant.

The choir and its music continues to thrive at Wailuku Hongwanji Mission!



Wailuku Hongwanji Mission Choir



DHARMA JAMS - Exploring Mindfulness in Music

By Rev. Shinji Kawagoe

As a new challenge, since February of this year on every second Sunday of the month, Pa'auilo Hongwanji Mission has started a new activity called "Dharma Jams - Exploring Mindfulness in Music." A Dharma Jam is where musical pieces or ideas take place in a free form mindfulness session. This "Dharma Jam" becomes a *practice of mindfulness*.



It has been a challenge for Pa'auilo to adopt this innovating type of mindfulness and music at its temple's activities. When I participated in this Dharma Jam, it was the first time for three musicians (including Reverend Shingo Furusawa), and myself. Musicians came together not knowing what sort of instrument each were to play. There were no special rules and no musical categories. Each performer's music resulted in one amazing performance of harmony.

Amida Sutra says that "there are lotus flowers, as large as chariot wheels, growing in the pools. Those of blue color emit blue radiance; those of yellow color emit yellow radiance; those of red color emit red radiance; and those of white color emit white radiance. They are exquisite, wonderful, fragrant and pure." Thus even though one may not have any experience with the Dharma Jam sessions, each individual performance is precious. And even if one does not play any musical instrument, everyone is welcomed to participate by attending because audiences are an important factor to having a harmonious atmosphere.

Dharma Jam sessions have been very enlightening and have only just begun. Let's make "mindfulness practice" together!

Anyone interested or having questions, please feel free to contact Mr. Wolfgang Rehmer at 808-854-7721 or email him at wolfgang.rehmer@gmail.com.

BJ Soriano Creates Sound of Music at Puna Hongwanji

By Ethel Miyashiro

On Sunday, January 18th, Puna Hongwanji proudly hosted BJ Soriano's first district workshop, spotlighting her nine gathas that were professionally arranged by Mr. Michael Springer. She was accompanied by her faithful sidekick, Karen Maedo, on keyboard, who together combined to make it an afternoon of humor and harmony. The workshop was attended by 36 enthusiastic choral and non-choral singers, temple members and friends from across the Big Island, who felt the power and emotion in "the sound of music". Once again it was proven that the love of music and the desire to share the Dharma musically is alive and well in the Hongwanji. Puna's Social Hall was certainly "rocking" that afternoon and along with it, came the hopes and wishes that these newly appointed "music ambassadors" would return to their temples to lead their sanghas in learning these new gathas.



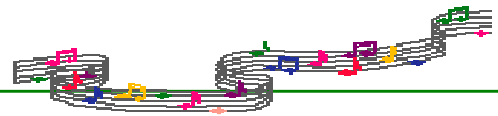
BJ Soriano conducts gatha singing workshop to attentive participants.

On Sunday, April 5th, the combined choirs of Hilo Betsuin and Puna Hongwanji, celebrated Hanamatsuri. Decked out in their colorful red tops and lei, representing the beauty of flowers, the choir, under the direction of BJ Soriano and accompanist, Charlene Pascual, sang the popular Japanese song *Hana wa Saku (Flowers will Bloom)*. The soulful song was written to support the relief efforts for the March 11, 2011 tsunami victims in Japan.

The Puna Hongwanji Choir is ever so grateful to BJ Soriano and the Hilo Betsuin Choir for including them as part of their choir ohana.



Choir members decked out in bright red colors, sing joyously in celebration of Hanamatsuri.



DHARMA TEACHING THROUGH MUSIC

The Kauai Hongwanji Council sponsored a music workshop on March 28, 2015, conducted by Hilo Betsuin's own composer, BJ Soriano. More than 30 attendees from all Hongwanji temples learned the nine original gathas, all with a simple Dharma message and upbeat tempo. All participants enjoyed the new music and liked the idea of learning the Dharma through music.

BJ Soriano shown here leading the music workshop.

