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Musical Notes

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Music Committee

Rene Mansho:
A Life of Music, A Heart of Service and Compassion

By Gail Taira

"Good Morning and Alooooooha!" Rene Mansho often opens our Sunday service with a great big smile, a warm and welcoming voice, dressed often in beautiful, flowing, soft and colorful kimono style jacket and her signature flower in her hair. When it is time for the gatha, she grabs her ukulele, introduces the songs the congregation will be singing with the Jammers, and leads us all in song - one folk song and one gatha.

As I watch Rene and get to know her, I see her huge heart and her desire to serve people to make all of our lives better. So who is Rene Mansho, and what drives her?

Born at Kapiolani Hospital, Rene's early years were in Manoa Valley at the Manoa Housing Project and amazingly, living in a quonset hut. Then, when the project was phased out, the family moved to Kapahulu where Rene enjoyed an "active childhood in Kapahulu, attending Thomas Jefferson Elementary and Waikiki Kapahulu Japanese Language School." When Rene was 10 years old, she and her family moved to Wahiawa as Rene's dad worked as a mechanic at Schofield Barracks. Rene attended Wahiawa Elementary, Wahiawa Intermediate and Leilehua High School.

Living in Wahiawa introduced Rene and her family to the very close-knit neighborhood Kumiai, or community organization, initially made up mostly of Japanese families, and later growing to include all the residents of all races. The Kumiai "held annual family picnics, New Year's parties and (included) helping neighbors in need especially during funerals where we worked at the Choba reception desk, and Rusuban, house sitting during the funeral service to prevent home burglaries during funeral services." "In Wahiawa we knew our neighbors for 10 blocks. I liked that caring and sharing atmosphere. I think that's what was the beginning for me to want to be involved in helping others. Our Kumiai neighbors were so caring and (were) always there to help."



Rene Mansho

Rene describes her time at Leilehua High as "a place to meet my friends and once in a while I had an outstanding teacher and learned a lot and (was) inspired to do good in the classes and projects." However, during her senior year, as a member of the Future Teachers Association of America, Rene had a life-changing experience of tutoring a 5th grade student from Wahiawa Elementary School. As Rene says, "a fooling around senior was inspired by the rewarding experience (of) tutoring" which fueled her desire to become a teacher. As a senior in high school, Rene was motivated to be a teacher and make a difference in student's lives.

Rene had to overcome her parent's limited expectation that she would go to business school and

(continued on page 3)

Music Editorial

By Francis Okano
Chair of Music Committee

Play On the Beat?

Soon after I started playing organ at Hawaii Betsuin in 1971, I overheard a veteran organist remark that I played with a steady rhythm. I took her words as affirmation that perhaps my playing was easy for the congregation to follow when singing gathas. I prided myself on keeping an unwavering beat as I led congregation singing from the organ.

As the years went by, however, I began to wonder if there was more to congregation accompanying than just a steady beat. When, for example, I listened on radio to renditions of art songs (lieder by Schubert, Wolf, and others), I noticed that the collaborative pianist did not always sound his chords in perfect unison with the singer's captivating melody. The pianist sometimes preceded the singer; at other moments his accompaniment trailed the singing. Yet, this "disunity" had the effect of focusing attention on the elasticity of the song's linear phrasing. The pianist preceding the singer, for example, might suggest the gentle start of a melodic phrase; likewise, a pianist's delayed chords may be heard as accentuating the finality of a phrase end. Given these effects, one might well ask how do singer and pianist execute such results?

