

Asia Society and Japan Society  
present

# Celebrating Beate Sirota Gordon



Photo by Mark Stern

Sunday, April 28, 2013  
5:00 pm  
Followed by a reception

Asia Society  
725 Park Avenue  
New York, NY



## **Program**

Welcome

**Rachel Cooper**

Director, Global Performing Arts and Special Cultural Initiatives, Asia Society

Performance

**Yoko Takebe Gilbert**

Violinist, New York Philharmonic

J.S. Bach, Adagio from a Sonata for Unaccompanied Violin

Video

**“I am Beate Gordon”**

Video Tribute

**Honorable Sonia Sotomayor**

Associate Justice, United States Supreme Court

Remarks

**Robert Oxnham**

**Vishakha N. Desai**

Presidents Emeriti, Asia Society

Remarks

**Honorable Shigeyuki Hiroki**

Ambassador and Consul General of Japan in New York

Video Tribute

**SamulNori**

“ssit-gim gut”

Kim Duk-soo, Korean traditional percussion master, and his troupe members perform a shaman ceremony to guide the departed’s soul to heaven and console those who are left behind.

Remarks

**Honorable Motoatsu Sakurai**

President, Japan Society

Former Ambassador and Consul General of Japan in New York

Kathak Dance

**Parul Shah**

“Radha-Naval”

Radha-Naval is based on the 'nritya' of Kathak, the narrative elements of dance, and involves 'abhinaya', facial expressions and gestures.

Remarks

**Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney**

U.S. Representative, 12th Congressional District, New York

Video Tribute

**Yoko Ono**

Artist

Remarks

**Dick Cavett**

Television host

Video Tribute

**Robert Wilson**

Theater artist

Performance

**Margaret Leng Tan**

Lee Hye Kyung, “Dream Play” (2000, revised 2011)

Raphael Mostel, “Star-Spangled Etude No. 3” (“Furling Banner,” 1996)

Video Tribute

**Yoshito Ohno**

Dancer

Remarks

**Richard Lanier**

President of the Board of Trustees, Asian Cultural Council

Performance

**Eiko & Koma**

“Duet”

Remarks

**Theodore Levin**

Arthur R. Virgin Professor of Music, Dartmouth College

Video Tribute

**Sin Cha Hong**

Korean dancer, choreographer and vocalist

Remarks

Message from **Alecia A. DeCoudreaux**

President of Mills College

Read by **Cynthia Brandt Stover**

Video Tribute

**Ohad Naharin**

Israeli dancer and choreographer

Remarks

**Paula Lawrence**

Vice President, The Starr Foundation

Former Director, Performing Arts, Japan Society

Former Assistant Director, Performing Arts, Asia Society

Video Tribute

**Somei Satoh**

Japanese composer

Remarks

**Geoffrey Paul Gordon**

Performance

“Dedication”

**Sachiyo Ito**, Dancer and choreographer

**Ralph Samuelson**, Shakuhachi

\*Pre-performance music: Recording of Leo Sirota playing the works of  
Domenico Scarlatti, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, and Franz Liszt,  
“Tokyo Farewell Recital,” 1963, Arbiter Records

## Biography

Born in Vienna on October 25, 1923, Beate Sirota was the only child of Augustine Horenstein and pianist Leo Sirota. She was five years old when her family emigrated to Japan where Leo Sirota had accepted an invitation to become a professor at the then Imperial Academy of Music in Tokyo. Beate attended the German School there until the age of twelve, when she transferred to the American School as the German School became Nazified. Not yet 16, she moved to Oakland, California in 1939 to attend Mills College, where she was graduated in 1943 with a bachelor's degree in modern languages and inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Society. She became a naturalized U.S. citizen in January 1945.

Cut off from contact with her parents during the war, Beate returned to Japan to search for them, securing overseas passage as a civilian interpreter attached to Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff at GHQ in Tokyo. There, she was assigned to draft the civil rights, academic rights, and women's rights sections of the new Japanese Constitution, codified in the two articles below:

Article 14: All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin. 2) Peers and peerage shall not be recognized. 3) No privilege shall accompany any award of honor, decoration or any distinction, nor shall any such award be valid beyond the lifetime of the individual who now holds or hereafter may receive it.

Article 24: Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis. 2) With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.

Beate was the only woman present during the negotiations between the Japanese Steering Committee and the American team on the final language of the Constitution.