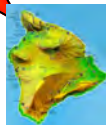


Kauai Hongwanji Mission singers open up their Hanamatsuri Service with *Each Day Anew*.



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CALENDARS!**

CHORALFEST 2016
September 24—25, 2016
Honpa Hongwanji
Hilo Betsuin
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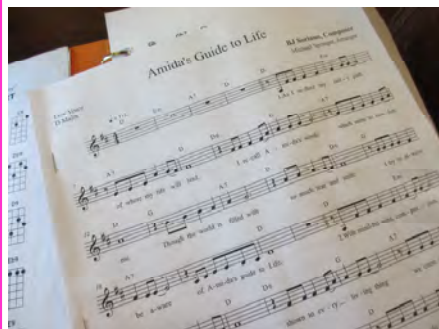
BJ Soriano Makes Musical Impression on Maui District Temples



BJ Soriano, talented musician and composer shares her gathas with love and enthusiasm!

Introducing singable gathas with a local flavor makes for a perfect way to teach the dharma through music!

Well, that's what Maui district did as they invited BJ Soriano of Hilo Betsuin, composer of nine new gathas complete with ukulele chord accompaniment, to conduct a music workshop at their annual Shinran Shonin birthday celebration of Fujimatsuri on May 17, 2015, at Kahului Hongwanji Mission. Her method and intent makes music fun as well as meaningful. In rapid but well-paced succession, BJ with her enthusiasm and expertise, introduced all of her gathas, ***Amida's Guide to Life, Amida's Our Horizon, Four Noble Truths, Hands Together in Gassho, Let's Weave Dharma in Our Lives, Listen to Amida with Your Heart, Live Amida's Love, Shinshu Pledge, and Together As One***, to a full and attentive audience in the temple. Some members with experience in ukulele strumming accompanied each gatha while other members concentrated and enjoyed learning each gatha from her. Comments about beautiful melodies and lyrics were heard from many in attendance. Some had already established their favorite gathas. Members were thankful to BJ for her generous sharing of song and her time. Leaders are talking of having each temple sing her songs at next year's SongFest portion of the Fujimatsuri. Thank you for inspiring us, BJ!



Singing and strumming with BJ!

WHM Dharma Strummers



Students enjoy learning to play the ukulele.

Upon the interest of some temple members, the musically talented Ms. Florence Tanaka was approached to start a new beginners ukulele group at Wailuku Hongwanji. Hence, Ms. Tanaka, the kind and generous person that she is, has reached out to a group of members who come together on Monday nights to learn the basics of ukulele playing. From learning the history, parts of the ukulele, setting up, tuning, to learning how to read notes, learning timing, and how to do basic strumming, students are being challenged at every session. She is amazed with their conscientiousness as all have made good progress. To think that some had never played the ukulele before! Some songs in their repertoire include: ***Oh, Susanna; On Top of Old Smokey; Hawaii Aloha; Hongwanji ga Mieta; and Can't Help Falling in Love With You***. Along with playing the ukulele, students are learning words to songs as well. With patience and a sincere desire to help her students, Ms. Tanaka lets her students know that they can take their time if necessary and assures them, "one step forward, two steps back".



DSTO Song Fest: "LIVE AMIDA'S LOVE"

On May 3, the Oahu District Dharma Schools gathered for their annual DSTO Song Fest, "Live Amida's Love" at Aiea Hongwanji. Students, Dharma School teachers, parents and friends from Mililani, Aiea, Waipahu, Pearl City and Wahiawa Hongwanji Missions gathered to share music and dance with each other. The day began with an opening service and dharma message given by Rev. Kosho Yagi. Students and teachers from each Dharma School participated in sharing a performance: Mililani danced to, ***Waka Waka***, Wahiawa danced to ***Koisuru Fortune Cookie***, Aiea sang ***When the Lights All Shine*** and Pearl City sang ***Follow the Rainbow***. This was followed by the title and group song, ***Live Amida's Love*** by BJ Soriano. Dharma School students who participated in and won the annual Poster Contest were recognized and presented with their awards followed by recognition and thank yous to our amazing Dharma School teachers. Everyone enjoyed the special performances of music and dance, and the morning program ended with delicious bento lunches.

