

# Musical Notes



January 2012 Issue

A Publication of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii Office of Buddhist Education Music Committee

## CHORALFEST HAWAII: A BACKGROUND

By Francis Okano

Hawaii Betsuin, in Honolulu, Hawaii, will be the site of **Choralfest 2012** on August 4 and 5, 2012. For the curious, the story of choralfest – what it is and how it came to be – begins in 2000. For it was then, on a cool autumn night twelve years ago, the Hawaii Betsuin Choir descended on Kyoto as the first overseas “foreign” contingent ever to participate in Honzan’s Midou Ensoukai (“temple concert” of mass choral singing). At the time, no one in the group had a clear idea of Midou Ensoukai; all anyone had was Choir Director Mitsuyo Saito’s promise that the experience would be *positively uplifting!*

In Honzan’s practice Hawaii delegation found its singers from all over Japan: women and 8 men, a lot of Japan’s temple choirs. Pre-Honzan Music Department gathas arranged for soprano and few men there were sang lower). Since Midou Ensoukai had different singers each day, there was about 800.

When the distinctive downbeat, at the hall and seemed to become obvious to the Hawaii delegation’s CDs in hand, Japan practiced their parts! Half of the tide of beautiful diminuendos that swept up were beautiful, they were Yamaha Electone organ and a grand piano that augmented and grounded the human voice. Above all, the refreshingly contemporary musical arrangements of gathas stirred the hearts of all!

As the afternoon performance time came, singers filed into the near half of Amida Hall, lined themselves up on risers, and faced a congregation who filled the far half. For the next half hour, the Hall reverberated in the embrace of clear, soaring voices and of the Buddha Amida. The “temple concert” seemed to end all too soon with congregation joining in on *Ondokusan*, trailed by long robust murmurings of the Nembutsu. Midou Ensoukai had turned out as moving a musical-religious experience as Mrs. Saito had promised! Seven years later in 2007, when Hawaii Betsuin Choir revisited Midou Ensoukai, no one was surprised that total participants had easily doubled.

(continued on page 3)

hall the next morning, the self surrounded by a sea of. They numbered nearly 400 sided gender ratio typical of cisely for this reason, the had had Midou Ensoukai and alto voices only (what the same lines an octave kai goes for two days with total participants in 2000

guished conductor from To-sudden wave of voices filled shake wall and ceiling. It waii delegation that, with pan’s singers had indeed waiians quickly became part phrasings, crescendos, and one and all. If the voices accompanied by artists on a

By Francis  
Okano

# Music Editorial

## Chicken or Egg?

Once upon a time, as they say, a question arose in a Music Committee meeting that stumped one and all: to write a song, does one write the lyrics first or the melody? At the time, it sounded like a chicken-or-egg question, for which I surely had no clue, not a single song to my name. In the years since, I'd like to think I've learned a thing or two. So, what *does* come first – lyrics or melody...or something else like chords or rhythm?

Googling "how to write a song" recently, I found myself staring at a startling answer. "None of the above," came the reply; "it starts with a title." Puzzled, I read on. According to this songwriter, the title says it all. As such, the title comes first. Make the title ring true in your ears and you'll get people thinking, "I've got to know more!" So you go on to answer one question after another about the title with lyric and melodic elaborations. Because the title is the line everyone remembers, it defines the message; it becomes your guiding principle, your beacon.

Fine, but I seem to recall many instances where the melody came first. Some alma maters, for example, are musical borrowings of well-known tunes – Iolani School borrowed from Sibelius' *Finlandia*; Punahou chose *O, Tannenbaum!*; Fair Harvard adopted an old Irish air. For another, many Japanese songs of the Meiji and Taisho eras merged English tunes with fresh Japanese lyrics, such as *Ryoshu*, *Hotaru no Hikari*, *Ko-kyo no Haika*, and *Hanyu no Yado*. Some early Hongwanji English gathas came about as new Buddhist lyrics were written to old Christian hymn melodies. And, let's not forget, the Music Committee's singable translations of Japanese gathas attempt to fit English-translated verses to already beautiful musical arrangements.