Beate returned to the United States in 1947 with her parents, and in 1948 married Lieutenant Joseph Gordon, who had been Chief of the Interpreter-Translator team for the Military Intelligence Section under the Supreme Commander. They settled in New York and eventually she returned to her primary interest, the performing arts. She had studied Japanese and modern dance in Tokyo and was a student there (and later became a dancing partner) of Forrest Garnett, former member of the Anna Pavlova group. She was a student of Gertrude Bodenweiser, internationally-known exponent of modern dance at the Vienna Academy, and in the United States she studied Spanish dance with Elena Imaz, former prima ballerina of the Argentine Ballet. At Mills College she studied modern dance with Marian Van Tuyl. While raising her two young children, she joined the Japan Society in New York City in 1954 as Director of Student Programs, providing career and job counseling to Japanese students. She also worked with visual artists, arranging exhibits and lecture demonstrations, including the first American visit of the renowned woodblock artist, Shiko Munakata.

In 1958 she was appointed the Society's Director of Performing Arts and introduced Japanese performing artists to the New York public, helping to develop many careers. In 1960, Gordon became a consultant to the Asia Society Performing Arts Program, expanding her activities from Japan to the other countries of Asia. In 1970, Gordon was named full-time Director of the Performing Arts Program of the Asia Society in New York and, in 1987, she became the Society's Director of Performances, Films, and Lectures.

Gordon's travels in search of authentic Asian performing arts took her to such remote areas as Purulia in West Bengal, India, and Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia, where she sought out indigenous artists to bring to universities, museums, and other cultural venues in New York and across the United States and Canada. Over the years, Gordon produced 39 tours by 34 companies from 16 countries, introducing Asia's traditional performing arts and its foremost performing artists to an estimated 1.5 million Americans in some 400 cities and towns in 42 states. These presentations brought significantly furthered the post-World War II Asian influence on American art, design, music, literature, and theater.

Gordon produced and hosted a series of public television programs on performing arts from Japan, China, India, and Thailand, including 29 videos and five films televised nationally. For the Nonesuch Records Explorer Series, she produced eight albums of Asian music. Gordon was a panel member and later a consultant for the Dance Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. She was also the Associate Editor in charge of the Asian Dance section of the International Encyclopedia of Dance published by Oxford University Press in February, 1998.

Gordon retired from directorship at the Asia Society in 1991, continuing as Senior Consultant for Performing Arts until July 1993. She received an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Mills College in 1991 and the President's Medal from the College of the City of New York in 1992. In 1998 she received the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold Rays with Rosette, from the Japanese government. She was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Smith College in 2008 and, in 2011, an honorary Ph.D. from Mills College, where her papers will reside.

For her work as an arts presenter and associated educational activities such as the production of videos, audio recordings, and scholarly monographs on Asian performing art forms, Gordon received numerous awards, including the American Dance Guild Award (1978), two Dance on Camera Festival Awards (1984, 1985), an Obie Award for the introduction of SamulNori to the United States (1985), a Bessie Award (1990) which cited her "for beating an ever-widening path between the cultures of East and West and for understanding the essential creative dialectic between tradition and experimentation and the fundamental partnership of artists involved in both", the 2005 Ryoko Akamatsu Award, the Avon Grand Award to Women (1997), and the John D. Rockefeller Award from the Asian Cultural Council (1997), which recognized her "extraordinary contributions in introducing American scholars, artists, and general audiences to the performing arts of Asia and in increasing the American understanding and appreciation of Asian dance, theater, and music traditions."

A Japanese language memoir, *Christmas 1945: The Biography of the Woman Who Wrote the Equal Rights Clause of the Japanese Constitution*, was published in 1995. The English version of this book was published in 1998 under the title *The Only Woman in the Room*. A play based on Gordon's role in writing the Japanese constitution, *A String of Pearls* by James Miki, was performed by the Seinen Gekijo in Tokyo in 1998. A film produced by Tomoko Fujiwara about Gordon's father's family and their flight from Europe into the diaspora, *The Sirota Family and the 20th Century*, was first seen by western audiences in Paris in 2009. Gordon has been the subject of numerous documentaries in Japan.

Gordon died at her home in New York City on December 30, 2012, at the age of 89. Her husband Joseph Gordon had died four months before, on August 29, at age 93. Her last public statement, made 10 days before she died, was to urge that the Japanese Constitution be preserved, especially the women's rights and peace clauses.

