



The following biography on Domenico Moro, who served as the thirteenth bandmaster of the Royal Hawaiian Band, has been transcribed from the 1989 thesis titled *The History of the Royal Hawaiian Band 1836 – 1980*, written by David W. Bandy. There have been small changes made due to modern research capabilities and practices. Photographs (figures) have been transcribed via screen captures from a pdf document and are low quality. High quality copies are available through the listed sources within the article. Reference citations have been re-numbered and included at the end of the article in the form of endnotes in order to accommodate a smoother reading flow within this format.

Domenico Moro: 1941-1955

Domenico Moro was born on December 24, 1884 in Caronia, Sicily, Italy. At the age of 11, he began his musical studies and at 13 studied conducting at the Provincial Conservatory of Music in Macena, Sicily. In 1897, while at the conservatory, a U.S. Navy officer visited the school. His ship was anchored in Macena's harbor and he had come to the school to try and recruit musicians. Moro, at the age of 17, accepted. In just a few short months he was appointed a bandmaster for the U.S. Navy, making him one of the youngest Navy bandmasters in history. Moro did not even know the English language at the time of his appointment.¹

Stationed at Pearl Harbor in 1918, Moro fell in love with Hawai'i, but decided in 1922 to go to San Francisco for a musician's job in a movie studio. Missing what he really considered his home, it was in 1924 that he returned to Hawai'i to play for the Princess Theater and also engage in some radio work, symphony playing and teaching. He was invited to lead the Honolulu Plantation Band (a small local band of plantation workers) in 1938 which he did until his appointment three years later with the Royal Hawaiian Band.² A well-rounded musician, Moro also served as a flute player in the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, holding the first

chair position for many years.

The name of Domenico Moro was not new within the circles of the Royal Hawaiian Band, however it was as early as November 1930 that Moro's name was first brought up as a possible candidate for the position of bandmaster. W. Twigg-Smith, business manager of the Honolulu Symphony, after conferring with Mayor-elect George Fred Wright, wrote the following to the Honolulu Advertiser:

With Mr. Alexander Anderson I did confer with our mayor-to-be George F. Wright, but not on behalf of Mr. King. For several months, I with others have been bringing forward Mr. Dominico [sic] Moro as the man of the hour for leadership of the Hawaiian Band- and it was for that reason we interviewed Mr. Wright yesterday. Toward [sic] the end of our conversation Mr. King's name was advanced, with many others, some of whom are members of the band.

Mr. Wright asked what we thought of the probable selection of Mr. King, and I replied that without doubt Mr. King was the most qualified of the men whom he (Mr. Wright) had mentioned, but that he was not to be considered in the same class as Mr. Dominico [sic] Moro, because of the difference in experience.³

Moro was officially appointed bandmaster on January 2, 1941, directing his first concert with the band at the Kapi'olani Park bandstand on a cold and windy Sunday afternoon on January 12, 1941. There was a large crowd in attendance for Moro's premiere, and all seemed to enjoy it enormously as was indicated by both the enthusiastic applause and the fact that ". . . everyone stayed to the last note of the last number of the program, *Star Spangled Banner*."⁴

In an interview following his appointment, Moro expressed what his immediate desires and goals would be for the band:

The spirit of the earlier and loved melodies that stamped them as Hawaiian means more to him than their form. However, he confessed, he could not resist one temptation: to pay the tribute of his sound musicianship to Hawai'i's national anthem. From the first day he heard his friend, the late Capt. Henri [sic] Berger, conduct an orchestra through the simply written *Hawai'i Pono'i*, he felt an irrepressible desire to reharmonize and rearrange the score so as to increase its dignity and its majesty. The average ear will note no change of melody, he explained, but the musician will

catch at once the difference in richness that resembles the difference between the voice of a piano and the orchestral voices of a pipe organ.⁵

“Under Domenico Moro's leadership, the band now boasts a membership of forty, and meets almost all the passenger ships which arrive at Honolulu harbor, as well as seeing ships off upon their departure.”⁶

Serving the band for a total of fourteen years, Moro was very successful with both the members of the band and community at large, having the ability to program just the right music for the occasion. Robert Edwards, a noted writer for *Paradise of the Pacific*, stated:

If I judge correctly, the band's popularity will never wane while he is its director. He has a happy faculty of selecting the right numbers for the right occasions, and the players perform so thoroughly in unison under his baton, that it is a pleasure indeed to listen to his concerts.⁷

Mr. Moro, an accomplished flute player, did not have a happy beginning with the band. Members in the community accused him of neglect in his responsibilities early on in his career as bandmaster. It had been said that Mr. Moro had asked Mekia Kealakai (former bandmaster) to take charge of the Hawaiian music for the band. Some felt that this was an indication of Mr. Moro's lack of knowledge concerning Hawaiian music, and that he would not be capable of handling it. However, at the same time the allegations were being voiced, the band was actually playing more Hawaiian music on their programs than some of the previous directors had performed.

With the change of local administrations, bandmasters were often reappointed or dismissed. Some felt that Domenico Moro's appointment was purely political. Moro was very frustrated early in his tenure as bandmaster, but could not allow such accusations to persist.

His reply was stated quite well:

My many years of service in the U.S. Navy did not teach me to take it lying down, and if irresponsible individuals force me to transfer my pen from the music sheet to the

letter head, then I must.⁸

Infuriated by politically oriented comments against him, he continued:

Has he [the author of the Letter-to-the-Editor] forgotten that the late Mayor Fred Wright (a Republican) submitted my name on December 22, 1932, as his first choice for Bandmaster of the Royal Hawaiian Band? Notwithstanding that I carried the Democratic 'Union Card'.⁹



Figure 25. Concert on grounds of 'Iolani Palace on "Army Day," 1942.
Hawai'i State Archives.

Despite personal political problems, Moro's tenure with the Royal Hawaiian Band proved to be fruitful. Many still consider him to be one of the three or four most favored leaders. It was, in fact, as early as 1930 that Moro's name was first introduced to Mayor-elect George Fred Wright, along with many others (including Charles King).¹⁰ King was the one

eventually selected, but it was noted that Moro's credentials stood alone within the band field as a conductor of 25 years with the United States Navy Bands, a well known flute soloist, conductor of many theatre orchestras, and conductor of the Native Band of Samoa for three and a half years.¹¹

Moro had established himself as a solid musician and leader. The year 1944 brought an additional challenge to both Moro and the band, for it was the one hundredth birthday year of Captain Henry Berger. Much planning was to occur in order to present a splendid concert in Berger's memory. That concert was held at Kapi'olani Park on Friday evening, August 4, 1944.¹² The evening would be filled with many of Berger's favorite selections that had by then been considered classics of the Royal Hawaiian band. Numbers such as *Old Hundred*, *Kohala March*, *Poet and Peasant Overture*, and of course, *Hawai'i Pono'i*.¹³ Domenico would even be conducting the concert with the gold-tipped koa baton that had been presented to Berger by the members of the band on his seventieth birthday in 1914.¹⁴

The evening was a spectacular event that all of Hawai'i honored. For the older generation in attendance, it sparked nostalgic memories of an era long past. The old gave way to the new as, just before the playing of Berger's beloved *Hawai'i Pono'i*. Throngs of Boy scouts filled into the aisles carrying lit torches as the lights were dimmed. Tears filled hundreds of eyes throughout the huge audience in this beautiful salute to the "Father of Hawaiian music."¹⁵ Moro was proud. It was an evening to be remembered.

Moro's popularity was booming. Members of the band were inspired not only by his musicianship, but also his caring. He looked out for his men in every way possible, including periodic pay increases. Municipal decisions do not occur overnight, but one such benefit came to the members of the band in May 1945, allowing them an additional \$20.00 per

month.¹⁶ Domenico Moro had the distinction of leading the band during the time of the Second World War. Times were rough. Some of the younger members left for the armed services, but the band continued. The only real alteration in the band's schedule was the omission of evening concerts due to the rigid blackout restrictions. Limited evening concerts did return to a large, enthusiastic audience in 1943.¹⁷ Another of the long established traditions that ceased during war time was that of playing for arriving and departing ships. That tradition began once again on the morning of August 30, 1945, when the *Matsonia* arrived from the port of San Francisco.¹⁸ Mayor Petrie also assured the ocean liners that if they (the City-County Administration) were aware of the arrival times beforehand, they would always try to fit arrivals into the band's busy schedule, even possibly "forgetting" the fee of \$15.00 per concert at times.¹⁹