I've long felt, however, that the more common approach is quite the opposite. Composers I know suggest they almost always get musical ideas for a song from the polished verse before them. Thus, we have beautiful music composed to winning poems from gatha contests – ranging from the 1964 *At Our Altar* to the 2008 *May Peace Prevail*. European composers of the 19th century wrote art songs which are precisely that -- poems set to music. Franz Schubert, perhaps the most prolific, turned more than 600 poems by Goethe, Schiller, Muller and others into lieder, including song cycles *Winterreise*, *Die schoene Mullerin*, and *Schwanengesang*.

Probably with art songs in mind, an instructor of collaborative piano once said, "I have my accompanying students study the standard vocal repertoire and make sure they know the text of each song.... I have them write the translations into the score because most of my students...don't speak German. In addition to the translation, they have to understand the symbolism and metaphors in the poetry of each song." The reason for this: "The best composers of songs wrote accompaniments that mirror or emphasize the text." And this, I suppose, is the point – whether verse or tune begins the process, what matters in songwriting is that word and music be married – lovingly -- to each other...and live happily ever after.



### Music Committee

Francis Okano-Chairperson

Gladys Fujiuchi - Kauai, Osamu Kawabata - Honolulu,

Mitsuyo Saito - Honolulu, B.J. Soriano - Hawaii,

Gail Taira - Oahu, Joan Tamori - Maui

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Francis Okano—Chairperson

Joan Tamori—Edit, Layout and Design

Yoshiko Umitani—Distribution

(Choralfest—continued from page 1)

In 2000, about the time of the Betsuin Choir's first Honzan visit – and of much fuss about the new 21st century -- Hawaii's Music Committee was looking to sponsor something of a state-wide choir festival or even a contest. Temple musical activity, it was felt, needed a boost. That was when word spread that the Hawaii Betsuin Choir had returned from Midou Ensoukai starry-eyed. As two and two were put together, the Committee thought, wouldn't something like a mini-Midou Ensoukai in Hawaii be just the refresher the Committee was looking for? With the Midou Ensoukai melodies, arrangements, and contemporary style so beautiful, wouldn't such music be sure to appeal? An outline was taking shape, but for one fuzzy spot – the lyrics of Midou Ensoukai gathas were all in Japanese! If the gathas were to have meaning for local singers, they would have to be sung in English!

After more brainstorming, a Translation Subcommittee was convened in early 2004, chaired by Mitsuyo Saito. The goal was to further the gatha translation efforts of the 1980s (which stopped after pioneering 15 English gathas), with priority given to translating Midou Ensoukai gathas. Thus, when a handful of English Midou Ensoukai renditions had been quickly completed, the Hawaii Hongwanji launched its first choralfest in 2005. The event drew state-wide over 100 singers, who assembled to rehearse as a massed choir on Saturday and to sing at a music service on Sunday. The program of choral works included three translations and two original pieces by local composers. Prominent local choral director Nola Nahulu inspired singers to sing wonderfully beyond themselves. With singers overflowing to the temple's side aisles, the music literally enveloped the audience in "surround-sound." The first choralfest had indeed been stunningly beautiful.

A second choralfest was held at Hawaii Betsuin in 2007. It rivaled the first in fanfare and excitement, drawing around 135 singers statewide. Then, by the end of 2009, when a dozen Midou Ensoukai gathas (and over two dozen total gathas) had been rendered in English, the third such event, Choralfest 2010, was planned for Hilo Betsuin, on the island of Hawaii. The first neighbor-island choralfest, it drew about 120 singers, with the largest representation from home, the Big Island. In addition to beautiful enjoyment of the Dharma in music, a bonus of Choralfest 2010 was how Sangha Hall, of Hilo Betsuin, had proven an extraordinarily adaptable venue for an event of this size!

