

Musical Notes



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Issue

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“Ah, What Joy!”

By Joan Tamori

After the final lyric was sung signaling the end of the choral performance, the 60 singers of the Triple Celebration Choir were both relieved and ecstatic to have participated in a memorable musical expression of dharma joy. They had just sung before a captive audience of 300 attendees at the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii's 135th Anniversary Commemorative Service on Sunday, September 8, 2024 in the Hibiscus ballroom of the Ala Moana Hotel. The prelude performance opened the service and though it actually lasted for about eight minutes, there was no doubt that the singers sang their hearts out feeling a sense of accomplishment after months of learning, practicing, and internalizing the two gathas with their choir directors back at their respective districts and temples.

The choir which was comprised of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass singers, sang two selections, ***When I Look Up At the Sky*** (*Ano Sora Mireba*) and ***Moments Like This*** (*Sonna Toki Watashi wa Kuchizusamu*), which are English renditions of Japanese choral works that were sung at the Midou Ensoukai, a Honzan massed choir performance held every November in Kyoto, Japan. These gathas honoring Shinran Shonin were purposefully chosen for our celebration. Quotes from the verses of Shinran's *Shoshinge* were featured in *Moments Like This*.

Ms. Brandi Yamamoto, music committee member from Kauai, assumed the role of choir organizer which encompassed a tall order of duties. She kept statewide participants well informed every step of the way through emails and phone calls. She synchronized recordings for each gatha with the sheet music and created YouTube videos making it much easier to practice the gathas. Clicking on links, participants could go to soprano and tenor sections, alto and bass sections, and all voice sections for each of the gathas. She also provided us with information on preparations

for performance day as well as generously gifting all participants with choir folders compliments of her family's H. Yamamoto Farms. On performance day, she organized the group efficiently with the assistance of music committee members, Ethel Miyashiro, Gail Taira, and Joan Tamori.



Ms. Mari Murakami, Triple Celebration Choir director, skillfully leads the massed choir.

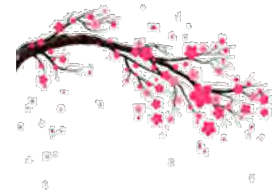
After presenting a beautiful introduction of the choir and the gathas, Ms. Yamamoto turned over the program to Ms. Mari Murakami, Hawaii Betsuin Choir director, who served as the Triple Celebration Choir director. Upon cueing accompanist Mr. Francis Okano to begin, Ms. Murakami raised her graceful hands commanding all singers' attention. With calm confidence and expertise, she led the choir through both gathas sometimes invoking a smile to remind all singers of the joy of the occasion.

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Music Editorial

DAUGHTERS AND SPRING LOVE

By Francis Okano



The pandemic's dark days finally behind us, we are delighted that Choralfest will return to Hawaii Betsuin in 2025. It will have been seven long years since the last one in 2018, and we look forward to exotic harmonies rocking the spacious Hondo once again. As such, we invite everyone, whether singer or listener, to **Choralfest 2025** to see for yourself the range of expressiveness that is to be found in Hongwanji choral gathas.

Allow me to preview two of them that are slated for the event, compassionate expressions both, set to a contemporary beat. *To My Daughters (Musume tachi yo)* voices the concern of parents who are sending their beloved daughters off on their journeys of life (marriage, perhaps, or jobs in the big city). They admonish their daughters: When a time should come, as it inevitably will, when you feel sad and alone, even shed tears of pain, remember to place your hands together in gassho—for in Amida's warm light you will always find the strength to walk on, reminded of happy times in your childhood home. Likewise, when fortune should smile, as it surely will, and you come to meet a *true friend* with whom to walk together, never forget to place your hands together in gassho—for in the Buddha's incomparable light you will walk on with the joy of a bond that will remind you of Mother's love when you were cradled in her arms.

Who cannot relate to such tenderness toward loved ones? In today's world, however, one might ask why is the focus here on *daughters* only? After all, the gender gap of opportunity is surely narrowing.

While so, I suspect the social commentary here is that, through most of history, gender often dictated social outcomes. Growing up, I recall the stereotypes that boys who went to college became engineers, girls school teachers; high school boys played sports, girls took 4-H. More seriously, however, the plight of the daughter-in-law in many an extended family in the pre-modern world was, often, one of hardship, as shown, for example, in the popular Japanese television serial *Oshin*. Where women lacked power for much of civilization, parental protectiveness of daughters sounds only natural—while tugging at our heartstrings as lyrics.

