

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

*Let's Be Friends
with Mozart!*

By Haruko Kataoka

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Last year, a middle school student from Aichi Prefecture, having been severely bullied by his classmates, took his own life. I prayed that such a tragedy would never happen again, but this year, on this very same date, another middle school boy from Niigata Prefecture took his own life after being bullied.

Bullying must have started as soon as humans came together in groups. Though communal living has its benefits when cooperating together to help each other, the flip side is that group living inevitably results in a hierarchy where the strong bully the weak.

Because God created humans with all types of personalities, there are individuals who bully and those who are bullied. With all the wealth of conveniences and materialism of our present-day world, it is no wonder that the resultant degradation of the soul has pushed bullying to terrifying extremes. However, it does not mean that we should just stand by and watch and say nothing about it.

It is too irresponsible to smugly conclude that it does not involve us because we are just doing fine. Both those directly involved and those who witness such incidents are equally responsible. Both must come together to solve this problem with heartfelt conversation from all concerned and come to the aid of those who are victimized.

I was not being bullied in school, but I have a very unpleasant memory of a time when I was 12 or 13 years old that has weighed heavily on me. Even though looking back now as an adult the incident does not seem so awful, I suffered from the impact of the experience of being alone and not being able to talk to anyone about it.

The preteen to teen years of children are a time when their whole world revolves around school and home. Within a short span of time, they are supposed to enter adulthood where their bright future awaits in a wide, wide world. Instead, many feel they cannot escape their life in school and

home if they find themselves in painful circumstances. Because of the hopelessness and desperation of not being able to escape the emotionally painful circumstances at school and home, children end up acting on their longing to end their own life.

When I was going through my dark time, there happened to be one thing that comforted my soul. Strangely enough, it had to do with practice that I absolutely dreaded and hated. It was piano. When I played Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms or Chopin, their music consoled me. Humans can betray you, but the more I studied and got to know the music of Mozart and Beethoven, they became my friends who comforted my heart and soul and saved me. The more the exposure, the more friendship I felt with them. I realized just how steadfast a friendship they provided and that they would never betray me.

It occurs to me ever so often now how I appreciate the opportunity I was given to practice piano, how it brought me joy. The journey that has brought me to this present day is the proof of the power of the arts. Please, everyone, let us become friends with Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, etc.

When learning a single piece of music (or listening to it) you are engaging with the composer. Influenced by their unique personality, they become our support to lift us up throughout life.

Though children go about unaware, innocently, mindlessly playing the piano, there will come a time in ten to twenty years when they will understand what music has become for them. It is regrettable that those children who took their own lives did not have something that lifted their hearts and supported them. The arts are so very important for human beings. Let us all endeavor to study hard so when hard times are upon us, the arts will be there to rescue us.



A Piano Teacher Teaches How to Play the Piano

By Karen Hagberg

Matsumoto News, vol.1, no.7. May 1989

One of my most glaring failures as a piano teacher involved a child who had a genius-level IQ. She began lessons when she was five years old. By the time she was seven, she was struggling awkwardly in the middle of Book 2, but she was eagerly absorbing the college-level music theory I could not resist teaching her. Her playing had become so labored and unnatural, however, that she quit lessons in frustration after less than two years.

I was trying to teach this child to play by communicating with her superior intellect. This was before I knew that playing piano is a discipline of the body, not of the mind. Kataoka Sensei taught me this.

It is no wonder I had been confused on this issue. As with my brilliant student, I had had an intellectual approach to everything as a child. I did not play with ease, but could memorize long and difficult pieces. As time went on, however, I too became frustrated with my inability to play as well, and as effortlessly, as I could think and reason. I loved music, however, and used my intellect to stay in the field by studying music history, theory, criticism, performance practice, medieval notation, etc., etc., after giving up seriously trying to play. I continued

piano lessons throughout college and graduate school, but my mind, on which I had always relied to accomplish things, never helped me play any better. And, until I began studying with Kataoka Sensei five years ago, none of my teachers were able to help me understand what my problem was. It was easy to believe that I simply had no talent.

Sadly, my intellectual relationship to music could not help students learn to play any more than it could help me.

My principal reason for coming to Japan was to find out how Kataoka Sensei consistently has students who can play so well. I had been impressed with their skill after having seen videos of their performances, but I could not imagine, before coming here and watching Sensei teach week after week, *how* a teacher could produce such results.

The answer is quite simple, really. Kataoka Sensei teaches ***nothing but*** how to play the piano. She never makes the mistake of believing that intellectual knowledge can contribute to what is ultimately a sensuous, physical skill. In other words, in lessons she does not waste any time at all on information I spent years learning, and which I found interesting enough, but which did not help me play.

To have students who play well, one must teach only how to play.

• Be a Piano Teacher, Not a Music History Teacher

In order to teach Bach, for example, we could present students with endless facts about the man himself or

his music: that he had so many children; that he wrote keyboard pieces for some of them; that he had only pre-piano musical instruments; that he epitomized and summarized the Baroque in northern Europe; that he wrote so many pieces of various types, both sacred and secular; that he never traveled outside of Germany, etc. But more important than all these facts is that Bach is a **sound** produced on the piano by using one's body a certain way.

Kataoka Sensei clearly demonstrates the basic elements of this sound. Of course, any good teacher must have the ability to demonstrate consistently and well. This demonstration, coupled with the instruction, "Play it like this, because this is Bach," becomes a clear and direct explanation of **how** to play. This is an explanation which may seem overly simplistic and even rigid to adults who have become locked into intellectual thought processes, but it is the **only** explanation that is clear to young children and the **only** explanation that can teach a student of any age **how** to play.

