

Suzuki  
Piano  
Basics  
Foundation News

To facilitate, promote, and  
educate the public on the way  
of teaching and playing the piano taught at  
the Talent Education Research Institute  
in Matsumoto, Japan by  
Dr. Haruko Kataoka

# I Can Read Music

(Part 2 of 3)

By Haruko Kataoka

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## Piano Basics Foundation News

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In Matsumoto, we use *Méthode Rose* when very young children begin learning to read music. The reason for this choice is that it contains many enjoyable pieces. As I mentioned in the previous newsletter, because parents are the ones who will be reading in the beginning, please use the original version of the book [not the enlarged-note edition]. Even children 7-8 years old [who may be independently reading from the start], having far better vision than adults, have no need of larger-than-normal notes. (The enlarged version is for the elderly who need reading glasses.)

We begin by showing the child that a reading book exists. Then, placing the book on the music desk, identify the current piece. In the beginning, this is all the child needs to know.

All the parent has to do is sing the notes in *solfège*, and because children who start the study of reading music are already in Book 2, they should be able to memorize and play eight-measure melodies without any problem. It is very important to practice repetitions every day and be able to play smoothly. If it is difficult for them to recall the piece the next day, all you have to do is read/sing it for them again.

The pieces in *Méthode Rose* are the same level as in Book 1. As children continue to learn and play these

Pieces, they develop a positive association with the reading book. There is no need to worry at all if it takes many, many months to finish the book. However, please try to spend even a little time reading music every single day. Humans are able to accomplish much with the accumulation of daily work to develop and acquire any ability.

Beginning with the *Recreations*, all musical indications, which include the title, time/time signature—*allegro*, *andante*, etc, and any terms that indicate the kind of expression that the piece must convey—are defined, with definitions written [by the parent] on the score so children will be able to read and understand them. This must be practiced because ‘correct music reading’ means understanding everything that is printed in the music score.

For the majority of people, reading music involves being able to play the correct key on the piano that corresponds with the note written on the staff. However, note reading is only one aspect of reading music. The music score has instructions for all the things necessary to play the piece. Those who can decipher all that the score indicates are the ones who can truly read music correctly.

The second reading book is Czerny’s *Recreations*, his book for beginners. Throughout this book as well, parents are “reading” to their child in the same way as they would read fairy tales. Children are not actually reading and playing 100% yet.

As in the previous book, children first memorize what is read to them for the right hand followed by work on the left hand, and then they put the hands together. The collection of pieces in this book is also quite enjoyable.

In order to cultivate correct reading skills, you have to start when the children are young so that they can truly read with their bodies. Musicians, more than likely, are able to read music intellectually. However, if they are not trained to read correctly while young, they become unable to look at a score, truly interpret it accurately, and transform this into the kind of music it is supposed to be.

As I have mentioned previously, in piano many voices are played simultaneously. Compared to other musical instruments, properly reading music for the piano is of utmost importance. Please take great care in teaching the proper, correct way to read music to children when they are young.

Editor’s Note: In Suzuki Method, a fundamental aspect of teaching very young students (ages 3-5) how to read requires the use of singing *solfege*, using fixed *Do*. This is no problem for Japanese parents, *all* of whom learn to sight-read music to a fairly high level using fixed *Do* in public school. Most American parents and teachers, if they learned anything about *solfege* at all, learned a system of moveable *Do*, which is too complicated an intellectual construct for small children to grasp.

Consequently, most Suzuki teachers in the United States do not begin lessons for children under the age of 6-7, when they are considered old enough to begin reading English, so that reading may be introduced in traditional ways: by learning the note names A-G, learning the various keys with their sharps and flats, and by expecting the student alone, without the help of a parent, to play a very simple passage while looking at its printed version. This traditional approach to music reading does not produce great results for a majority of students, whether studying with a Suzuki teacher or a traditional teacher. This is the point at which some students are labeled “talented” and others “untalented.” It is at this point, struggling with the complicated task of reading piano music, when the “untalented” students quit.