For two weeks, six times a year, I am glued to NHK TV to watch Japan's sumo tournaments on *O-zumo Digest.* A while back, the reigning *yokozuna,* Hakuho, now retired, remarked in interview that -- and I paraphrase -- "Whenever I am in the ring, I see my opponent's moves *in slow motion*, which allows me to see his intentions clearly and thereby lets me counter him or attack his weaknesses." While exactly how he achieves this visual slow-down was not mentioned, the experience could resemble an accidental fall I might incur which I "see", involuntarily and from extreme stress, in "slow motion". A clue as to "how" might lie in slow practice, which allows a pianist to clearly "see" his fingers and "hear" his rhythms; some concert pianists practice mostly at half-speed, complaining that students practice too fast. Football coaches are known to slow-practice plays – walking, not running, through sequential steps deliberately – to improve visualization and team work.

If Hakuho can so concentrate as to see his opponents in slow motion, why can't singers and pianists likewise sharpen their rhythmic acuity to "hear" each beat, not singly but, in the minutest *fractions* of a beat – broadly into *fore*-beat, *mid*-beat, and *hind*-beat? The good ones probably do. If performers can hear *segments* of a beat, *as if in slow motion*, then maybe that is a key to sounding notes either *on* or *off* the beat, as it were, to achieve a rubato-like effect. There is more to the process, surely, than what I've tried here to describe. Yet, I suspect just such a technique may underlie the difference between a more and a less artistic rendering of music.

In hindsight, maybe the veteran organist's comment on my playing a half century ago was not quite the compliment I thought it was then.



Mansho *(continued)*

be a secretary, as all good "Japanese girls" should do. The general belief at that time was that "men go to college, and women go to business school, wear dresses and nylon stockings and high heels and raise their families. The men are the breadwinners and, women just need to be good wives and mothers." And as Rene explains, "Well, if you know me, I did not accept that unfair standard, and begged and pleaded and finally my whining paid off." To pay for her schooling, Rene worked as a secretary at Bachman Hall and as a waitress at the Park Shore Hotel for two years." Rene successfully completed her Bachelor's degree in Education and joined the State of Hawaii, Department of Education as a 6th grade teacher at Maili Elementary. And as a Wahiawa girl, she asked, "What island is that (Maili) on?" Rene went on to become Grade Level Chairperson and taught at Maili, Kaala and Mililani Uka for 17 years. She spent the last six months of her DOE career as a Vice Principal at Mililani High School.

A popular craze of the 1960's was teenagers collecting autographed photos of favorite singers, like Connie Francis, Fabian, Elvis, Lettermen, Beach Boys, Annette Funicello and others. Rene recalls this as the beginning of her interest in music. Then, while at UH Frear Hall, as she watched fellow dorm mates playing the guitar and singing folk songs, Rene realized that she too wanted to play the guitar. Her boyfriend at the time taught her to play and sing Beatles songs which sparked her "serious mission to play folk and popular songs on the guitar."

"Serendipitously, as I began student teaching, I would play the guitar for my K-6 grade classes, teaching music. My students loved it and I would bribe them (that) if they finish their work, we could have music. Wow, it worked! Great incentive. So my love of music (and) playing the guitar became a major part of my teaching career at Maili, Kaala, and Mililani Uka Elementary Schools. I formed a musical group called the MUSICAL MENEHUNES in 1973 comprised of students playing the ukulele, singing, dancing, and (being) stage hands, and we were invited to perform our talent show at other schools, like Aina Haina Elementary, where the students were treated like celebrities." Rene went on to lead and inspire students to perform, and while at Mililani Uka, as the Music Resource Teacher, she formed another group called MAGICAL MOMENTS. Rene said, "I could see the joy of music in my students, the audiences, and the proud parents too."

For 14 years, as a Honolulu City council member, playing the guitar and leading in singing songs at public functions came naturally to Rene. At Mililani Hongwanji, Rene leads the Mililani Hongwanji Jammers.



Rene and the Mililani Hongwanji Jammers

"I am now enjoying our Mililani Jammers who got together originally to play ukulele and now we are playing once a month for Sunday Services, playing one folk song and one gatha. So nice to hear the congregation singing along with our ukulele Jammers."