*"...we invite everyone, whether singer or listener, to **Choralfest 2025** to see for yourself the range of expressiveness that is to be found in Hongwanji choral gathas."*

The second gatha, *Surely, We Will Meet Again Someday (Kitto mata aeru ne)*, is equally contemporary in sound, if without social critique. On a cherry blossom hill in spring, where "blossoms dance and twirl," the speaker recalls soulful meetings with a loved one and wonders, by day and by night, where the beloved is now. Surely as the petals dance by day and the stars shine by night, the warm and lasting connection beckons the speaker and the beloved to meet again, without fail, one day. The lyrics may be said to suggest, on another level, that the mysterious beloved, so far away yet so vividly near, could as well be the Buddha Amida, whose care is ever-present and to whose Pure Land we are ever destined.

(continued Choir)

Music Committee Chair and Hawaii Betsuin Choir accompanist, Mr. Okano, provided the choir with a truly splendid keyboard accompaniment of the gathas.

This very special Triple Celebration Choir experience will surely hold warm and lasting memories for all participants. "Ah, what joy!"



"WHEN I LOOK UP AT THE SKY"

*"When I look up at the sky, there in the sky I see
Shinran Shonin's openness of heart
A welcome so overflowing fills horizon far.
Ah, what joy,
Ah, what joy,
We feel our hearts brimming o'er with happiness to know
That, hand in hand as we toil, we become as free!"*



*"When I gaze at a flow'r, there in its heart I see
Shinran Shonin's look of kindly joy
A smile so firmly gentle plays upon the breeze.
Ah, what joy,
Ah, what joy,
That we, at ev'ry turn, embraced in Buddha's Care,
Can on the Way overcome, so that we are free!"*



*Choir photos by
Alan Kubota*



Professional Violinist, Kisa Uradomo of Maui, Gives Back in a Big Way!

By Joan Tamori



Kisa Uradomo, born and raised on Maui, returned back to her home island with her Hana Hou Music Quartet along with fellow musicians to perform at various venues in late August and early September 2024. Kisa, granddaughter of Nobu and Kiku Kanemoto who are members of Kahului Hongwanji Mission, is a University of Michigan graduate where she received her Violin Performance Specialist degree and studied with Professor Aaron Berofsky. She received her Bachelor's in violin performance at Eastman School of Music followed by her Masters of Music degree in violin performance at University of Michigan.

She is the founder of the Hana Hou Music Program, which is a musical outreach organization aimed to inspire young students regardless of their background, economic status or abilities, to enjoy live music. Growing up on Maui, she realized that music for her was inaccessible especially for her interest and passion in violin playing. She was given the opportunity to learn with the Hawaii Youth Symphony through a scholarship enabling her to make frequent trips to Honolulu. Thus, she expresses her deep gratefulness to her mentors, teachers, and professionals who helped her along the way.

In her mission to give back to the Maui community, her group performed at a number of schools and gave free concerts at the Queen Ka'ahu-manu Center and King Kekaulike High School's new performing arts center. Kisa and her group also treated the children of **Kahului Hongwanji Mission Preschool** and church members with a performance. She mentioned that the interest for music can even be sparked at that young age!



Kisa Uradomo, second from left, along with fellow Hana Hou Music Program musicians, perform for the preschool children at Kahului Hongwanji Mission.

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(continued Maui)

Wailuku Hongwanji Dharma Strummers: Celebrating 10 Years of Music and Joy

By Danny Topp



The Dharma Strummers, a small ukulele group at Wailuku Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, has been bringing the joy of music to the community for a decade. Founded in March 2014 by Florence Tanaka, a lifelong temple member, the group was originally formed to teach children how to play the ukulele and introduce them to basic musical theory. Florence, a retired teacher and world traveler, began the group with the aim of empowering students to learn the ukulele step by step.

What began as a children's group soon expanded to include parents and other temple members eager to learn. As the children moved on to other activities, the adults continued to gather to play the ukulele. Over the years, the Dharma Strummers have become

an integral part of the temple's celebrations, performing at special events such as Hanamatsuri and the temple's 120th and 125th anniversaries.

The group meets once a week, with a special performance on the last Sunday of each month before services. They have even stepped in to play Gathas during services when the organist was unavailable.

Membership has fluctuated over the years, particularly during the pandemic when many members left the group. However, the Dharma Strummers continued to share their music, adapting by recording individual performances that were then combined into virtual group performances for online services.

As they celebrate their 10th anniversary, the Dharma Strummers remain a joyful presence at Wailuku Hongwanji, sharing the gift of music with the community.



Six years ago, the Dharma Strummers performed at Fujimatsuri (Wisteria Festival-Shinran Shonin's Birthday Celebration) on May 20, 2018 which was held at Lahaina Hongwanji Mission.



Special performance by the Dharma Strummers on the last Sunday in July 2024

(continued Choir)

*"When I behold mountain high, there in the heights I see
Shinran Shonin's mind of clarity
A vision bold, enduring, lives for us today.
Ah, what joy,
Ah, what joy,
That we on earth create tomorrows beautiful,
Our dreams we realize, soaring high and free!"*



Francis Okano, Music Committee Chair, accompanies the choir.