However, as we know, there are supposed to be no “untalented” students in Suzuki Method. Where does the system break down here? In what aspect is it fundamentally different from the way it is taught in Japan? I believe it is our lack of a fundamental tool in music education all over the world (except in England and the U.S.): *solfège* using fixed *Do*. I recently learned that the Eastman School of Music has begun teaching fixed *Do*, and possibly other conservatories will follow suit, but this is new in the U.S.

With this tool, parents are able to “read” the Book 1 pieces to their child (as described in Dr. Kataoka’s article) in the same way they read books in

English. All educators agree that *being read to* is the single, most important experience a child needs before beginning school.

What do children learn when the parent is able to open Book 1 and sing the right hand or the left hand part of each of the pieces? The first thing they learn is that there is a book, and that music is written in it. Then they notice, if the parent points to the notes while singing, that these little dots have meaning depending on their placement on the staff and on their shape and connection to other dots. With the kind of daily repetition of a single piece they may be learning to play, they begin to understand, *without explanation*, that sounds look a certain way when written. If the parent checks the pitch before singing, the child has a good chance to develop perfect pitch, another invaluable ability for any musician. Because so many of the beginning pieces are in C major, they begin to understand that *Do* appears in the third space up in the right-hand staff and in the third space down in the left-hand staff, and that all the other notes go up or down from there or stay the same. Imagine a child from the age of 2-3 having this daily experience before they begin Book 2 and start reading pieces they haven’t heard, especially if the parent continues singing the pieces as the child is learning to play them!

None of these benefits are available to American students unless teachers take on the task of teaching parents how to sing *solfège* using fixed *Do*. First, teachers would have to learn it! The good news is that it is much simpler than using moveable *Do*. It requires only the willingness to change.

And the good news for parents is that this is not rocket science! The pieces in Book 1, starting with Twinkles, are very simple. Adults can learn them easily if they are shown how to write in the *solfège* syllables above the notes. If parents have trouble matching pitches or singing in tune they may sing along with the recording. The important thing is that they are reading to their child.

Teachers can use *solfège* during every lesson, encouraging parent and student to join in. In my studio I found it helpful to hold a weekly Beginners Class where we sang the pieces in Book 1 together. For further information on how you may want to develop such a class, please refer to my articles, "Structuring a pre-school Suzuki piano class: solutions in my

studio," part I in this newsletter Vol. 14, #2, March/April 2009, and part II in Vol. 14, #4, July/August 2009. (Search Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation to find the newsletter archive.)

-----Karen Hagberg

## ***Ogiwara Sensei's Speech at the Friendship Concert***

***Phoenix, Arizona  
February 18, 2018***

We are so happy to see you all after two years!

These days I am finding that it is becoming more popular for children to engage in various types of lessons. It seems that parents will take their children to lessons in whatever they express interest, no matter what the subject. Also parents are heavily influenced by their surroundings. They are pressured to do too many things and thus make their lives overly busy.

When a child shows interest in something legitimate, and if it originates from the child's own will, I have no problem with that. However, this chosen subject must be taught and nurtured by a method that transforms the interest into some kind of ability.

In many cases, children end up with mediocre skills because parents have spoiled their

children by allowing them to switch from one subject to another according to the child's whim.

Parents, while your children are young, please choose one thing for them and nurture it. By fostering your children until they reach a higher level in whatever you and your children chose, most certainly they will succeed. Moreover, acquired ability at a high level will be used in other future aspects of their lives.

All the children here who study piano with the Suzuki Method can grow up and become respectable human beings having acquired the abilities of effort, patience, concentration, and good manners by continuously listening to good music and daily practice. Please keep practicing without haste, without stopping, and without giving up.

Thank you.



From L to R: Keiko Kawamura Sensei, Gloria Elliott (workshop director), Keiko Ogiwara Sensei, and Ken Matsuda (interpreter) at International Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop, Phoenix, Arizona, February, 2018.

# ***Never Too Old to Learn Something New***

***By Vicki Merley***

Why attend workshops? I already feel really good about my teaching and the progress my students are making, why spend money and time to go to another workshop, and hear the same things?

Workshops can help us see things in a different way, help us get out of our comfortable ruts, help us make a change for the better, and re-dedicate ourselves to really getting it: to really keep trying to spread beautiful sound in the little world of each student and family in our sphere of influence, and then to spread that sound to our neighborhood, our community, our state, our country, our world.