Rene's dad was in the military during WWII and her husband served in Vietnam during the Vietnam Conflict. Because of this, Rene is passionate about caring for and serving our Veterans, and Rene's newest project is "sharing music with Veterans living at the State Akaka Veterans Home in Kapolei. Since they opened this new facility in February 2026, the Veterans recently requested Buddhist services and Mililani Hongwanji and the Oahu Ministers Association are offering Buddhist services for the first time! We are now playing ukulele with the Mililani Jammers, and singing the ever-popular Karaoke at our weekly/monthly visits." Rene is also currently

(continued on page 7)

Maui District Music Notes

By Joan Tamori

Maui Hongwanji Choir

At the time of this *Musical Notes* publication, the newly formed Maui Hongwanji Choir (MHC) will be celebrating two years of actively participating in services and events throughout Maui Hongwanji temples. Although small in number, choir members have remained dedicated to attending practices and diligently learning Choralfest gathas, along with other gathas for upcoming performances. Beyond the music, the choir has developed a wonderful sense of camaraderie. Warm conversations and laughter fill the room during practices, making each gathering an enjoyable time of fellowship as well as musical learning. New members are always welcome!

In December of 2025, the choir sang *Upon Clouds* and *To My Daughters* specially selected for Wailuku Hongwanji BWA's Memorial Service in remembrance of BWA members who had passed on during the year.



MHC sings at MUBWA Spring Assembly at Kahului Hongwanji

The Maui Hongwanji Choir proudly offered *To All We Owe* and *Where, Oh Where?* at the Central Hanamatsuri Program. At the Maui United BWA Spring Assembly, the MHC was asked to sing. The choir rendered two gathas, *To All We Owe* and *To My Daughters.* A special part of the session was involving all BWA members for round singing of *Countless Buddhas (*sung to the tune of *I Love the Mountains)*, with lyrics by Kallie Keith-Agaran. It was a fun and successful venture! In August 2026, the choir sang for Wailuku Hongwanji's Hatsubon service. *Upon Clouds* and *Live and Light the World* were offered by the choir which helped bring comfort and reflection to this meaningful occasion.



MHC sings at Wailuku Hongwanji's 2026 Hatsubon Service

The Peace Day 2026 Interfaith Gathering was held on September 19 at Makawao Hongwanji Buddhist Temple. Representatives of various faiths shared their thoughts on peace, followed by the Maui Hongwanji Choir's heartfelt performances of *Peace Begins With Me* and *Live and Light the World*. Participants were also welcomed by a beautiful origami peace crane display at the entrance of the temple grounds, enjoyed a T'ai Chi demonstration and session, and were treated at the end of the event with a taiko presentation for peace.



MHC sings at Peace Day 2026 Interfaith Service at Makawao Hongwanji

(continued on next page)

Musical Activities on Maui

Central Maui's Hanamatsuri Service and Program, held at Wailuku Hongwanji Mission in April 2026 to celebrate the Buddha's birth, featured a variety of musical performances from Maui Hongwanji temples. Makawao Hongwanji's scouts and leaders entertained with three lively songs entitled *Smoke on the Water, Hayburner,* and *Kimi to Itsumade Mo* using various instruments, while Kahului Hongwanji's Sing and Strum with Patsy ukulele group delivered an enjoyable performance. Wailuku Hongwanji's Dharma School students sang *Golden Chain of Love*, accompanied by Kamauoha on the drum, and the Wailuku Hongwanji Dharma Strummers joyfully performed a few numbers, ending with, We *Are Ohana,* to encourage audience participation.