Now, as the fourth such gathering, **Choralfest 2012**, comes to Honolulu's **Hawaii Betsuin** on **August 4 and 5, 2012**, singers from the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) have been warmly invited to share in this musical Dharma. BCA's participation (limited to 50, for space reasons) is anticipated to swell the ranks to upwards of 200 voices joined as one in praise of the Buddha in English! Under the skilled hands of conductor Nola Nahulu, the upcoming festival choir will sing the following selections: *Amida's Compassionate Vow (Mida Daihi no Seigan wo)*, *Cosmos Flower (Kosumosu no Hana)*, *Entrusting Heart (Marui Kokoro)*, *Life (Inochi)*, *Overflowing Light (Hikari Afurete)*. The congregation will sing the recently revised *Shinshu Anthem* at program end. Following on Puna Hongwanji's surprise gala reception for Choralfest 2010, a welcome reception for all singers is planned for Friday night, August 3, at Hawaii Betsuin.

Knowing the background of choralfest, if you were to find yourself drawn irresistibly to this Dharma in music, why not include Choralfest 2012 in your plans for the summer? If the past is any guide, your visit to Hawaii Choralfest, as either singer or observer, is bound to be *positively uplifting!*







## District of Honolulu

### Moiliili Hongwanji Mission Choir Shares Music

By Osamu Kawabata

The Moiliili Hongwanji Mission Choir was originally formed to commemorate its Centennial celebration in 2005. Since then, the choir has been conducted by Edwin Tanaka and accompanied by Francis Okano. The choir participates in its major temple services.

Last year, it performed at Maunalani Nursing Home to entertain residents and is planning to continue its visits.

### Hawaii Betsuin Choir News...

#### Gatha Singing Resounds Everywhere!

By Mitsuyo Saito



The Hawaii Betsuin Choir participated in the following temple services: Obon, Grandparent's Day, Autumn Higa- E, Dana Awareness Sunday, Eitaikyo and Bodhi day services.

The choir was busy taking part in many community events. The choir was invited to the choral service honoring the deceased of the 9/11 disaster which was held at Kawaiaha'o Church. A number of sentimental musical presentations touched and inspired those attending the event. Everyone listened intently as they reflected on the tragic event.

The Oahu AJA Veterans Council 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Joint Memorial Service was held at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific on September 25. The choir was deeply honored to be invited to participate in this annual event. The Hawaii Betsuin Choir's singing remembrance at the 9/11 and the AJA Memorial services were reported on KHON and KITV stations on the same day.

The choir sang in the Dharmachakra Festival sponsored by the Hawaii Association of International Buddhists held at the Soto Mission of Hawaii on November 9. They also shared the *Gift of Music* at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Nu'uano Valley Interfaith Thanksgiving Service at Community Church of Honolulu on November 22. The speaker was Dr. Maya Soetoro-Ng, sister of President Barack Obama. A photo of the Hawaii Betsuin Choir at this event appeared in the Star/Advertiser news bulletin.

The choir sang at the HBC Bodhi Day service which was held at the Soto Mission on December 4. The Hawaii Betsuin Choir will continue to participate in temple services and community events to spread the Dharma message through singing of beautiful gathas.



The Hawaii Betsuin Choir sings at its best at the annual Nu'uano Valley Interfaith Thanksgiving service at the Community Church of Honolulu.



Singing harmoniously with members of other faiths at Kawaiaha'o Church..

## More from Honolulu District



The Betsuin Bodhi Day and Music/Dance Fest 2011 was held on December 11. The Hongwanji Mission School kindergarten and third grade students were featured in the show. Their sweet voices and delightful dances were appreciated by all.

### Kiyoshi Nobutoki: Composer of *Mihotokewa*

By Osamu Kawabata

[based on *Jewel Box of Melodies* (Kyoto: Institute for Buddhist Music, 1997)]

Kiyoshi Nobutoki was born in 1887 in Osaka, the son of a diplomat. He studied composition at the Tokyo Music School, where he became a professor of composition upon graduation. Later, from 1920 to 1922, he studied composition in Europe on a government stipend. Receiving encouragement from his German mentor, Nobutoki succeeded in forming a Department of Composition at Tokyo Music School in 1932. There, he taught many students, among them Kan-ichi Shimofusa, the composer of *Inochi*.