### **Some Artists Beate Gordon Introduced to American Audiences:**

Suzushi Hanayagi, Japanese modern dancer; Edo Bayashi, kagura troupe from Japan; Heen Baba Dance and Drum Ensemble from Sri Lanka; Dancers and Musicians of the Burmese National Theater; SamulNori, Korean drummer-dancers; Kim So-hee, Korean P'ansori singer; Mansaku Nomura Kyogen troupe; Eiko & Koma; Nihon Ongaku Shudan (Ensemble Nipponia) under direction of composer Minoru Miki Bando; Yaenosuke's Tachimawari troupe; The Royal Dancers and Musicians from the Kingdom of Bhutan; Yakshagana, Ritual Dance and Drama from Karnataka, India; Kathakali, South Indian Dance-Drama from the Kerala Kalamandalam; Chhau, the Masked Dance of Bengal Australian Aboriginal Sand Painters; The Fujian Hand Puppets from the People's Republic of China; Siberian Asian Music and Dance from Kamchatka and the Amur River region; Thovil, the ritual chanting, dance and drumming of exorcism from Sri Lanka; Penca and Topeng Babakan from Bandung and Cirebon, West Java, Indonesia; The Sabri Brothers: Qawwali Music from Pakistan; Kimio Eto, Japanese koto player; Kaze-No-Ko ("Children of the Wind"), Japanese dance-theater group.

In addition to the artists she introduced to American audiences, some of the many others with whom she worked over her career include David Byrne, John Cage, Henry Cowell, Philip Glass, Ge Gan-ru, Sin Cha Hong, Saeko Ichinohe, Toshi Ichiyanagi, Indrani, Sachiyo Ito, Amjad Ali Khan, Yayoi Kusama, Yo-Yo Ma, Birju Maharaj, Yehudi Menuhin, Minoru Miki, Kifu Mitsuhashi, Minoru Miyagi, Raphael Mostel, Masayuki Nagare, Ohad Naharin, Isamu Noguchi, Yoko Ono, Kazuo Ohno, Yoshito Ohno, Nam June Paik, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Luciano Pavarotti, Somei Satoh, Kazue Sawai, Ravi Shankar, Margaret Leng Tan, Julie Taymor, Jennifer Tipton, Robert Wilson, and Katsuya Yokoyama.

## Testimonials

I know Beate Sirota Gordon only as an historian may know her, for we never met. And yet there seems a special intimacy in this acquaintance, for she sparkles with rare vivaciousness in that brief moment when she helped make history. I have in mind, of course, her role in promoting gender equality in two separate articles (14 and 24) in the new Japanese constitution that was drafted in 1946.

These enlightened provisions would not have seen the light of day without the then Beate Sirota. Even all these years later, it is still a bit breathtaking to imagine the scene, for the picture involves more than just a twenty-two-year-old female dynamo in a room full of men working at fever pitch to draft a new national charter for a shattered land.

This picture begins with Beate Sirota commandeering a jeep to search through bombed-out Tokyo for still-standing libraries where she could collect reference volumes on constitutional law from around the world. Heightened drama intrudes when her superiors call on her to defend guaranteeing gender equality in the Japanese constitution when the U.S. constitution itself has no such provision. And the picture extends to a conclusion of sorts in which Beate Sirota, with her rare bilingual skill, helps both the American and Japanese sides navigate the delicate initial stage of rendering this English-language draft into Japanese.

There is an earlier picture behind this picture, however, that in my mind is just as captivating. The question here is why this young woman believed Japan would benefit greatly from a constitutional guarantee of gender equality--and, more intriguing yet, why she was confident this would find support among the Japanese people. And the answer surely lies in the exceptional intelligence and empathy with which she observed life in Tokyo between 1929 and 1939, beginning when she was five years old.

She witnessed chauvinism and mounting militarism and repression, of course. But she also was attuned to the opposite of this by virtue of interacting with the more liberal Japanese guests her family entertained as well as the household servants they employed. These formative years obviously made Beate Sirota a passionate champion of equal rights for Japanese women, but that was only the half of it. She emerged not only with respect for the aspirations and abilities of these women, but also with a broader, non-condescending optimism concerning the promise of a genuinely democratic Japan.

