



How Buddhism Helps Musical Message Take Wing...

By Laurie Rubin

My introduction to Buddhism happened simultaneously with my introduction to my in-laws. I was very apprehensive as a new girlfriend often is when you meet the most important people in her significant other's life. However, I received the same warm and inviting reception from Jenny's family as I did when I walked into the Mililani Hongwanji for the first time. In both cases, there was absolutely no sense of judgement, no uncomfortable feeling as though I were being appraised for my value. From the moment I set foot in Jenny's childhood home and the church she was raised in, there was such a sense of joy and life. I also distinctly remember the smell of delicious Japanese food in both places. It was January 1st, 2005 when I attended my first Buddhist service, and at that time, there were many parents lovingly reunited with their children who were home from college. Everyone knew each other well and seemed to be celebrating a closeness kindled from childhood. I also marveled at how it was encouraged for people to bring their youngest offspring to services, and that when a baby cooed or

cried, there was only a loving chuckle that rippled through the sangha. I was raised Jewish, and in our Synagogue, kids were relegated to Hebrew School or children's services. It was frowned upon when a young family brought a new baby into the synagogue, unless it was for a baby naming ceremony.

Fast forward 20 years, and so much has changed for Mililani Hongwanji which had given me my first impression of Buddhism. So much has changed in our world. We've had several family discussions, lamenting the significant decline in attendance to services and to a shrinking sangha. We tried to brainstorm some ways in which we could make Buddhism jump further into the 21st century in keeping up with some of the trends that attract the younger generations. In 2024, access to the news, our social lives, and even religion has become so much more available online. People have traded phone calls for texts, letters for emails, movie theaters for Disney Plus. So, it isn't surprising that face to face, in-person events have taken a hit. Add to that a two-year pandemic where everything was exclusively online, and our world has settled into a much more remote and reclusive way of operating.

*"As long as people are made up of
mind, body, and soul, music will continue
to remind us that we are still people."*

(continued on page 3)

RARE OPPORTUNITY

By Francis Okano

Four years after the brutal worldwide COVID shutdown, we seem today to be back to normal in most areas of our lives. When Choralfest 2020 was cancelled, we thought the public health threat would be transitory, take a few months, a year at the most – even as we assumed that singing might be the last activity to resume, for its potential to spread airborne undesirables. Little did we expect the lockdown to linger and devastate and for choirs to be slow to get back on their feet.

Despite the present COVID recovery, I suspect choirs everywhere are struggling to return to their pre-pandemic form. If so, I think there is no better time to pick ourselves up than at this year's Triple Celebration festivities. A statewide choir has been asked to assemble, to offer two choral preludes at the service commemorating the 135th year of the Hawaii Hongwanji's establishment, on Sunday, September 8. While Saturday's service will center on Shinran Shonin's 850th birth year celebration and the 800th commemoration of Jodo Shinshu's doctrinal founding, Sunday's choral preludes can help to re-ignite the passion for choral singing that was snuffed by the pandemic.

"But if we find ourselves wanting choral music to brighten more temples as it did pre-pandemic, we have everything to gain by participating, committing to singing, and working to bring beautiful vocal harmony into the hondo once again."

What will the statewide choir sing? Surely one of the happiest, most exuberant chorales to grace the temple. In *When I Look Up at the Sky* (*Ano Sora Mireba* in the Japanese original), the lyrics remind of Shinran's purity of heart "when I look up at the sky," of Shinran's warm smile "when I look at that flower", and of Shinran's boundless vision "when I behold mountain high", all of which cannot help but infuse us with overflowing joy. The second gatha, *Moments Like This* (in Japanese, *Sonna Toki Watashi wa Kuchizusamu*), offers a contrasting moment of reflection. Times that move us to utter the opening lines of the *Shoshinge*, Shinran's words of unwavering faith -- *Kimyo muryoju nyorai / Namo fukashigi ko* [I take refuge in the Tathagata of Eternal Life / I entrust myself totally to the Buddha of Inconceivable Light] -- are captured with music both mysterious and introspective, yet quietly resonating joy.

If we want Hawaii's temples to be lit by only a few exceptional pockets of choral singing, we can continue our post-pandemic trend. But if we find ourselves wanting choral music to brighten more temples as it did pre-pandemic, we have everything to gain by participating, committing to singing, and bringing beautiful vocal harmony into the hondo once again. In the meantime, we are all encouraged to enjoy and support the Triple Celebration this year, a rare occasion to honor three happy and deeply significant events in Hongwanji history.

In spite of all of this, there is one factor in our lives that has not changed. It is a phenomenon which will always stir the emotions, remain timeless, unaffected by technology or changes in lifestyle. That is music. As long as people are made up of mind, body, and soul, music will continue to remind us that we are still people. It will be one thing that will motivate people to gather with other people, because music does not have oxygen or inspiration without in person contact. Music inspires community, and community inspires music. Music has also been the backbone of any religious service or gathering since the beginning of time. It is the soul's most powerful communication device.