Triple Celebration massed choir represented by singers from Oahu, Honolulu, Kauai, Maui, and Hawai'i districts, opens the 135th Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii Anniversary Service with gathas, "When I Look Up at the Sky" and "Moments Like This".

"MOMENTS LIKE THIS"

*"With the rising sun, happy, I behold
Such refreshing morning rays, a stream of seeming gold,
Pouring o'er my garden joy untold!
With a fragrance sweet, playful breezes rush to greet,
Rustle through the leaves of green, and brush against my cheek!
Moments like this...sing from precious verse - -
"Ki-myo-mu-ryo-ju..."¹ - - Shinran's heartfelt words."*

*"As the sun descends at the close of day,
In the stillness of the dusk, against the fading rays,
Glow the western sky, dyed in red!
In the twilight peace, I hear evening bell clearly
Sound the tones that call me home that echo so in me!
Moments like this...sing from precious verse - -
"Na-mo-fu-ka-shi-gi-ko..."² - - Shinran's heartfelt words."*

*"On a moonlit night, from a stream nearby
With its surface mirroring the silver moonlight,
I hear waters murmuring through night!
There I realize, hidden portals of my mind
Open to awake in me my deepest wish in life!
Moments like this... sing from precious verse - -
"Shin-ko-sho-go..."³ - - Shinran's heartfelt words."*

¹ I take refuge in the Buddha of Eternal Life.

² I entrust myself to the Buddha of Inconceivable Light.

³ The Buddha's light shines upon us and protects us always.





The 50th Annual GathaFest: February 25, 2024 *"Building Healthy Sanghas: Sharing Nembutsu Moments"*

By Ethel Miyashiro

Excerpt from the GathaFest program on "Brief History of How GathaFest Came To Be":

"In 1974, Sadao Aoki, of Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, in an attempt to engage all the Dharma School members throughout Hawai'i Island in celebrating the dharma in a different way, conceptualized and executed the idea of a GathaFest."

And thus, a musical sharing of the dharma began. Held annually, on the last Sunday of February, GathaFest has been hosted around the island by each temple/group of temples. While originally highlighting the Dharma School program and it's recognition to the dedicated teachers and youth singers, GathaFest has evolved into an inclusive celebration of the Dharma with participants of all ages.

This year, our 50th anniversary (that's half a century of musical tradition), our friends, both singers and those that enjoy listening to singing, met, appropriately, at Hilo Hongwanji to share our joy in *Sharing Nembutsu Moments*.



Tracy Tsuha, GathaFest performer,
sings his own composition.

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(continued Hawai'i)

From individual performers such as Tracy Tsuha with his own compositions to combined groups, such as the Hamakua four temples, (shown below) the audience was treated to a variety of music expressing Buddhist concepts and teachings. Other performing groups included the Honoka'a Band, Puna/Pahala/Na'alehu Hongwanjis, Kamuela Hongwanji, Kona Hongwanji, Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin and a crowd favorite - the Hawai'i District Ministers Association.

A special 50th anniversary musical piece was performed by Megan Pascual. Many thanks to all the organizers and helping hands for a wonderful day. GathaFest 2025 will be held at Puna Hongwanji on Sunday, February 23, 2025. Everyone is invited.



Hamakua temples perform!

Megan Pascual performs a special 50th anniversary piece on her violin.



Peace Day at Puna: September 22, 2024

On Sunday, September 22, in recognition of Peace Day, a community celebration was held at Puna Hongwanji. Guest speakers were Hawai'i Island's Mayor Mitch Roth and keynote speaker Art Taniguchi. Mr. Taniguchi's speech was particularly interesting as he shared stories of his own families' experiences after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Hilo High School Japan club displayed many posters of the life of Sadako Sasaki. The Puna Hongwanji choir sang two songs "*When I Look Up at the Sky*" and "*Live and Light the World*", both messages of peace and the struggle to achieve peace in our lives and in our world.



Music News Flash!

CHORALFEST ANNOUNCEMENT

What: CHORALFEST 2025

When: September 20-21, 2025

Where: Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin

Conductor: Nola Nahulu

Registration information to become available at all temples after January 1, 2025.

MUSIC COMMITTEE

Chairman *Francis Okano*, Honolulu

Hilo Betsuin: *Rev. Blayne Nakasone-Sakata*

Kauai District: *Brandi Yamamoto*

Honolulu District: *Osamu Kawabata*

Oahu District: *Gail Taira*

Maui District: *Joan Tamori*

Hawaii District: *Ethel Miyashiro* - East Hawaii; *Miles Okumura* - West Hawaii

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