This mix of hard-headed realism and open-hearted idealism was rare and precious after such a bitter war, and it is just as precious today. Once her contribution to the constitution became known, years later, Beate Sirota Gordon never lost an opportunity to reaffirm her vision. Her legions of present-day admirers among Japanese women are moving testimony to the durability of that vision.

—*John Dower*, Ford International Professor of History, M.I.T., author of *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*



I had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Beate Gordon for the first time in 1973 when I first came to New York. She was about to visit India to bring out authentic dancers and musicians – 3 Asian groups per year. Since she was due to travel to the hinterland of Perulia (off Calcutta) by bullock cart, I realized here was a lady who thirsted for the truth. I told her “If you are going to India, please go to Sri Lanka.”

Mrs. Gordon visited Sri Lanka, auditioning several schools of Kandyan Dance as well as Devil - masked dancers of the South. Both these dance forms have remained in their purity for the last two thousand years. These all night rituals both in Kandyan Dance and Thovil exorcism date back to folk religion and animistic worship. Shamans purify themselves over a period of three months, preparing altars and sanctifying the dance arena.

Mrs. Gordon was delighted and asked me to author a monograph – “The Classical Dance of Sri Lanka – Kandyan Dance” which she published through the aegis of Asia Society and distributed to universities and libraries both in the U.S. and overseas.

Mrs. Gordon visited Sri Lanka again in early 1974, auditioned us for eighteen hours and chose Heen Baba, my teacher and the greatest traditional master, with his dance and drum ensemble, to tour twenty-two cities across the U.S. Mrs. Gordon was courageous enough to put across the traditional masters in their traditional costumes in all their authenticity, winning standing ovations at Carnegie Hall, the Smithsonian Institute, Natural History Museum, and UCLA and earned wonderful reviews by Anna Kisselgoff in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times.

To see the poster of the Heen Baba Dance & Drum Ensemble hanging outside Carnegie Hall was such a treat and filled us with elation.

In my lecture demonstrations, I had to point out Sri Lanka on the map as many had not heard of Sri Lanka – or for that matter, Ceylon Tea, and thought Sri Lanka was a part of India. Students in universities were hungry for knowledge of authentic dance forms.

We worked very hard at a cracking pace from coast to coast – in all, twenty-two cities. The Heen Baba Dance Troupe was such a resounding success for Mrs. Gordon, so much so much so that four years later she wanted to bring the “real McCoy” – the exorcists from the South who usually go into trance during their all night rituals. These exorcists had never performed in the city before, let alone travelled abroad, and the excerpts from these rituals had never been seen on the stage before.

When the New York news announced on our arrival in 1978 that “the witch doctors are here from Sri Lanka to cure the Russian flu,” we had sell-out concerts with ethnomusicologists and anthropologists following us from state to state and distressed parents demanding seats for their troubled children, believing that even by watching our concert their children would benefit. The Thovil troupe of Southern Province Dancers also took the U.S. by storm.

I had to get agricultural permits and fire licences to bring huge coconut fronds, banana tree trunks and resin to provide the authentic altars, cut and prepared by the dancers themselves. Mrs. Gordon subsequently got both my troupes - Kandyan and Thovil - for the Jerusalem Arts Festival, again to much acclaim. We were to go to the Shiraz Arts Festival but it was cancelled due to an earthquake. Later the troupes performed at the Chingay Festival in Singapore where they were privileged to light the Chingay torch.

Mrs. Gordon made me write on the aspects of Kandyan Dance: costumes, rituals and poetic dances as well as the Kandy Perehara, the annual road pageant in Kandy (with over one hundred elephants, dancers and drummers) for the International Encyclopaedia of Dance.

Mrs. Gordon's vision and her contribution to Asian art forms through the Performing Arts Programme should not be forgotten. In fact it should be supported in every possible way as a lasting tribute to her and for all she did to foster cross-cultural dialogue through performing arts. I salute this great lady Mrs. Beate Gordon for the invaluable impact she has had on the world of artists and artisans. She has been an inspirational mentor to me and to others the world over whose hearts she has touched. She will be forever remembered.

