



Buddhist Churches of America®
MUSIC

BCA Music Committee

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MBT Taiko. Photo: G. Nagata, courtesy of Midwest Buddhist Temple

Midwest Buddhist Temple Taiko and Music

By Cynthia Mee, Ph.D.

BCA Music Chairperson's comments: Cynthia Mee is a Minister Assistant and member of the BCA Music Committee and the BCA Archives Committee. She joined Midwest Buddhist Temple (MBT) in Chicago over 15 years ago and has since learned a lot about the history of MBT and about Buddhist Churches America (BCA), the Eastern Buddhist League (EBL), Jodo Shinshu Buddhist traditions and practices. We thank Cynthia, members of MBT, and especially Rev. Ron Miyamura for sharing memories to preserve the temple's music history.

The Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) Music Committee asked me to share information about MBT's choir. In doing so, I ended up writing a detailed four-part article about the music history of MBT. The choir and other music history will be presented separately. This article will share the history of taiko at MBT and different ways MBT is embracing music today.

MBT Taiko

In a very small way, this article honors and acknowledges two BCA Emeritus Ministers and their impact on the growth

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BCA Music Chairperson's Message

By Kemi Nakabayashi

Gratitude is my overwhelming sentiment to all who have contributed to the various BCA 125th anniversary music projects. Some projects are still in progress with the celebration continuing into 2025.

The BCA Music Committee is proud of the creative work of Bonbu Stories for the BCA 125th anniversary bon odori song/dance commission. There were also several new gatha video premieres originating from the BCA 125th anniversary gatha lyric contest.

Bonbu Stories and BCA temples across the districts presented "Lantern Song." On September 8, Bonbu Stories along with former founding member Emily (Yoshihara) Imazumi on koto presented "Lantern Song" live at the Yerba Buena Gardens public bon dance in San Francisco. There were even "Lantern Song" premieres in Hawaii and a "Lantern Song" cover in Portuguese organized by Rev. Haruhisa from Sao Paulo Betsuin in Brazil! **Som das Lanternas (Ao Vivo)**

During the BCA Founding Day 125th anniversary service live-streamed from Buddhist Church of San Francisco, the gatha video "Storms and Peace" produced by Marissa Wong

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MBT Taiko & Music *(from page 1)*

of taiko in the United States, Rev. Masao Kodani and Rev. Ron Miyamura.

Rev. Masao Kodani, “Rev. Mas”, was the foundation for the spread of Buddhist taiko in North America, possibly starting over 30 groups within BCA. Taiko, as created by Rev. Mas at the Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles, started with Kinnara Taiko and Kinnara Gagaku. Rev. Mas wanted taiko to be part of his temple with the foundation to be “Japanese American Buddhist Taiko” and shared that we are none of these, yet all of these.

As a Buddhist taiko group, Kinnara places emphasis on participation, self-awareness and discovering the joy in “just playing” taiko rather than expecting its members to play as performance-focused professionals. Rev. Ron Miyamura, “Rev. Ron”, was impressed by Rev. Mas and his taiko leadership and embraced it by bringing it to the Midwest and the East Coast at various opportunities.

Taiko made its first appearance in the Midwest at the 1975 Eastern Youth Buddhist League (EYBL), now Eastern Buddhist League (EBL), when Johnny Mori and George Abe from Los Angeles Kinnara Taiko presented a workshop on taiko and fue for the conference attendees. Kinnara Taiko’s second Midwest performance came two years later at the 1977 MBT Ginza Holiday Festival in Chicago. Five taiko players from Kinnara Taiko stayed at the temple parsonage with Rev. Ron and his wife, Elaine Miyamura.

Johnny Mori stayed after Ginza was over and held the first meeting of the MBT Taiko Group. He taught how to make drums and how to play a piece called “Renshu” (meaning practice). Kinnara returned to perform at Ginza in 1978, 1981 and 1989. Through these

performances MBT members and Ginza attendees not only experienced taiko but were exposed to traditional Buddhist music like gagaku.

Similar to Kinnara, when the MBT Taiko Group originated it wanted Buddhist concepts to be part of the group more than being a performing group. The group played Kinnara pieces like “Ashura” (realm of fighting spirits) and “Samsara” (the six realms of existence) and have always valued the concept of “tsu” or silence which brings emptiness (sunyata) into the making of taiko music. These Buddhist concepts are still embraced by the group.



