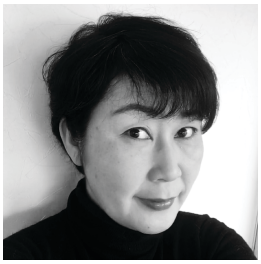
Kuhon Raigō-zu IV for organ solo

Notes from composer Hina Sakamoto, translated and adapted by Steven Dieck



The *raigō-zu* (descent of Amida) portrays the Buddhist teaching that those who concentrate on the Buddha Amida during life, and recite his name, will at the final moment of death be escorted into *Saiho Gokuraku Jodo* (the Pure Land, or Paradise.) The *raigō-zu* is based on the *Kanmuryō jukyō sutra* (*Sutra on the Meditation of the Buddha of Infinite Life*), as is seen in the Taima Mandala. Since the *kuhon ojo* (nine levels of rebirth in the Pure Land) represent different rebirth levels from *jobon josho* (highest) to *gebon gesho* (lowest), the paintings depicting *raigō* vary with each level of rebirth in the Pure Land.

In Hōōdo Hall (Phoenix Hall) of Byōdō-in Temple in Kyoto (top right), there is a frontispiece of the *kuhon raigō-zu* painted 1,000 years ago (bottom right). In addition, there are fifty-two wooden statues of Unchu Kuyo Bodhisattvas (enlightened beings in the cloud of the pure land) from the same period (below). The Unchu Kuyo Bodhisattvas are depicted playing old traditional Japanese instruments.

Hina Sakamoto writes, "I intend to make this work nine pieces in total, because there are nine levels in the images of the welcoming of the dead into the Pure Land. So far, four pieces have been completed:

I. Harpsichord and Flute

II. Organ and Traverso (baroque flute)

III. Traverso solo

IV. Organ solo (the present piece)

In the future, I plan to complete the work using traditional Japanese woodwind instruments and Japanese drums."

TOP: The Phoenix Hall of Byōdō-in Temple, completed in 1053 C.E.

BOTTOM: In the frontispiece of the Phoenix Hall, the Buddha Amida, accompanied by Unchu Kuyo Bodhisattvas (Bodhisattvas in the cloud of the Pure Land), descends to welcome the dying man (just visible inside the house) into the Pure Land.

BELOW: Bodhisattvas on clouds, playing traditional instruments. These carvings, like the Phoenix Hall itself, are designated National Treasures of Japan

continued →

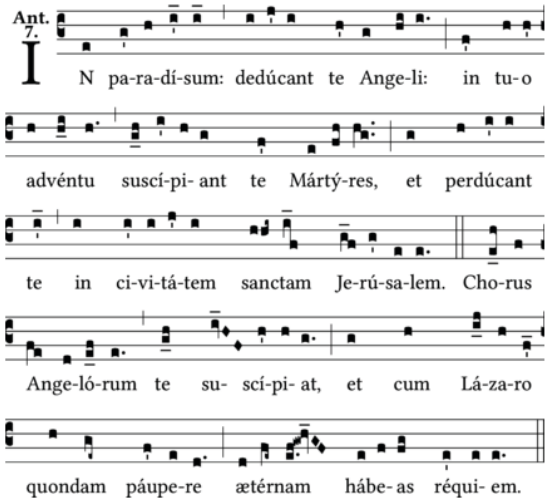
Notes for Listeners, from Canon Kleinschmidt

The Gregorian Chant which permeates Hina Sakamoto's *Kuhon Raigō-zu IV* is found at Hymn #354 in *The Hymnal 1982:* "Into paradise may the angels lead you." It may be helpful to note that the first four pitches of the chant are identical to those in the song, "Oh when the saints go marching in."

The first movement, "On Cloud," opens with whimsical musical gestures played on bright flute stops of the organ. After a minute or so, the first phrase of the chant theme is played slowly in a colorful harmonization on very gentle, shimmering organ stops. Subsequent phrases of the chant are played in dialogue with additional, ever-varying fluty passages.

The second movement, "To the Door," opens with a new melody composed of eighth notes in 12/8 time, which is woven into an elegant three-voice texture for fourteen measures. At measure fifteen, the chant theme appears as a fourth voice above, and later within, the texture. The interplay of the two melodies develops the motion and harmonic intensity of the music for several measures. Then the weave loosens, its strands leading to an inconclusive chord that neatly sets up the next movement.

The third movement, "The Pure Land," takes the form of a Prelude and Fugue. After an opening flourish which hints at the fugue subject to come, the prelude presents quiet, slow-moving music about which Hina Sakamoto writes, "my hope is that it could be heard like from the distant and high heavenly world." The fugue interrupts this music, its subject first played by the organist's left hand over a quiet pedal point. As soon as the right hand takes up the subject, the left hand introduces a counter-subject consisting of the chant theme. Fragments of the chant theme appear in almost every beat of the ensuing musical conversation. After a brief echo of the ethereal music of the prelude, the fugue culminates with a statement of the chant theme in long notes in the pedals. The exuberant joy of that statement spills into a frenzied coda that ends abruptly in an exceptionally bright chord.



ABOVE: Another depiction of the descent of Buddha Amida, accompanied by Bodhisattvas on clouds, greeting the dying at the moment of death, from the paintings in Byōdō-in Temple.