In 2010, my wife Jenny, her younger sister Cari, and I founded an organization called Ohana Arts which trains youth in the performing arts. Our mission is to cultivate peace and an international family through the arts. Our organization got its start at the Hongwanji Mission School. Cari had gotten her very first job out of college as the director of the performing arts theater at the Hongwanji Mission School. She created the program from scratch and built it up over the subsequent eight years. The school allowed us to hold our classes and rehearsals there, and many of the students who started with us were Cari's Hongwanji Mission School students.

Because Buddhism was such a huge influence in Jenny's and Cari's lives, I credit a lot of our teaching and leadership philosophies to Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. I also believe that became the hallmark of our

program which inspired students to return year after year. While high caliber training has been quite important to us, the emphasis on interdependence, kindness, and universal acceptance within our program has been at the top of our list of things to sew into the students we work with.

In 2013, Cari was approached by the Bishop of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, Eric Matsumoto. He had seen several of our productions over the years, but he had also witnessed their impact on the greater community. He wanted to find a way to share that with temples on the neighbor islands. So, he asked Cari to find a small musical play which the Honpa would sponsor to tour to the neighbor islands.

Cari mentioned Bishop Matsumoto's idea to Jenny. Jenny had always wanted to write a musical Broadway style. She also had felt frustrated year after year in trying to find appropriate theater repertoire to program for youth which would be challenging enough, but would also speak to their life experience. One story she had always been impacted by was that of 12 year old Hiroshima atomic bomb victim, Sadako Sasaki, and her thousand paper cranes. That became the subject of the play with a Buddhist message that Jenny and I would write and produce. The small play ended up having a cast of 38 students as we didn't want to turn away any of our loyal students who auditioned. It also had an orchestra comprised of 18 players. If Bishop Matsumoto had seemed stressed or overwhelmed by how his idea had exploded, he did not show it. He

just continued to find resources within the Buddhist community to make his idea come to fruition.



"Peace On Your Wings"
Prologue, Hiroshima,
August 6, 1945

(continued on next page)

Sadako's story is deeply rooted in Buddhism. Her living brother Masahiro, was a dear friend of Bishop Eric and the Honpa, having partnered with them in several peace day events over the years. Jenny and I also became inspired by a Dharma talk given by Rev. Marvin Harada of the Orange County Betsuin which Jenny's dad had shared with us on the Buddhist message, "Ichi-go, ichi-e", literally meaning, "One chance, one meeting," and in Buddhist interpretation, "Today is the first and last day of your life." This phrase seemed to espouse everything Sadako's life stood for in how she feverishly folded cranes to gain good health and a chance to live her life to the fullest.

"Peace On Your Wings" has toured ten cities over the past ten years. The tour of the show started with an Oahu premiere in 2014, followed by a neighbor island tour of Kauai, Maui, and the island of Hawaii. The show was fully embraced by the temples on all the islands. Cast members were greeted by the hospitality of temple members who provided food from their own gardens, home cooked meals, PR services to get the show into all the local newspapers, word of mouth marketing, and most of all, a grassroots loving effort from the community which resulted in the show's big success.

The show toured to Los Angeles soon after that, and the Honpa's sister organization, Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) took the show under its

wing and provided a similar powerful effort to help Sadako's message spread its wings.

Once the show had its West Coast premier in



LA, reverends from temples around the country began emailing us, asking how they could facilitate bringing the show to their respective necks of the woods. East Coast temples got wind of the show's impact, and the next

Sadako and Itsue, both victims of the atomic bomb

stop on the tour was New York City. The original cast toured the show for two years and in 2017, a brand new cast of youth from Northern California toured the show to San Francisco, San Jose, and Sacramento. Once again, the engine behind the show was the consortium of Buddhist churches who provided rehearsal spaces, meals, and promotion to ensure the show's success.

At Ohana Arts, we were seeing a truly altruistic outpouring of support for the show. The Honpa which had been like a parent in raising up this musical began pouring large sums of money into the show's continuation and sustainability beyond Hawaii. Supporters of the show in Los Angeles donated money to ensure the show would travel to New York. After the show had completed its run in the Bay Area, members of various Buddhist churches in San Francisco and beyond began requesting moneys from various foundations to support future performances of the show, wherever it would travel next.



Hospital Kids with Sadako singing, "Peace On Your Wings"

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In the summer of 2023, the show reached the milestone of milestones. It traveled to Hiroshima, the very city where it all took place, where Sadako herself had lived and died. Once again, Buddhist churches from around the US began bestowing monetary gifts upon the show to help ensure that our dream would come to fruition. A brand new cast was assembled, and the show was performed at Aster Plaza for an audience of over 2,800 people from Hiroshima and greater Japan, including the Governor of Hiroshima Prefecture, Governor Yuzaki. The show took place on September 2 – 3, 2023.

