

# The Band Plays On

Distant relatives of John William Fenton were in Japan recently to help commemorate the bandleader's remarkable contribution to Japanese music. **Julian Ryall** reports.

It took Toshio Akiyama more than fifteen years to discover the whereabouts of John William Fenton, but in October he was able to meet—and personally thank—the descendants of the County Cork, Ireland-born bandmaster credited with organizing Japan's first military band and giving the country its first national anthem.

Akiyama, a conductor and head of the Japanese Band Directors Association, has researched the history of bands in Japan since U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry arrived off Yokohama in 1853 and requested that the government open up to foreign trade and diplomatic relations. Significantly for the history of music in this country, his crew included a small group of musicians who became the first foreign band to perform in Japan.

The following year, John Fenton arrived to serve as bandmaster of the British 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment, which had come to protect the small foreign community in Yokohama from samurai diehards bitterly opposed to the foreigners' presence on their soil. According to Akiyama's painstaking studies, Japanese naval cadets overheard Fenton's band rehearsing at Yokohama's Myoko-ji temple and convinced him to become their instructor as well.

One hundred and forty years later, Matthew Zealear stood on the same spot to conduct the Japan Grand Self-Defense Force Central Band in a selection of tunes. Zealear and his wife, Lauri, had traveled to Japan from their California home after researching their family tree and coming across a 2006 appeal in a British newspaper for Fenton's relatives.

"They revere him here," said Zealear, an eye surgeon whose grandmother was Fenton's second cousin. "This is a huge honor and I'm only now realizing what an important part he played in Japanese history."

Fenton ordered the novice band's instruments from London and convinced the nation's leaders that to become a modern nation state they needed a national anthem. He also encouraged his charges to find a suitable Japanese poem that he would then set to music. Once this had been found, Fenton had less than three weeks to complete the score and have the band practice before the debut performance in front of the emperor in Tokyo in 1870.

Ten years later, Japan replaced Fenton's composition with one by Japanese composer Hiromori Hayashi. This version, known as "Kimi Ga Yo" and still used today, was commissioned by one of Fenton's pupils and retains the same words.

Fenton's regiment left Japan in 1871 but he stayed for a further six years as a bandmaster with the newly formed Japanese navy and then the band of the imperial court. His first wife, Annie Maria, died in 1871 aged forty. Her grave is in the Yokohama Foreign General Cemetery, where the

Zealears paid their respects during their visit.

Fenton left Japan for San Francisco with his new wife, Jane Pilkington, in April 1877, and seven years later he was back in Scotland, but Akiyama's efforts to trace his subsequent whereabouts petered out at that point.

With Fenton's departure, the baton was initially picked up by French and German music teachers and conductors.



From top left, clockwise: Matthew and Lauri Zealear with Toshio Akiyama at Myoko-ji temple, Yokohama; the Zealears examine the Monument to Japan's First Brass Band; the GSDF Central Brass Band in the Myoko-ji grounds; Megumi Motoki (center); sister Minami (right)

Their efforts were helped by the government's decision to set up a Music Research Center in 1879 to provide singing material for use in elementary schools. The institution later became the University of Tokyo School of Fine Arts, the training ground for some of the country's finest musicians and Akiyama's alma mater.

The year 1900 was an important one in the development of music in Japan, according to Akiyama, with the first navy bandmaster dispatched to Germany to study and music becoming a compulsory subject in elementary schools. Over the next three decades, more local districts set up bands, although activities were soon cut short by the war.

"Before the war, schools only taught singing and some

piano and it was very old-fashioned,” says Akiyama. “Very few school teachers had studied music abroad, with the exception of some pianists or violinists in Europe, and we had no idea how to play wind instruments. But with the end of the war, Japan was very deeply influenced by the United States’ education system.”

The Tokyo Area Band Association returned in 1947 and contests between towns and districts were organized. In 1963, Akiyama became the first Japanese band director to visit the United States and studied at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York State, for one year.

After returning to Japan, Akiyama played a key role in bringing American musicians to Japan to practice sessions and to promote band music and teaching techniques.

“We were lucky to be able to develop a good musical



education in Japanese schools because the teachers were really interested in their subject,” Akiyama says. “Other countries may still only teach singing or music appreciation, but here our teachers are really keen to play instruments and for their students to play as well.

“In the years immediately after the war, the government was not so interested in music in schools, but the teachers really pushed the authorities and they finally agreed to provide us with funds for this extra-curricular subject,” he says. “That was because we were able to get support from boards of education, schools and parents.

“It has taken a long time to get where we are now, but it has been worth the wait,” he adds.

## Musical Youth

Thanks to sixty years of effort, sisters Megumi and Minami Motoki are among the scores of enthusiastic musicians in their school bands in Chiba Prefecture.

“I joined the brass band in elementary school, then in Junior High one of the older students convinced me to join the marching band,” says fifteen-year-old Megumi. “When I first started Junior High, I played the trombone for a couple of months before changing to the baritone sax, which I have now been playing for a little over two years.

Minami, who is twelve, has been playing the alto saxophone in her twenty-strong elementary school brass band for eighteen months and practices for thirty minutes before school twice a week and intensively for a month before a performance or competition.

In November, Megumi’s band finished in the top three in the Higashi Kanto district for the national band competition and will be going to the national finals.

“First-year students in the marching band all have to learn to march of course, but some kids did not play an instrument before joining the band, so they have to learn how to play really quickly,” she says. “We normally start the band in May—school starts in April—and this year our first local competition was in early June, so it’s a real crash course for first-years.

“We are going to the nationals for the second time in our school’s history,” she adds. “The first time was two years ago when I was a first-year student, but this time I am a third-year and the captain of the band. This will be my last performance before preparing to get into the high school I want to go to, but I’m pretty lucky being able to go twice.”

There are 1,017 elementary school bands in Japan, as well as around 7,000 junior-high bands and 3,780 outfits in high schools. Amateur bands are also popular in towns and communities across the country, as well as at companies.

“Some people think that maths, science and languages are the only important things at school and that music is a waste of time,” Akiyama says. “I disagree; I think music should be included as an important part of the total education of young people and become part of the entire character of a person.”

Despite the popularity of band music in Japan, Akiyama has long felt that not knowing what had become of Fenton left the story incomplete.

“We made no progress for more than ten years and I was giving up hope that we would ever find out what happened to the man who is the father of band music in Japan,” says Akiyama.

In June, he received an e-mail from Lauri Zealear who had followed the Pilkington family tree and discovered the link to Fenton, who it was learned died on April 28, 1890, and is buried in Santa Cruz, California.

“It’s a miracle,” says Akiyama. “We have been working in tandem without knowing it and we have now brought this story full circle.”

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