In 1947 Moro proposed another pay increase for the members of the band. He also suggested that the Glee Club members receive additional funds, as they performed more than their normal band duties.²⁰ The matter was turned over to the new mayor, John H. Wilson, as the band came under his direct supervision.²¹ In August the suggested pay increases were approved, now establishing an extra-pay for extra-duty incentive.²² Being a municipal organization, it was the band's duty to serve first the citizens of Honolulu, then perform for the many other functions when time allowed. Many of these functions included the pier concerts for the ships, special parades, hotel and business concerts, and funerals. Fees were always charged for such events, but for quite some time they remained the same. In November 1947 Supervisor Richard M. Kageyama proposed a fee increase for the band's outside performances. The proposal failed because the Board felt that the costs of \$25.00 for both ship arrival and departure, \$25.00 for hotels, private institutions and business

establishments, and \$100.00 for private funerals were too high.²³

Today, aloha shirts and mu'umu'us are seen being worn by band members at any given concert, but it was an innovation for the band in 1949 when Moro asked them to wear just that when they reported to the piers in early May. The following account helps to show why the band is still attired in aloha wear:

It seemed that some of his bandsmen might have tried to outdo one another for "loudness" of color combinations. As one pier-side observer put it, "You can hear the band today even when it's not playing."

General public opinion seemed definitely in favor of the Aloha-shirt-and-holoku attire for the ship-greeters. "Now it looks like the Royal Hawaiian Band ought to look--Hawaiian."²⁴

Even the smallest of *matters dealing with the band seemed to appear in print. One such occasion was the need to purchase three new guitars for the organization.²⁵ Despite an economy drive at the time, the Board of Supervisors' finance committee approved the request saying "We gotta have music."²⁶ It was also in this year of the economy drive that the band was given new uniforms . . . not just one, but two per member.²⁷



Figure 26. Royal Hawaiian Band playing at the signing of the State Constitution, 1950- *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* photo.

Solo vocalists have held special places with the band since the days of Henry Berger. Some of Hawai'i's most famous female singers have been with the band, including Julia Keliiaa Chilton, Lei Lehua, Nani Alapa'i, and Lena Machado. Theresa K. Malani was another name to be added to that list. A natural Hawaiian soprano voice, Theresa had rough beginnings even joining the ranks of the band. A major controversy erupted in the hiring procedures for the solo vocalist position in November 1952, which would plague Moro for the following six months.

Malani charged Mayor John Wilson with favoritism in hiring a friend of his, Miulan Naiwi, in the vocalist position.²⁸ Malani took her plea to a special Board of Supervisors meeting on November 21, stating that she had passed the civil service examination, when Miulan Naiwi had not. The mayor's wife, Jennie Wilson, accompanied Malani to the meeting in support of her plea.²⁹

Asked if his wife had tried to influence him in the matter, the mayor said, 'Oh yes, she came around and asked me to help Mrs. Malani. I told her to mind her own business. I'm running this show 'Mrs. Malani told the finance committee about two private conversations with commissioner Kum who was alleged to have said, 'We'll have to turn the heat on. I told the old man two years ago he ought to turn that woman out.'³⁰



Figure 27. Hearing regarding favoritism in hiring procedures of the Royal Hawaiian Band, 1952. Hawai'i State Archives.

Obviously, John Wilson was not running the show, as the mayor's wife eventually had her way, giving the Royal Hawaiian Band another one of their famous vocalists.³¹

Domenico Moro had spent a long and productive time with the band. He had been able to instill a level of superior musicianship in the members of the organization while offering many quality performances to the public. Soon the time for him to retire would come, but not before one final conflict.

Peter Kāne, Jr. had been a saxophone player with the band for 15 years, but Kāne was a little on the stout side. Moro dismissed Kāne in 1954 by reason of the city physicians' report that Kāne could blow his horn, but he "should not be required to walk up stairs."³² Kāne lost 55 pounds, but Moro stated he should lose an additional 45 pounds in order to be rehired. Kane could not reach such a goal. Eventually, the crisis passed with Kāne leaving the band.