MBT Ginza with MBT Taiko Group.
Photo: Cynthia Mee

When MBT’s Taiko Group started in 1977, it became Chicago’s first and now oldest taiko group. It evolved as a self-taught group, embracing the Buddhist concepts of harmony and oneness.

As a temple taiko group, MBT Taiko members come from many different backgrounds. The group’s performance and participation at Obon Odori and Ginza Holiday Festival are its priorities. The drumming equipment was made by the group from wine barrels and skinned with un-tanned cowhides. The music played by the MBT Taiko Group comes from many different sources and is a commitment to spreading this form of artistry.

A valuable and respected early experience for the MBT Taiko Group came when some of the early members attended the Horaku Conference in Los Angeles. At the conference they experienced a range of different temple taiko groups coming together and playing.

In 1979, the Seabrook Buddhist Temple (SBT) hosted the EBL Confer-

ence and held a “talent show” as part of the event. The MBT Taiko Group packed its drums on the bus and traveled to the conference to perform and through its performance introduced taiko to the East Coast. Later that year, Rev. Ron went to SBT and taught members how to play and make drums, resulting in SBT starting its taiko group, Hoh Daiko. Unfortunately, the original group was short-lived but did reorganize about 10 years later.

Another event that occurred in 1979 was when Rev. Ron visited the New York Buddhist Church (NYBC) in December and taught its interested members how to play and make drums. At that time its taiko group, Soh Daiko, was established.

Around 1985, Rev. Ron visited the Twin Cities Buddhist Sangha (TCBS) and helped it create the Twin Cities Taiko Group. In 1991, the TCBS group needed to reorganize, so Rev. Ron returned to help it create its taiko group, Kogen Taiko.

Currently most temples in EBL have had longstanding taiko groups, MBT, NYBC, TBC, TCBS, and Ekoji Buddhist Temple (EBT). The youngest adult EBL Taiko group, Nen-Daiko, recently celebrated its 30th anniversary.

Rev. Ron was instrumental in bringing taiko to the Midwest and East Coast. We thank him for his efforts and hard work for helping to popularize taiko outside of the West Coast and for bringing Rev. Mas to share his talents and taiko ideologies in the Midwest.

Ho Etsu Taiko

(Jason Matsumoto online interview with Amy Klouse <https://www.chicago.us.emb-japan.go.jp>)

I will always remember watching Ho Etsu Taiko for the first time at MBT’s Ginza Festival. It was so exciting. The drummers were relatively young (possibly in their late teens or early 20s) and played with such incredible energy and enthusiasm. Occasionally Ho Etsu would offer workshops at MBT and I would take them. I enjoyed learning from them, but I have also enjoyed

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Chairperson's Message (from page 1)



Bonbu Stories and mentors and BCA Music leaders at the public Bon Odori, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco. (below) Bon Odori workshop leaders and participants at KOHO.

Photos: Mark Shigenaga



premiered. See the October issue of the *BCA Wheel of Dharma* for a full article by Dennis Akizuki on composer Francis Wong's work with Skylar Lam for this new gatha composition and recording project.

In this newsletter issue, Donna Sasaki and Amy Peterson write about the Northwest District Convention hosted by White River Buddhist Temple. Amy includes a separate story with more details of the two gatha video premieres "Sincerest Gratitude" and "Light of Wisdom". Cynthia Mee reports on music at the Midwest Buddhist Temple. We also include an update on our BCA Music sponsorship wish list and donor acknowledgments.

Working closely with *BCA Wheel of Dharma* editor Jon Kawamoto, a number of music-related articles were included throughout the year. The series of articles by Wynn Kiyama of "50+ years in the Dance Circle" resumed in the *Wheel of Dharma*,

featuring Marilyn Ozawa of Mountain View (June), Annie Tanimoto of Lodi (July), and Nancy Okada of New York (August). BCA Music Vice-Chairperson Donna Sasaki and I wrote a 4th year anniversary overview article on BCA Music Committee in the September issue. Dennis Akizuki, our BCA Music Newsletter editorial advisor, also wrote an article on "Ei Ja Nai Ka" in the August issue. These articles can easily be found online under the Music category of *BCA Connect: Music - bca connect*. Look for an article in the January issue of *BCA Wheel of Dharma* by Bonbu Stories members to reflect on their "Lantern Song" experiences.