I went to Matsumoto, Japan twice, once alone, and once with a 13-year-old student who played in the 10-Piano Concert there. It was about three weeks each time. Amazing trips! They did these simple little exercises on every piece, down-ups, Twinkles, checking every chair setting, footstool setting, pedal extenders if needed. The teachers demonstrated the sound they wanted the kids to get. And kept asking for THAT sound. Just amazing detail, and amazing results that made tears stream down my face to hear them.

It was like a very very long workshop; I will never forget the sound they produced on each piece. That is why I keep going to these workshops, and listen to the Japanese teachers ask for the most

basic thing: unforced, beautiful sound.

The Japan Sensei again made that long trip, for a five-day workshop in February in Phoenix: master classes for students and teachers, daily question and answer, and a Friendship Recital, for which they meticulously take notes to share in a critique the morning after the recital.

I drove up from Tucson, and several of my students came as well to have lessons and to be in the recital. Another teacher from Tucson also made the trip up there, along with many of her students.

Why make this effort? The Japan teachers believe in us, and keep encouraging us to keep trying. It takes time and money to travel so far, even just for a few days. Both for them and for us, it takes a lot of effort. For me it is so much closer and easier for me to travel to Phoenix, than to go to Japan again.

The teachers seem to focus on the same things, very simple, and very repetitive: Check every finger as it plays on the key, do down-ups to get the best tone, use the body correctly. And above all, listen to your sound! Simple, but profound.

The best thing for me, is to hear them demonstrate the tone they think you should be able to produce. I love to hear them play, and to watch them play, they make it seem so easy. They get such big, beautiful sound. I want that! I still use my own creative ideas; each student and family is so different. But, I use these basics at every lesson, and every time I sit to learn a new piece, incorporate these ideas. What is the important tone, what do I need to bring out, are my fingers working correctly, or do I have tension somewhere in my back, or my hand, preventing me getting the best sound?

I remember hearing that Dr. Suzuki said it is really easy to be a Suzuki teacher, just say the same things over and over to each student for ten years!



Teachers at International Teacher Research Workshop, Phoenix, February 2018. Vicki Merley at back center.

## ***We Can Take the Torment Out of Music Study***

***By Karen Hagberg***

“People say medical school is stressful, but it’s *nothing*, compared with *this!*” reported my good friend, the house physician at the Eastman School two days a week during her residency, after a few weeks on the job. For me, it felt good that an outside, impartial observer—one who knew what education stress was—saw and validated the pressure I had lived under for years as a student in a major U.S. conservatory. Looking back on it, it was truly brutal.

Under this pressure, music students suffer from a variety of emotional disorders, physical injuries, and illnesses brought on by stress. Many students, myself included for a time, made career changes away from music. As an older graduate student I began to pity the new class of freshmen each year, all of whom

were coming from communities in which they were hailed as musical prodigies, most of whom would leave the conservatory feeling like fallen stars. It might have crossed my mind in those days that music education could be more humane, but until I came to Matsumoto I was unable to conceive of how such a system might work.

The first thing I noticed at the Talent Education Institute is that there are no *stars*. There are, of course, students who play better than others. But rather than being *stars* who are at a level the rest of us cannot attain, they are encouraging examples of what we can *all* achieve in a system based on the belief that “talent” can be taught and learned. The teacher trainees who have studied the longest and who are near graduation do not have a superior attitude toward the rest of us. In fact, they are very humble. With Kreisler and Horowitz as our examples, the longer we study the more we are all humbled by greatness. Dr. Suzuki often gives a graduate a lesson based on the recital he or she has just

**...we can *all* achieve in a system based on the belief that “talent” can be taught and learned.**

**One begins to learn that there is time for everything important in life, and that it is never too late for anything.**

played right in the middle of the graduation party. There is thus no separation between those who have “made it” and others who merely aspire. We are all on the road to making more and more beautiful tone and *nobody* ever achieves perfection in a quest like this.