When I reflect on the show's impact and the motivation for Jodo Shinshu Buddhist communities to get behind this initiative to spread Sadako's message worldwide, I realize it is because of music. It is the music that everyone is left with when they exit the theater. It is the theme song they continue to sing. It is music that is responsible for parents gathering to help build sets and to sew costumes for cast members to cry and hug each other when they would sing the chorus of, "*Ichigo, Ichi-e*" during their preshow circle. The result was not only increasing the amount of audiences the show garnered, but it was the in person, face to face interaction and fellowship that took place. Similar to church services which inspire friendships between chil-

dren and adults, a musical with a Buddhist message was accomplishing so many of the same goals we hold dear in services. Our casts learned firsthand how everyone played a role in the show's success, how true interdependence prevailed. The power of teamwork, thinking of others, learning to be kind and compassionate in cultivating a theater family through the process, and coming together in the name of peace. When our cast presented a thousand cranes at Sadako's monument, the students were welcomed by Hiroshima Mayor Matsui, and were introduced to Sadako's still living best friend, they were humbled again and again by the journey and the hard work of hundreds to make this happen.

When we are seeking solutions for how to keep the ethics and values of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism alive and to insist on cultivating opportunities for in person gatherings I think turning to music might just be the answer. Perhaps future bishops will pose a challenge to their sangha members to create an initiative through music to rally the troops. Whether it is receiving a message in a church, a theater, or a concert hall, the important thing is to make every new sangha member feel as I did when they walk in the door warmly welcomed, celebrated, and inspired to receive a message.



Finale, the entire cast singing "*Sadako's Gift*"
The words from this song, *'this is our cry, this is prayer, peace in the world'*.

Musical Greetings from the Beautiful Garden Isle of Kauai!



By Brandi Yamamoto



Kauai's news for this issue will highlight West Kauai Hongwanji Mission's Music Sunday Services. Rev. Tomo Hojo shared that they started conducting Music Sunday Services in January 2015 and they are still ongoing today. Temple Member Shirley Kakuda selects the gathas for the services which occur on the fifth Sundays of months that have five Sundays. The Music Sunday Service, like many of WKHM's services, are hybrid which means anyone can join at Hanapepe Hongwanji Mission or via ZOOM. Rev. Hojo said that everyone is welcome! Currently Kapaa Hongwanji Mission joins WKHM Services due to not having a minister at this time. During the Music Sunday Services, choralfest practice CDs and YouTube videos are utilized when practicing gathas.

Upcoming Music Services will take place on June 30 and September 29, 2024. If you would like to attend the WKHM's future Music/Sunday Services, please reach out to WKHM. I can also assist with connecting you. Please email me at: brandiay@hawaii.edu

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"Musical Notes" is published biannually by the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii,
Office of Buddhist Education Music Committee.

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“MILILANI JAMMERS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN!”

By Rene Mansho

A few members of Mililani Hongwanji better known as the Mililani Jammers, have started to gather after Sunday morning services to casually enjoy strumming the ukulele again. They are learning and practicing new chords, and singing familiar tunes for approximately 60 to 90 minutes during each session.

Prior to the pandemic, the Mililani Jammers met one Friday evening a month to play music and just to have fun “jamming” together. That ended with the lockdown of COVID19, but now the Jammers are thrilled to be back!

They have been invited to play at temple programs accompanying singers and inviting the audience for sing-alongs! Their goal is to someday accompany the Mililani Choir and create a truly magical musical synergy. Ukulele players of all levels are invited to join the Mililani Jammers on Sundays after service and refreshments to socialize and play in the same room with the Mililani Mahjong Club. Our goal is to learn new songs and have fun!



Jammers entertaining at Rev. Sol Kalu's welcome party!



Jammers practicing...an impressive bunch!



Honolulu District “Moves” to the Music

By Wendie Yumori

The Honolulu District Council and Friends of Foster Gardens sponsored the first concert honoring Mary Mikahala Foster, benefactor of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, at Foster Botanical Gardens on September 8, 2023. More than 300 attendees were treated to a wonderful overview of Hawaii’s vibrant musical landscape.



Concert honoring Mary Mikahala Foster

Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin

Hawaii Betsuin hosted an interfaith service honoring Queen Lili’uokalani’s legacy of justice and nonviolence on January 19. Memorable performances were offered by the Hawaii Betsuin Project Dana Dancers, Harris Hoike Group, shakuhachi master, Katsumi Takemoto, and Ryugen Taiko of Wahiawa.