On a personal note, I was delighted to meet Nancy Okada and see Gertrude Kihara again from NYBC at the BCA FBWA conference in San Jose in August. Coast District dance instructors presented a Friday evening bon odori activity which brought together conference attendees in an energetic

fashion. Aptly chosen because of the conference theme, we learned Nobuko Miyamoto's "Ichigo Ichie," as well as "Lantern Song," "Remember Me," and "Ei Ja Nai Ka." How wonderful to have the choreographers Reiko Iwanaga and PJ Hirabayashi there to teach us their dances! Bishop Harada sponsored the Grateful Crane Ensemble to produce a program about the history of BCA. At the BCA FBWA conference, a special BWA-tailored performance was presented as the banquet entertainment.

As much as the BCA Music Committee has accomplished in four years, we are also backtracking with the recent hire of an intellectual property attorney to ensure proper copyright and licensing agreements going forward and to protect the recent new creative efforts. BCA president-elect Glenn Inanaga has been leading this effort while engaging Donna Sasaki and me in the discussion along with Pam Matsuoka, BCA staff liaison to the Music Committee.

We are fortunate to have the support and encouragement of the BCA Bishop Rev. Marvin Harada and others on the BCA Executive Committee as we continue to produce and present new creative music projects.

The newest gatha video of "Sincerest Gratitude" composed by my husband Jim Norton to lyrics written by Darlene Bagshaw was recently posted to the BCA Music YouTube channel. **Sincerest Gratitude** It is an updated version produced by Emma Inge from Tacoma Buddhist Temple that incorporates additional photos taken since the original premiere at the Northwest District convention. This version of the gatha video was presented at the Northern California BCA 125th anniversary/Eitaikyo service on October 13. Please enjoy!

Namo Amida Butsu

MBT Taiko & Music *(from page 2)*

learning about them. I recently read the interview (cited above) with Jason Matsumoto, a life-long Ho Etsu Taiko member, MBT member and now president of the MBT Board.

In the interview, I learned that in 1997 MBT's Dharma School taiko class members established the Ho Etsu Taiko group, as an offshoot of the MBT Taiko Group. Lynne and Jerry Matsumoto (members of MBT Taiko Group) were the teachers and directors of the Dharma School taiko group. There were several children around the same age in the Dharma School, who enjoyed playing taiko, so the Matsumotos decided to form the Ho Etsu youth taiko group. They embraced the traditions of MBT Taiko Group while exploring and performing in new directions.

At the time, MBT's minister, Rev. Koshin Ogui, supported Ho Etsu and sponsored the formation of the group by giving it the name: Ho Etsu, meaning "to spread joy", a spirit the group still chooses to endeavor to reflect in its approach to taiko. As a frequent audience of Ho Etsu, I can affirm that the drummers do spread great joy in their playing. Some of Ho Etsu's members still play with the group in addition to some newer members.

Ho Etsu is still connected to MBT, however it is an independent taiko group (www.hoetsu.org).



Jesse Zavala and Alex Yu. Photo: Cynthia Mee



Rev Todd Tsuchiya playing the Fue with Yvonne Harada, pianist. Photo: Cynthia Mee

Current MBT Music Activities and Music Groups

Sangha members participate in various MBT music groups and perform during various services and events. We have a variety of music groups: the MBT String Quartet, the MBT Band, the MBT Ukulele Group, a few backup singers who sing with the band, Dharma School students participating in various ways, and dharma talks which embrace music themes and songs. An example of a music theme dharma talk was given by Minister Assistant Joy Zavala, "Sounds of Silence", which embraced the meaning of the lyrics and included the MBT Band performing the Simon and Garfunkel song with the sangha as a sing-along. There are other such dharma talk music themes over the years.

Venus by Air Band and Kun'er Basic, a guitar band, perform in our music services and concerts. Both bands have various MBT sangha members. There are four regular pianists who alternately play for Sunday service music and other events: Christina Szabo, Yvonne Harada, Elaine Matsushita, and Bob Sutter. MBT is fortunate

to have one of them play the gathas for the service and at various music events.

Our Annual Spring and Fall Ohigan "All-Music Services" have various MBT music groups and individual sangha members performing during the services (**9/22/24 Ohigan All-Music Service**). Following these services and after lunch, various musical groups participate in a music concert which also engages the sangha in a sing-along playing kazoos.

The MBT String Quartet plays at Sunday services upon occasion. Minister Assistant Grady Hutt recorded the ensemble playing "Nembutsu" by Chizu Iwanaga as part of the collaborative recording with BCA vocalists for the hybrid BCA 125th Anniversary Founding Day Service live-streamed from Buddhist Church of San Francisco.

