Bernice Kisako Hirai, Ph.D., began playing the koto at age 11 in Hakalau, Hawai‘i with her first teacher, Ayako Yokoyama. In Honolulu she studied under Kazue Mikami, "Dai-shihan," Miyagi Kai, from 1955 into the 1970s. She resumed her studies in 1985 with Makiko Goto and Shoko Hikage, the first two instructors from Sawai Sokyoku-In Tokyo to come to Hawai‘i. Hirai has served as president of Sawai Koto Kai Hawai‘i, the first overseas branch of Sawai Sokyoku-In Tokyo, since its inception in 1986 and is presently the instructor of the group. She taught the koto course offered by the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Music Department’s Ethnomusicology section starting in 1990.

She is currently writing a book, *A Century of Koto in Hawai‘i,* (Hawai‘i no Koto Sekai: Hyakunsu no Ayumi). The contents include Yamato koto (Japanese koto), Uchinan koto (Okinawa koto), University of Hawai‘i Ethnomusicology koto program, Pagaku (koto component), Taieho koto, and Sawai Koto Kai Hawai‘I, 22 years since its inception.

Bernice Hirai was awarded the prestigious "Shihan" rank in July 1995, the first foreigner to be so recognized by Sawai Sokyoku-In Tokyo. In Spring 1998, she was awarded Japan’s imperial award, The Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold and Silver Rays.