PEACE ON YOUR WINGS Presented on Kauai, Maui, and Hawaii Island

On a separate topic, In January and February, the Ohana Arts original musical, ***Peace On Your Wings***, travelled to Kauai, Maui and the Big Island. The students, staff, teachers, chaperones, and parent volunteers were so amazed at the warm welcome and very gracious hospitality of all of the members of the various temples who worked so hard to provide meals for our Ohana Arts family. Everyone was especially touched by your warm smiles, kind words and giving spirit and truly loved and enjoyed every meal provided to us. Every meal was totally delicious and nutritious as well! The Ohana Arts family sends a heartfelt thank you also for coming to see ***Peace On Your Wings***, and thank you also to the many people who kindly gave monetary donations. Please know that the Ohana Arts family is very grateful for all that the members have done and for all that the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and its members continue to do for the Ohana Arts family.

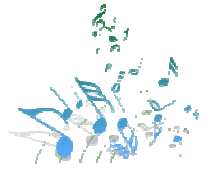


Because the show has been so well received, an encore performance will be performed at the Hawaii Theatre on August 6, 7, 8 and 9, 2015. These performances, which have newly designed sets and choreography, will mark the 70th Anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sadako Sasaki's brother, Masahiro, and his son Yuji Sasaki, will be in Honolulu to help commemorate the 70th Anniversary, and they will also attend several performances of ***Peace On Your Wings***. For more information and tickets, please go to www.peaceonyourwings.com or www.hawaiitheatre.com.



"I will write peace on your wings and you will fly all over the world." — Sadako Sasaki

Honolulu Keeps Musically Active!



Kailua Hongwanji hosted BJ Soriano's workshop on February 15. Honolulu and Oahu district participants enjoyed BJ's introduction to nine of her original gathas and were happy to receive copies of the scores and a CD of all the gathas.

Hawaii Betsuin Choir members shared warm musical fellowship on February 19 with Aki Kyoku Bukkyo Ongaku Renmei, a choir consisting of ministers, ministers' wives, and lay people from Hongwanji temples in Hiroshima. The Hiroshima Choir, about 38 in number, sang four gathas after which



Hiroshima participants have fun learning the Hukilau!

the Hawaii Betsuin Choir members were honored to join them in singing **Namo Amida Butsu, Shinran Sama, and Nembutsu**. The Hawaii Betsuin Choir then debuted **Live and Light the World**, the new English rendition of **Inochi Kagayaite**. The latter is a touching song of peace which originated in Hiroshima to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing. The evening ended on a delightful Hawaiian note as Hawaii Betsuin folks played ukulele, sang, and taught the delighted Hiroshima group the **Hukilau** hula!



The Hawaii Buddhist Council's Buddha Day service was hosted by Soto Mission of Hawaii on April 5, and members of Moiliili Hongwanji and Jikoen Hongwanji joined Hawaii Betsuin's Choir

Honolulu District combined choir at Hawaii Buddhist Council Buddha Day Service

members in singing the beautiful prelude gathas, **A Lotus Pure** and **Hana no Kokoro**. The combined choir also led the congregation in singing **Floral Festival** and **Happy Buddha Day**.

Hawaii Betsuin Dharma School students and families sang three inspiring songs for the Eshin-ni/Kakushin-ni Day Service on April 26. The first was a heartwarming prelude composed by dharma school teacher and parent, Debbie Kubota, entitled **Let Your Love Show**. During the service, the songs, **This Day of Peace** and **Do the Good You Know**, were also presented. The con-



Hawaii Betsuin Dharma School families sing at Eshinni/Kakushinni Day Service

gregation couldn't help but feel uplifted as they sang some of these songs with the dharma school families.