Makawao Hongwanji:
Front (Lto R): Brayden Kitagawa (trumpet), Lorin Kosaka (alto saxophone), Elias de Jesus (Bari saxophone)
Back (L to R): Glen Kitagawa (trombone), Nevin Wehner (bass guitar), Lindsay Kosaka (piano)



Wailuku's dharma school students sing *Golden Chain of Love*



Kahului's Sing and Strum with Patsy ukulele group - Patsy Saki, Leader (front - fourth from left)



Wailuku's Dharma Strummers ukulele group - Danny Topp, Leader (fourth from left)



Hawai'i District Music Notes

By Ethel Miyashiro

Puna Hongwanji Mission

On September 20, 2026, Puna Hongwanji hosted a Peace Day celebration, promoting peace by building stronger community relationships. The Puna choir sang *Live and Light the World* and *Smile Awhile*, a joyful song written by the choirs' own Andy Izutsu. Andy wrote the lyrics and also taught the choirs' volunteer ukulele strummers the accompanying chords. We look forward to introducing more songs written and composed by our talented choir members.



Ukulele strummers (L to R): Karen Mason, Ilene Hara, Joli Ishibashi-Dixon, Eileen Usagawa and Andy Izutsu

Choir singers: Craig Shimoda, Stella Miyashiro, June Miller, Stan Mason, Warren Tanigawa, Marilyn Sato, Aukai Ventura, Valerie Lamport and Carol Tsunezumi

Hilo Betsuin

Coming up on November 24, 2026, the Hilo Betsuin choir, led by director Corey Maesaka, will be participating in the annual Interfaith Service. Sponsored by the Interfaith Communities in Action, this annual Thanksgiving Music Celebration brings together members of various religions throughout the East Hawai'i region, to share messages of peace, harmony and thanksgiving through music. This year, the Hilo Betsuin choir, joined by members of the Puna Hongwanji choir, will be singing *Our Gift to You*, words and music by Jerry Estes, and arranged by Alfred Choral Designs. *Our Gift to You* is Peace, Joy and Love, this season and throughout the year.



***Mansho** (continued)*

organizing the 80-year-old Wahiawa Lions Veterans Day Parade for November 11, and the Mahalo Veterans Luncheon on November 14th with Augie T, to pay tribute to our Veterans.

There is one more project dear to Rene's heart and that is RECYCLING! "I spend most of my Saturdays volunteering for Going Green Ewaste Recycling events around the island. I started in 2004 partnering with recyclers and community organizations to provide a free convenient one-stop drop off event to accept recyclables, mainly to keep them out of our landfills. Toxic materials filter down into our ground water so we need to keep electronics and toxic ash from HPOWER out of our landfills." Whew!! What a schedule she has!

Rene leads us in singing with a positive energy, passion and vibe that is quite contagious. However, she does way more than lead us in music. Her desire to make others happy and a deep wish to help others and make a difference has led her to become a part of numerous other community organizations at different levels of leadership. These organizations and her part in them include: Wahiawa Nikkei Civic Association – Secretary; Wahiawa Lions Club – Vice President; Rotary Club of Wahiawa-Waialua – Member; Soroptimist International of Central Oahu – President; Leilehua Alumni & Community Association – Director; Zonta Club of Leilehua; Wahiawa Waialua Hiroshima Kenjin Kai; Mililani Hongwanji – President; Oahu Hongwanji Council – President; Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i Board – Member; and Honpa Hongwanji Peace Day – Chairman.

What drives Rene? In Rene's words, "I grew up in a family that was pretty close with regular family gatherings, and relatives on both my mother's and father's families regularly helping others with their household, family, and personal needs. They were role models for me, so generous in always trying to help others. Then, as a Council member, I met so many community organizations and unselfish people volunteering to help in different situations. I was touched."

Of course, being Rene, she invites and encourages, with much gratitude and aloha, anyone reading this article who is interested, to contact her at Rmansho100@gmail.com or at (808) 291-6151 to join in the fun: if your temple and organizations would like to visit with the Veterans for a 45-minute session, with a dharma message, or if your temple and organizations are interested in participating in Going Green events which are free to host and provide free collections of toxic materials keeping them out of our landfills.

We, at Mililani Hongwanji, are fortunate and grateful for Rene's energizing leadership, her commitment to our temple, and to her wonderful musical talents!!