Some of our musicians have multiple roles. Each of our four Sunday service pianists may also be in the MBT Band or another music group. For example, both Christina Szabo and Elaine Matsushita are two of our Sunday pianists, but they also play in a piano-cello duet.

Some of our various band members play in more than one music group and also have leadership positions. Christina Szabo and Alex Vincer, members of the MBT's Band, also arrange the music and direct the group. Grady Hutt, a member of the MBT Ukulele Group, is also the MBT sound technician. In addition to being our minister, Rev. Todd

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MBT Taiko & Music (from page 2)

Tsuchiya has multiple musical talents playing in the MBT Ukulele Group. Rev. Todd also plays the fue (bamboo flute) with Yvonne Harada, another one of our pianists whose original home temple is Pearl City Hongwanji on Oahu.

Notably, when Yvonne Takeshita Harada was an undergraduate student at the University of Hawaii, the Music Committee of the Hawaiian temples sponsored a gatha composition contest. Her home temple members encouraged her to enter the state competition. Contestants could select the lyrics of poems that were made available that they could use to put music to the poem, which could then become a gatha. Yvonne chose the lyrics from the poem “Becoming Free”, by Cecilia Lindo. Yvonne’s composition was one of three that was selected and published in the Hawaii service book, still used today. Currently, Yvonne is a member of the BCA New Buddhist Music subcommit-

tee and has collaborated with members from other BCA districts on new musical compositions.

MBT Obon, Ginza Holiday Festival, and other music celebrations are opportunities for MBT Taiko and Ho Etsu Taiko to perform along with other groups.

Summary

In 2024, MBT celebrated its 80th Anniversary. Through these 80 years, our sangha members have shared their musical talents. Our musicians embrace a variety of music venues and enjoy sharing their talents with the sangha and others.

MBT remains dedicated to its love of music and invites you to come to a service or event to share our musical-dharma joy. Whenever you are in Chicago please come and visit MBT and participate in our music in person. If you are not in person, you can always find us online at our website: <https://mbtchicago.org>



Seattle Betsuin HS DS class and teachers with Donna Sasaki, Dec. 2023. Photo: Kemi Nakabayashi

Making Music for the Future

by Amy Peterson, Oregon Buddhist Temple

What does it take to make a gatha? Many have tried and many have been frustrated and quit. But how do you get a classroom of high school students to take it seriously? Well, teacher trio Ron Hamakawa, Harrison Chinn and Jason Yokoyama did just that.

Ideas abounded, but a poem from dharma lessons was selected. As most

DS teachers know, trying to engage a full class of students each week is not only a wish, but challenging on so many levels. Against those odds, the students prevailed and adjusted the poem, a wasan from *Shoshinge*, to something they felt confident in submitting to the gatha contest.

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Donations to the BCA Music Committee June 1 to November 30, 2024

Kemi Nakabayashi and
Jim Norton (in memory of
Herbert Futoshi Kaneko and
in celebration of the BCA
125th anniversary)

Donna and Alvin Sasaki
(in celebration of the BCA
125th anniversary)



Please consider joining the
Music Committee leadership
with an individual or temple
donation to support BCA Music
Committee projects before year
end or in the new year.

We gratefully accept unrestricted
donations through the Music
Committee Endowment Foundation
account on BCA Kindful
<https://bca.kindful.com/>

Select “Music” from
the campaign dropdown.

BCA Music Committee is working
on a revised sponsorship wish list
for 2025 which will be posted on the
BCA Music webpage:
[https://www.buddhistchurches
ofamerica.org/music](https://www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.org/music)

Among the ideas are sponsoring the
next Bon Odori/Taiko webinar or
choosing a favorite gatha to fund a
new audio recording and gatha video.

For any questions, use the
“Contact Us” button at the bottom
of the BCA Music webpage.

Music Highlights of the Northwest District Buddhist Convention

by Donna Sasaki, Tacoma Buddhist Temple and Amy Peterson, Oregon Buddhist Temple

For those who attended the 77th Annual NW District Buddhist Convention Sept. 13-15, 2024, it was truly a time to reconnect with our past, enjoy the present, and plan for the future – the young and “not so young”, experienced convention goers and first-time attendees, and not only NW folks, but people from many other temples in the BCA.

The convention theme, “Connections, Building for the Future,” was meaningful and enjoyed by the many who attended this gathering, hosted by White River Buddhist Temple and held for the first time at the Muckleshoot Casino and Hotel in Auburn, WA.

The opening service began with Land Acknowledgement by the Muckleshoot Canoe Family whose land was the site of this convention.