Nobutoki, together with Kosaku Yamada, was responsible for popularizing Western choral music in Japan. While Yamada's compositional style was described as flamboyant, Nobutoki's was seen as simple and classically German. Nobutoki composed over 1,000 songs, of which *Mihotokewa* (*Amida is Such*) is probably his most famous gatha in Hawaii.

After returning from Europe, Nobutoki composed *Umiyukaba*, on an old Japanese poem, in 1923. His interest was in merging Western music and the Japanese *waka*, a poem of 31-syllables. This short song, *Umiyukaba*, became, dubiously, his most-heard song throughout Japan when it was used by the Japanese Imperial military to promote war. Deeply regretting not opposing the military government's use of his song, he felt profound guilt for the loss of many young lives, and he nearly stopped composing. In the twenty years from the war's end until his death in 1965, he published only six major choral opuses, besides smaller works. *Mihotokewa* (1947) comes from this period.

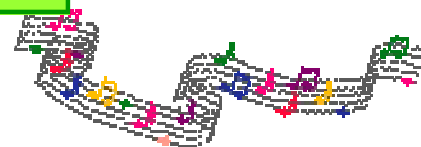


## District of Kauai



### Peace Day Music on Kauai

By Shirley Kakuda



The West Kauai Hongwanji Ukulele Group, made up of Hongwanji members as well as non-members, meet every Wednesday evening from 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm at WKH Hanapepe Temple.

This ukulele group was invited to participate in the 2011 Peace Day program sponsored by the United Junior YBA of Kauai on October 12<sup>th</sup> at WKH Hanapepe Temple. The group worked for about two months on the song, *Let Peace Begin With Me*, music and words by Mary Donnelly. This same song was sung at the BWA Conference in Honolulu.

Mr. Roy Tamashiro worked on and helped us with the ukulele chords. The group worked diligently on this inspirational piece with meaningful words and it was very appropriate for the occasion.

Mrs. Diane Kent was the group's original instructor who started the weekly sessions but moved away after several years. With Mrs. Kent, this group performed at the Hanamatsuri a few times and with the Lihue Hongwanji Choir on occasions at other Peace Day celebrations. The group is now under the direction of Mr. Roy Tamashiro.



West Kauai Hongwanji Mission ukulele group members plucking and singing to the inspirational melody of *Let Peace Begin With Me*.



## District of Maui



### Musical Notes Fill the Air...

By Joan Tamori



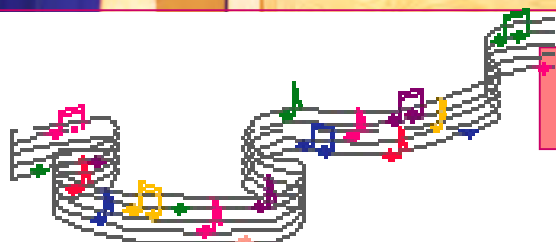
After a restful summer break, the Wailuku Hongwanji Mission choir was rejuvenated and prepared to provide the distinctive musical component to its temple's special services and programs. Beginning with its Obon services, the choir skillfully sang two gathas on both nights, *Gratefulness*, and *Nembutsu*. The beautifully composed *Nembutsu* never fails to warm the heart with its exceptional melody.

In September at its autumn Ohigan service, the choir rendered *The Wondrous Gift of Peace* and *May Peace Prevail*.

A Music Sunday service was held in October where choir director, Joan Tamori, taught the congregation, *Amida's Guide to Life*, with the assistance of dharma school and parent ukulele players. The learning session utilized a video projector which projected the words onto a screen.

*Homeward I Go* and *Let It Begin With Me* were sung at the Buddhist Women's Association Memorial day service in December. Also as part of the service, the congregation sang *Asoka Garden* with the choir.