Interfaith Service -- Ryugen Taiko

The Hawaii Betsuin Choir, conducted by Mari Murakami and accompanied by Francis Okano, enhances major and special services with lovely choral preludes, most recently at the Hongwanji Day service on March 3, with *You Can Build a Bridge*. For Hawaii Buddhist Council Bodhi Day and Buddha Day services, Hawaii Betsuin Choir members are joined by singers from Honolulu District and Oahu District and call themselves the Honpa Hongwanji Choir (HHC). The HHC also sang for the touching Maui Wildfire Memorial Service at Hawaii Betsuin on September 24, 2023.



Maui Wildfire Memorial -- Honpa Hongwanji Choir

Windward Buddhist Temple

Several Windward Buddhist Temple members joined the HHC to sing *In Praise of Buddha* at the Hawaii Buddhist Council Bodhi Day service at Nichiren Mission of Hawaii on December 3, 2023. WBT will also



HBC Bodhi Day -- Honpa Hongwanji Choir

be represented at the Hawaii Buddhist Council Buddha Day service on April 7 at Soto Mission when the HHC presents the beautiful choral gatha, *Moments Like This*, one of the offerings of the Triple Celebration Choir on September 8.

(continued on next page)

Jikoen Hongwanji

Jikoen held its New Year's Party on January 28 and the program featured talented Jikoen members, Pacific Buddhist Academy's musical group – Oubaitori, the Hawaii Okinawa Creative Arts group, and Ukwanshin Kabudan, an Okinawan performing arts group. The party closed with a lively “Kachashi”, a traditional Okinawan dance of celebration. Often, at Jikoen services, Pete Doktor, happily accompanies congregational singing on sanshin/guitar. And one Sunday, a Jikoen friend shared her whistling skills with the congregation, to the delight of all!



Jikoen New Year's Party -- Lois and Pieper Toyama and Bishop Toshiyuki and Yoshiko Umitani dance to “Kachashi”!

Moiliili Hongwanji

Two musical groups at Moiliili enliven special services and gatherings. The first is the Happy Strummers who sing at the Project Dana recognition service and Mother's Day and Father's Day services. The second group, mainly BWA members, formed two years ago and is called the Sangha Ohana. This 11-member ensemble, which includes ukulele players, presented two hula for Moiliili's New Year's parties in 2023 and 2024. Sangha Ohana singers enjoy performing children's song favorites -- *Haru ga Kita* and *Kodomo no Uta*.



Moiliili New Year's Party 2023 -- Sangha Ohana



STATEWIDE CHOIR FOR THE 135TH ANNIVERSARY SERVICE

After a continental breakfast at 7:00 am, all who attend the HHMH 135th Anniversary Commemorative Service on Sunday, September 8, 2024, at the Ala Moana Hotel will be greeted by a statewide choir that will open the morning service at 9:00 am. The choir will offer two preludes -- *When I Look Up At the Sky (Ano Sora Mireba)* and *Moments Like This (Sonna Toki Watashi wa Kuchizusamu)*. The selections are English renditions of Japanese choral works that have been sung at Honzan's Midou Ensoukai (a massed choir performance), an event held in Kyoto every November. Both gathas praise our founder Shinran Shonin for his profound teachings, and the second gatha quotes from the verses of the *Shoshinge*.

Celebrants who enjoy singing are encouraged to express their dharma joy by joining the statewide choir on this very special occasion. They may affirm their interest by marking "Yes" to the question "Choir: Would you like to join the choir and sing at the HHMH 135th Anniversary Service on Sunday Morning?" on the Triple Celebration Registration Form.

The choir will be conducted by Hawaii Betsuin Choir director Mari Murakami and accompanied by Francis Okano. Singers wishing to join this statewide choir will receive musical scores and taped recordings around June 2024 for self-learning and practice. A rehearsal will be held Sunday morning before the service at the Ala Moana Hotel. A flyer, a "call for participation," has circulated, and any questions may be directed to Francis Okano or Brandi Yamamoto of the Hawaii Music Committee. (See flyer on page 11.)

Let us all take this opportunity to rejoice in the power of voices raised in song to spread spiritual joy in the commemorative service of the founding of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, an important part of Hawaii's Triple Celebration.

A rehearsal will be held early Sunday morning before the service at the Ala Moana Hotel.

Call for Participation!

We are looking for participants to join our Triple Celebration Choir! The Triple Celebration Choir will be singing during the prelude of the 135th Commemorative Service on Sunday, September 8, 2024.

The two gathas selected are:

“When I look Up at the Sky”

(Ano Sora Mireba)

“Moments Like This”

(Sonna Toki Watashi wa Kuchizusamu)

If interested, please check “Yes” for the Choir Question on the Triple Celebration Registration Form.

Please email Francis Okano (faokano@gmail.com) or Brandi Yamamoto (brandiay@hawaii.edu) with any questions or concerns!



We will very soon have a google drive dedicated to the Triple Celebration Choir preparation materials!