During the service, a new gatha was presented, combining Darlene Bagshaw’s (Stockton Buddhist Temple) adult lyric submission for the



“Light of Wisdom” performed at NWD convention. Photo: Joe Gotchy

BCA Music Committee’s lyric writing contest with Jim Norton’s (Seattle Betsuin) music. The gatha “Sincerest Gratitude” was recorded by Northwest temple artists and presented in a video as a surprise for Darlene who was in attendance.

There are not surprisingly a lot of people to make this happen. I know it had a strong emotional effect, especially with the conference theme. From the lyrics to the music, to the singers and video, a path to a new future was built.

During Saturday night’s banquet, the Muckleshoot Canoe Family presented a moving musical performance. It was performed by at least three generations of tribal family.

The closing service commemorating BCA’s 125th anniversary began with live gagaku performing “Etenraku” for the ministers’ procession, and “Shuso Sango Saho” Music Service Shoshinge with Rev. Kusunoki (sho), Rev. Tadao Koyama (ryuteki), Dennis Yamashita

and Esther Sugai (ryuteki), and Kemi Nakabayashi, electric keyboard. NWD singers supported both gatha videos and the “Wasan” and “Nembutsu” on Sunday.

Lastly, another new gatha “Light of Wisdom” was presented in a video, featuring the youth Honorable Mention lyric winner, the Seattle Betsuin High School Dharma School class of 2023 and 2024. Donna Sasaki visited the Seattle Betsuin class to collaborate and compose the music for their lyrics. Both of these new gathas were supported by the BCA Music Committee and the Seattle Betsuin Kaneko Music Fund.

The many connections made during this convention remain lasting and strong. Although a small district, there is a lot of talent and talent that comes together for our conferences. So we hope you’ll consider attending soon to share music and the Dharma together!



Misa Hirota, Georgette Magnin, and Ruth Terry perform “Sincerest Gratitude” (below) Gagaku group performs “Etenraku” Photos: Joe Gotchy



Making Music for the Future *(from page 5)*

Much to their surprise, they won the youth Honorable Mention lyric prize at which time the BCA Music Committee offered the class the chance to work with a local composer to set the lyrics to music. Besides the token monetary award from the BCA Music Committee, the Seattle Betsuin Kane-ko Music Fund supported the audio recording project. The Seattle Betsuin class is grateful for the opportunity and for Donna Sasaki, gatha musician extraordinaire close by down I-5, who agreed to help the class put their gatha to music.

The students didn't have a true picture of the amount of time and work that would go into making this gatha lyric a reality. As excited as they were to be recognized, there was another year of work ahead. Some had graduated, new students were introduced, and it would entail bringing all their musical talents both vocal and instrumental to view.

Next, I had the opportunity to talk with Jim Norton who usually quietly is near Kemi Nakabayashi as she plays piano, keyboard, or organizes the Northwest District choir. While originally the blinded gatha lyric judging panel liked the lyrics submitted by Darlene Bagshaw, they thought the words would be a big challenge to put to music. The lyrics sat on the back burner of the BCA Music Committee after the contest winners were announced. One day Jim informed Kemi that he might have



Jim Norton (Seattle Betsuin) and Darlene Bagshaw (Buddhist Church of Stockton)
Photo: Kemi Nakabayashi

some music that would work.

A few more weeks of working with the melodies, adding the multiple parts and voices and a new gatha was born. Easy huh?

Now, to gather the chart and gather singers and musicians for the parts, photos to help enhance the lyrics, sound engineering, video editing, and you almost have a finished project. Then Kemi goes into hyper-drive and assembles all the participants for the premiere.

Many of us gather in the audience and watch an original production but have no idea of the amount of work and love that goes into the project. We just see the final product and let the emotions take over. Color me very impressed. As a "car songwriter" with only a lyric and melody, reviewing the processes from these dedicated people adds so much to enjoying the music.



Amy Peterson and Donna Sasaki at the NWD Sunday Service, *Photo: Joe Gotchy*

To read more details about the recent collaborative gatha videos and the Northwest District Convention musician participants, see page 5 of the October issue of the Seattle Betsuin *Wheel of Sangha* newsletter
<https://seattlebetsuin.org/newsletter/>

We are very proud of the significant youth participation creating the gathas that emerged from the youth category of the gatha lyric contest and grateful for the sponsorship from the Federation of Dharma School Teachers League.

BCA MUSIC NEWSLETTER

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