Gathas by Hawai'i Composers Recorded

By Francis Okano

Posted on the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i Music Page are recordings of 38 gathas, from the 5th edition of *Praises of the Buddha* (2024). These recordings, initiated by the Hawai'i Kyodan Music Committee, are intended to help congregations sing new or unfamiliar gathas, and they respond to long-standing requests for such audio support. As such, their primary intended use is as sing-along aids to Sunday singing, targeting particularly temples where neither organist or choir is available. These delightful recordings may also serve as service preludes or postludes, in addition to offering a source of listening pleasure at temple or home.

Unique to these 38 songs from the recent 5th edition is that they were all written by members of Hawai'i Kyodan -- largely after compilation of the prior 4th edition. In choosing to record these Hawai'i-composed gathas, the Music Committee found itself considering the importance of a) learning gathas of relatively recent origin; b) promoting gathas authored by familiar local names; c) sharing the stylistic novelty and simplicity of some home-grown gathas; and d) potentially encouraging the creation of more gathas by members of Hawai'i Kyodan. Furthering "local" products, it was felt, offered many advantages besides encouragement.

The composers and lyricists of these gathas are, or have been, generally busy *(continued on next page)*

***Gathas** (continued)*

individuals at temple. They include **Lily Horio, Mitsuyo Saito, BJ Soriano, Debbie Kubota, Mari Murakami, Cecilia Lindo, Wendie Yumori, Shigeko Miyashiro, Carrie Kawamoto, Florence Tanaka, Hanae Okumura, Jean Saito, Megan Sakata, Alan Kubota, Danny Topp, Cameron Kubota,** and **Sharon Nohara.**

Among "outside" contributors are composer-arranger **Michael Springer**; **Alice** and **Taitetsu Unno,** late religion professor emeritus at Smith College and Buddhist Churches of America members; and **Takeo Kudo** and **Allen Trubitt,** retired music professors at the University of Hawaii.

A generous Propagation Project Grant from the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i funded the project. Recording artists **Laurie Rubin,** soprano, and **Jennifer Taira,** collaborative pianist, undertook the project in February 2025; they completed all recordings and edits in September 2026. Laurie and Jennifer are well known within the temple as not only creators and producers of the internationally acclaimed musical, *Peace on Your Wings,* but also co-founders of the educational enterprise for music and theatre, Ohana Arts. On recital tours, they have performed in European and North American venues, notably Carnegie Hall, Ravinia Festival, and Kennedy Center. Laurie has soloed with the LA Chamber Orchestra, sung at London's Wigmore Hall, the Human Rights Conference at Lucerne, Switzerland, and the White House, and performed roles in operas by, among others, Poulenc, Monteverdi, and Rossini. As prize-winning clarinetist, Jennifer has performed with the Burbank Philharmonic, Moscow Chamber Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, New Britain Symphony, and the Royal Hawaiian Band. Graduates of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Northwestern University, respectively, Laurie and Jennifer did post-graduate study at the Yale School of Music.

Francis Okano and Wendie Yumori, both organists at Hawai'i Betsuin, established guidelines for the recording process and carefully reviewed each of the recordings for textual and technical fidelity. The completed recordings were accessibly displayed on the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i website by David Atcheson, Headquarters Communications Coordinator.

These recordings represent one means to acquaint all with new or unfamiliar gathas and to help boost spontaneous and spirited congregational singing. It is hoped they will be used regularly--and conscientiously--as aids for the purposes intended. It is also hoped the recordings will inspire more recordings or new advances so that all may experience the joy of singing beautiful gathas.

NOTE: These recordings may be found at hongwanjihawaii.com/music. Scroll down to the section, "Audio Files: 38 Gathas by Hongwanji Hawaii Composers—New to *Praises of the Buddha* 5th Edition (2024)". Click the button to the audio files page.