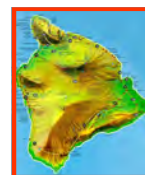
The choir's performance schedule continues from January through May 2012 after which the choir will be committed to practicing gathas for Choralfest 2012 coming in early August. The choir is looking forward to experiencing another outstanding Choralfest!



Wailuku Hongwanji Mission choir members sing proudly at their annual Obon services.



## District of Hawaii



### Mahalo, Gere!

By B. J. Soriano



The Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Choir members bid a fond farewell to their dedicated accompanist, Gere Mimaki.



The Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Choir recently bid farewell to its accompanist, Gere Mimaki, who after many, many, many years, decided to take it easy from accompanying the choir. A farewell luncheon on her behalf was held in September at Encore Restaurant. Thankfully, Charlene Pascual agreed to step into these large shoes, and is serving as the choir's present accompanist. Gere began playing for the temple back when she was 9 years old, and now some ....uh hum, 60+ years later (without revealing her age), she still continues to serve as one of the organists and pianists for Honpa Hongwanji. She is part of a remarkable team of pianists and organists, namely, Amy Kubota, Karen Maedo, Charlene Pascual, Ellen Okano and Jeanine Atebara. Honpa Hongwanji is very fortunate to have these extraordinary women who serve in this capacity voluntarily and with such compassionate hearts.



The Hilo Betsuin Choir recently provided their rendition of *Simple Song of Peace* for the Interfaith Community Thanksgiving Service at Holy Cross church, and will serve as the 2012 host of this event, which brings together many different faiths to celebrate and give thanks in a musical format type of service. The choir will soon ready themselves for February 2012's Gatha Fest, hosted this year by Puna Hongwanji Mission, and looks forward to participating in ChoralFest 2012 at Hawaii Betsuin.



## District of Oahu



### Dharma School Teachers of Oahu Present "Voices of the Dharma"

By Gail Taira

On Sunday, October 16, 2011, Dharma school students, parents and teachers gathered at Wahiawa Hongwanji for the annual DSTO Songfest. The morning began with an opening service led by Reverend Arthur Kaufmann. MC Amy Kanemaru introduced DSTO President, Gay Tanaka, who welcomed everyone.

The songfest began with the Aiea Hongwanji students singing *Come on Everybody*, a rousing and engaging children's song with hand motions and clapping that set a lively tone for the morning. They were followed by Waipahu Hongwanji and *You Are My Sunshine*. With their wonderfully creative signs and pictures, the singing and music uplifted and encouraged everyone to smile! Mililani Hongwanji followed with *Gentle Hands*, lyrics by Alice and Taitetsu Unno, music by Mitsuyo Saito. Wahiawa Hongwanji's presentation of *Buddha Loves You* included cute costumes and outstanding solos singing! The children did a great job! The group song was *I Am What I Am*, words and music by Roy Sakuma and Jill Chinen, which was accompanied by the Wahiawa Hongwanji Ukulele Group.

Led by Judy Kakazu and Richard Fujimoto, the Wahiawa Hongwanji's Ukulele Group of 10 ukulele players and 3 singers entertained the audience with, *Wakare no Isochidori*, *Suiteita Noni* and *Bassho fu*.

Because it was a music filled morning, we even sang our Words of Thanksgiving before we all had our delicious bentos!

As each temple group shared their wonderful presentations, we were all caught up in the energy, excitement and sheer joy that the children, parents and teachers emanated! We all left with a sense of gratitude for the special gifts that each of the children, parents and teachers gave to us as they shared their hearts through their songs!

### 2011 Translation Subcommittee Report

By Mitsuyo Saito

The following three gathas were completed in 2011:

Song of Obon (Bon E no Uta)

Other Shore (Higan)

Happily Together (Minna Nakayoku)

The committee is working on three more gathas for the year 2012:

Lullaby for Children of the World (Nonnosama)

Yasashisa ni Deattara (When Kindness Greeted You)

Yurusareishi (Be Allowed To)

Members: Francis Okano, Rev. Shigeaki Fujitani, Ruby Nagao,  
Osamu Kawabata, Florence Wasai, Wendie Yumori,  
Mitsuyo Saito