—*Lady (Dr.) Sicille P.C. Kotelawala, Sri Lanka, April 2013*

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Beate Gordon-san,

In 1963, my father (Nomura Manzo VI) and I taught kyogen at Seattle's Washington University. This was of course the very first time for me and for kyogen to travel to America. At the end of that same year, I visited New York by myself through the invitation of Japan Society, where Beate Gordon-san was in charge at the time. I was also much obliged to have been invited to her home. That next year, in 1964, my father and I were greatly indebted to her for giving us the opportunity to perform kyogen in New York for the very first time. Following that first performance, each time I returned to the states to perform, she would always nostalgically say "I was the first to invite Nomura Manzo VI to perform in New York." Her perfect Japanese pronunciation was, I'm sure, a gift of her education in prewar Japan. And it was much to my surprise when I later learned that she herself was involved in the drafting of Japan's constitution. I offer prayers from the bottom of my heart that her soul may rest in peace.

—*Nomura Mansaku, Japanese Living National Treasure*

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I first met Beate when I graduated from Oberlin and was on my way to the Far East. She was extremely generous and helpful in putting me in touch with the great traditions of Japan connected to Awaji Theater on Awaji Island. Beate introduced me to Japan and helped me to plan my time spent there. Those months were packed full of unforgettable experiences, all due to Beate's inspiration and guidance. She was outstandingly brave and lit the way for others who not only love Asia, but also need to experience it from the inside, not just from afar.

—*Julie Taymor*

I first got to know Beate Sirota Gordon-san when I came to New York in 1954 to study music. Beate-san treated me with much kindness from the moment we met. However, at the same time, I also had the impression that being the daughter of the eminent pianist Leo Sirota and someone deeply involved in the drafting of Japan's postwar "Peace Constitution," she was very strong-minded and somewhat intimidating.

I remember fondly that just after our first encounter she said to me, "Toshi, please give American children the opportunity to hear Japanese music," and proceeded to set up numerous opportunities for me to play the piano at New York area elementary schools.

Half a century later, in March 2008, when I was at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall for a 3-day concert event, to my great surprise, she appeared on stage as my interviewer and we had a wonderful conversation.

At that time Beate-san looked so well that her sudden passing gives me great sorrow. Together with offering prayers to her from the bottom of my heart, I want to honor her life that was filled with a strong interest and dedication to Japanese culture and so many great accomplishments that resulted from her efforts to introduce Japanese culture to the U.S.

—*Toshi Ichiyanagi, April 2013*

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To Mrs. Beate Sirota Gordon,

I came to New York City in the fall of 1968 on a Fulbright grant to study dance technique at the Martha Graham School and to learn choreography in a course at the Julliard School.

Even for such a new-comer, Mrs. Beate Gordon, The Director of Performing Arts program at the Japan Society, arranged a performance at the Civic Center Museum in Philadelphia for my dance group. To express my appreciation, I invited Mrs. Gordon and her mother to our final rehearsal at a dance studio at the Julliard School.

Mrs. Gordon loved our program very much and recommended strongly that I stay in the United States rather than return to Japan as I was contemplating. "Stay and perform in the United States," Mrs. Gordon encouraged me. To help make my stay possible, she arranged temporary work for me. Then, she helped organize out-of-town performances, including a six-week tour and many others.

I have remained most grateful to Mrs. Gordon for her endless words of encouragement, and her endless warmth of heart. Without her, I would not have had my dance career in America.

With endless respect and gratitude,

I miss you,

—*Saeko Ichinohe*

### **About Asia Society**

Asia Society is the leading educational organization dedicated to promoting mutual understanding and strengthening partnerships among peoples, leaders and institutions of Asia and the United States in a global context. Across the fields of arts, business, culture, education, and policy, the Society provides insight, generates ideas, and promotes collaboration to address present challenges and create a shared future.

Founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Asia Society is a nonpartisan, nonprofit institution with headquarters in New York, centers in Hong Kong and Houston, and affiliated offices in Los Angeles, Manila, Sydney, Mumbai, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, and Washington, DC.

### **About Japan Society**

Founded in 1907, Japan Society is a world-class, multidisciplinary hub for global leaders, artists, scholars, educators, and English and Japanese-speaking audiences. At the Society, more than 100 events each year feature sophisticated, topically relevant presentations of Japanese art and culture and open, critical dialogue on issues of vital importance to the U.S., Japan and East Asia. An American nonprofit, nonpolitical organization, the Society cultivates a constructive, resonant and dynamic relationship between the people of the U.S. and Japan.

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### **Audio/Visual Staff**

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