Co-Founders of Ohana Arts: **Jennifer Taira** - composer, pianist, and clarinetist and **Laurie Rubin** - acclaimed mezzo-soprano opera singer, author, and motivational speaker

A TALE OF TWO COUSINS

By Laurie Rubin

The Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i has nurtured and supported the many ventures of composer Jenny Taira, including the peace focused performing arts organization Ohana Arts which she co-founded with her sister Cari Taira and her wife Laurie Rubin, and her original musical, **"Peace On Your Wings,"** based on the true story of Sadako Sasaki.

While Jenny was working hard to build Ohana Arts and touring Peace On Your Wings, another artist, named Lee Tonouchi, was becoming prolific as his plays were being performed by numerous theater companies in Hawai'i and the mainland, and his books were winning awards. Though there are many on island who may know both of these artists, they probably do not know that Jenny Taira and Lee Tonouchi are first cousins. Lee who had lost his mother in a tragic car accident when he was three years old, lived with his maternal grandmother who happened to be Jenny's paternal grandmother. Jenny has fond memories of them growing up together as children. Lee was closer in age to Jenny's older sister Kathy, and Jenny remembers Lee and Kathy teaming up against her, running to their grandmother saying, "Grandma, Jenny's making trouble!" "I didn't do anything, Grandma," Jenny, the younger, quieter child would retort. In their adulthood, Lee still refers to his baby cousin as "Little Jenny." Though the cousins' lives went in different directions over the years, they still kept in touch, Jenny going to see Lee's plays from time to time, and Lee coming to see Peace On Your Wings in 2023 in Honolulu after the show's successful Hiroshima debut.

Lee, also known as "da pidgin gorilla," called up Jenny a few years ago to ask if she would collaborate with him on one of his most beloved projects. His children's book, entitled, **"Okinawan Princess,"** won a Skipping Stones Award in 2020, and Lee decided to adapt the book into a musical to introduce even more audiences to the important Okinawan history within its pages. Jenny not only said "yes" to this proposition, but she also told him that Ohana Arts would produce it and give the musical its world premiere in 2027. **"Okinawan Princess: Da Legend of Hajichi Tattoos",** written in Hawai'i Creole ("Pidgin English") is based on the legend of the hand tattoos sported by Okinawan women several generations back. Jenny remembers seeing the tattoos on the hands of her and Lee's obaaban, great grandmother. The story of the musical is set in contemporary Hawai'i and takes us back to early 20th Century plantation era Hawai'i and Ryukyu Kingdom Okinawa before its annexation to Japan in 1879. The story documents the hidden Okinawan history and practice of hajichi hand tattoos.



"Okinawan Princess" performers and staff in pre-show circle

(continued on next page)

***Tale** (continued)*

Through their work, Lee and Jenny hope to inspire pride and interest in Uchinanchu (Okinawan) cultural history in a younger generation of Okinawans. The two cousins are joined by Okinawan language activist and songwriter Brandon Ufugusuku-Ing who is writing several songs for the musical, and lyricist Laurie Rubin. The production will be directed by Broadway actress and renowned Okinawan performer Yuka Takara. The script is funny and entertaining which will make the show both educational and enjoyable for youth audiences. The songs fuse together Okinawan influences with contemporary pop and local Hawaiian musical styles.

The Production will be performed for a total of three performances for the general public on Friday March 12, and Saturday March 13, at Tenney Theatre which is on the campus of St. Andrews Priory. The Ohana Arts cast and the show's creative team would love to see members of the Jodo Shinshu community at these performances.

Tickets are on sale at the Ohana Arts website. This will be a once in a lifetime opportunity to see two Hawai'i talents come together to tell a story of their Okinawan lineage and culture.



Staff and performers of **"Okinawan Princess"** in a group photo with **Lee Tonouchi** (in center of photo showing 'shaka') Workshop reading was held at Manoa Valley Theatre.



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