Moro served the remainder of his term with quiet success. However, in 1955 the Board did not reappoint him to the position of bandmaster due to the required retirement age stipulation, which was in effect. The following years would see Moro's name continuously brought before the public to resume the position in front of the band once again, but it was not to be.

Moro helped to better the band in many different ways, but perhaps some of his best contributions were in his many fine arrangements of Hawaiian songs, which are still performed today.

Domenico Moro died on December 22, 1976 in the Convalescent Center of Honolulu.

David W. Bandy

Endnotes

- 1 "Domenico Moro, Ex-Bandmaster, Is, Dead at 91." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 31, 1976, p. C-7.
- 2 "Musician Domenico Moro Dies." *Honolulu Advertiser*. December 31, 1976. p . A-4 .
- 3 "Dominico Moro Desired As Hawaiian Bandmaster By Music Interests Here." *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 23, 1930, p, 1.
- 4 "Makes Hit." *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 14, 1941, p, .2.
- 5 Benyas, Dorothy. "Moro Wants New Zest, Feeling In Haw'n Airs." *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 5, 1941, p. 1.
- 6 Bassett, W.K. "Royal Hawaiian Band Dates From Monarchy." *Paradise of the Pacific*, August 1947, p. 9.
- 7 Edwards, Robert. "Music in the Tropics." *Paradise of the Pacific*, September 1941, pp. 8-9.
- 8 "Moro Denounces Attacks on Him As Vicious Lies." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 24, 1941, p . 3.
- 9 *ibid*.
- 10 "Dominico Moro Desired As Hawaiian Bandmaster By Music Interests Here." *Honolulu Advertiser*. November 23, 1930, p. 1,2.
- 11 *ibid*.
- 12 "In Memory of Captain Berger." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 19, 1944, p. 4.
- 13 "Berger Centennial Concert." Concert Program, City and County of Honolulu, August 4, 1944.
- 14 "Berger's Old Baton Will Be Used When Band Honors Him." *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 1, 1944, p. 5.
- 15 "Monarchy Days Recalled At Berger Festival Honoring Territory's First Music Master." *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 5, 1944, p. 1.
- 16 "Pay Increase Given Royal Hawaiian Band." *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 27, 1945, p. 6.
- 17 Janssen, Otto. "Hawaii's 'Other' Music." *The Etude Music Magazine*, July 1945 pp. 368,410.
- 18 "Royal Haw'n Band To Greet Matsonia Today." *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 30, 1945, p. 1.
- 19 "Band Will Greet Ships Provided City Gets Notice." *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 8, 1946, p. 2.
- 20 "Royal Hawaiian Bandmaster Asks More Band Funds." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 19, 1947, p. 4.
- 21 "Royal Haw'n. Band Pay Hike Studied." *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 19, 1947, p. 3.
- 22 "Bandmaster, Glee Club Get Raises." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, August 6, 1947, p. 6.
- 23 "Band Fee Boost Denied By Board." *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 15, 1941, p. 11.
- 24 "Hawaiian Band Blooms in Aloha Shirts, Muumuus." *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 10, 1949, p. 11.
- 25 "Band Asks Funds For Three New Guitars." *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 18, 1949, p. 9.
- 26 "We Gotta Have Music, Say City Financiers." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 21, 1949, p. 6.
- 27 "New Uniforms For Royal Hawaiians." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 15, 1949, p. 7.

- 28 "Favoritism Charged Over Band Singer." Honolulu Advertiser, November 19, 1952, p. 1.
- 29 "Supervisors Hear Mrs. Malani in Battle of Singers." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, November 21, 1952, p. 4.
- 30 Krauss, Bob. "Mayor, Wife Can't Agree on Vocalist." November 21, 1952, p. 1.
- 31 "Board Considers Eliminating Job to Solve Contralto Tiff." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 18, 1953, p. 3.
- 32 "355-Pound Player Fired from Band; Issue Is Created." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 3, 1954, p. 11.