A spirit of cooperation prevails in performance. A young man whose violin graduation is coming up this spring has been practicing a fast passage very slowly and carefully for weeks. I remarked to him that it was sounding better and better lately. He replied, “Well, I want it to be like when Yuriko (another trainee) plays it. She makes it sound so clear and so very beautiful. I won’t be satisfied until it sounds like that.” The students are not notice and will encourage me. This process is instructive, not stressful.

Also, we do not feel rushed. Even at age 90, Dr. Suzuki often tells students he has time to wait for their improvements to happen after months, or even years, of practice. Nobody here gets pushed to graduate before they feel ready to do it. One begins to learn that there is time for everything important in life, and that it is never too late for anything. What a relief!

It is crucial that we, as teachers and parents, give our children not just a music education, but one that is non-stressful as well. What a tragedy to think they may be facing a life of torment with their music, when music is, and should be, such a joyful and wonderful thing. To teach the joy of music successfully, we *must* believe that all can learn to play well. We need to resist seeing some students as “stars,” when they are just the ones who happen to be working harder at a given point in time and who have family situations that allow for this.

fearful of recognizing who currently can execute something better, and where they personally fall in the scheme of things at any given time. It is not defeating to acknowledge one’s own shortcomings if we believe we can overcome them with sincere effort. (Of course, neither he nor Yuriko will really be satisfied until it sounds like Kreisler, and at that point a new goal of excellence will present itself. This is the nature of musical performance.)

The absence of a star system is a major step toward relieving stress. But there are additional factors as well. One of these is Monday Concert, at which most of us play every week. Our reputation as performers (and consequently our self image as musicians) does not depend on one or two big recitals a year. When students have the opportunity to play on a weekly basis, *everyone* experiences both good and bad performances. If I play something poorly, I simply schedule it again next week. If it has improved, lots of people will

We must never rush the students, but also never give up on them. Teachers need to provide frequent performance opportunities and parents should take advantage of every one of these (and possibly create others at home or at school). Teachers and students must have the best possible pianos kept in the best possible condition. Above all, our environment needs to be rich with the sound of wonderful performances. Teachers and parents need this constant enrichment as well as do students. Recording equipment should be the highest quality, but live performance is still preferable. Frequent attendance at concerts is a necessity.

If we take care to provide this nurturing environment for ourselves and for children, we can give them not only a love of music, but the ability to enjoy their own role in the musical world throughout their lives.





*Matsumoto News Republication: From September 1988 through January 1992, Karen Hagberg lived and studied in Matsumoto with Dr. Haruko Kataoka, the co-Founder of the Suzuki Piano Method and the founder of the Suzuki Piano Basics Method. During that time she published a newsletter with nine issues*

*annually that was distributed to Suzuki piano teachers in North America and Europe. In addition to news of upcoming workshops and multi-piano concerts, each issue contained an article intended to share what it was like as a foreigner to live in Japan and to study with Dr. Kataoka and Dr. Suzuki.*

*Nearly twenty years have elapsed since the first issue of Matsumoto News: an entire generation. By popular demand we are re-publishing the articles here. They have been edited from the original, but they remain under copyright and may not be reproduced without written permission from the author.*

# ***Piano Basics Foundation Upcoming Workshops/Events***

**June 11-15, 2018**

**Louisville, Kentucky**

Louisville Suzuki Piano Basics Institute

Contact Bruce Boiney 502-241-5921

[boiney@suzukipiano.com](mailto:boiney@suzukipiano.com)

[www.suzukipiano.org](http://www.suzukipiano.org)

**August 2-6, 2018**

**Louisville, Kentucky**

Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop

With Keiko Ogiwara and Keiko Kawamura

Contact Bruce Boiney 502-241-5921

[boiney@suzukipiano.com](mailto:boiney@suzukipiano.com)

[www.suzukipiano.org](http://www.suzukipiano.org)

**August 9-13, 2018**

**Sacramento, California**

Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop

With Keiko Ogiwara and Keiko Kawamura

Contact Linda Nakagawa, 916-422-2952

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**The events listed above are for the information of Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation members and others. Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation does not endorse, sanction, or sponsor events.**

To add or change items on this list and on the Suzuki Piano Basics website, contact

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**Suzuki Piano Basics Web Site and discussion group:**

**<http://core.ecu.edu/hist/wilburnk/SuzukiPianoBasics>**