This is how a baby learns English. We do not even have to tell the baby to say it like this because this is English; we simply speak English.

- ***Be a Piano Teacher, Not a Piano Literature Teacher***

There is an endless amount of piano literature to play and to learn about. Traditional teachers fill their studios

with great stacks of music and typically spend time choosing new pieces for each individual student during lessons, talking about the music, playing portions of it, inviting students to choose pieces that appeal to them. It is even popular among some Suzuki teachers to provide a menu of supplementary material so that students can have variety, or so they can be exposed to different styles of music at each level of ability.

Piano literature, however, is above all, **sound**. One does not really know it by memorizing lists of composers' works or by being able verbally to describe different styles. Nor does one learn it by hearing the teacher read through it, or by reading through it by oneself. The only way to achieve the goal of playing the literature well is to hear live and recorded performances by the greatest artists. Kataoka Sensei always teaches parents and students to listen at home to good recordings and to attend fine concerts. She does not spend time discussing music literature at lessons.

One distinct advantage of the Suzuki Method is its set repertoire that has been carefully graded to raise the student's ability in the fastest, most efficient way. Teaching the same pieces to many different students requires that the teacher constantly research the Basics of how to play it and how to teach playing it. In this way, not only are the students good to begin with, but they get better and better as the teacher understands the repertoire more profoundly. A teacher whose assignments are spread thinly around the entire piano literature cannot possibly understand the music as well as the teacher who assigns the same repertoire to everyone.

Children are motivated by playing music really well and by playing what everyone else around them has played or will play. Of course, when ability has developed, students can play anything they want to play. There is a lifetime in which to tackle the vast literature. A teacher who is teaching **how** to play can comfortably use one well-chosen repertoire for everyone and can teach students to play at a very high level.

- ***Be a Piano Teacher, Not a Performance Practice Teacher***

The longer one studies music on the conservatory level, the more one learns about performance practices in given styles of music. At first exposure to such information, people usually believe there is only one correct way to perform a piece authentically. But after further study, it becomes clear that even “experts” disagree on major questions of performance practice. Ornamentation, phrasing, tempo, dynamics—everything—can be open to question regarding authenticity. And if one is old enough, one lives to see that preferred performance practices come and go with new generations of professors.

Kataoka Sensei teaches one way to play the pieces in the Suzuki repertoire. This one way follows the Basics of time, rhythm, melody and note values. Alternative possibilities are not considered.

In the matter of ornamentation, for example, she chooses a way of execution that is easy to explain and that sounds graceful. Students learn how to play one particular ornament perfectly, naturally, easily, and beautifully. This skill is the first one needs before being able to play other versions.

Or in the matter of dynamics: Kataoka Sensei teaches **how** to play loud and soft by demonstrating a consistent interpretation of dynamics in every piece and by showing how to use the

body to produce loud and soft sounds. Students cannot choose alternative interpretations of dynamics until they have been taught actually **how** to play loud and soft.

As a child, I remember that the result of my teacher’s presenting alternative interpretations of ornaments or dynamics or phrasing, or anything else, was to bring me to the conclusion that it did not really matter how I played anything. But a student must learn to execute one thing well before being able to execute another thing well.

- ***Be a Piano Teacher, Not a Music Editing Teacher***

I once heard Kataoka Sensei tell a student to follow every fingering printed in the music, even if it were a misprint. “Whatever could she mean?” I wondered.

Just as in the matter of ornamentation, the experts, the music editors, disagree on fingerings. There is an infinite number of possible combinations of fingerings for any given piece. But if a student spends **no time at all** changing fingerings while learning a piece, hours of time considering alternative possibilities are saved. Learning a piece of music is training the body to move in a certain way. During the learning process, if we confuse the body by moving now this way and now that way, we impede the learning—it takes longer—**thinking** about the notes begins to take precedence over feeling them, truly learning them.

Again, as a child reacting to my teacher’s discussions about possible alternative fingerings, I concluded that it did not really matter which fingers I used. Consequently, consistent fingering was not part of my practice and did not help me learn new pieces. On the contrary, inconsistent fingering slowed me down a lot. Piano students need not concern themselves with questions of editing as they are learning **how** to play.

Note: The importance of the teacher and student both working from exactly the same edition should be apparent.

• ***Be a Piano Teacher, Not a Music Theory Teacher***

In America, much value is placed on knowing music theory. The MTNA tests knowledge of theory from simple to complex as students cycle through their evaluation system. Typically, students learn the circle of fifths, time signatures, intervals, chords, harmony, scales, and a multitude of musical terms. All of these things are useful if you want to talk about music, write about music, or take tests, but are of no use at all if you want to **play** music.

A cadence is a sound, not a definition of certain chords moving in certain inversions. A student must hear it to know it and to play it.

“Allegretto” is a way of moving, a tempo, a lightness of sound, not simply an Italian word, the diminutive of “Allegro.” To learn to play it, a student needs demonstrations of “Allegretto.”

6/8 time is a rhythm, a sound. Would being able to call it “compound duple time” help anyone play it? There is one natural way that a rhythm can be played. Kataoka Sensei says we do not **make** a rhythm, we **find** it. It is in the nature of every piece. It exists on its own. To understand this, we need to hear natural rhythm, such as may be heard in great performances or in the

demonstration of a skilled teacher who has carefully researched the question of rhythm (or in truly natural rhythms, like heartbeats or breathing).

Because music theory is an intellectual discipline, there is no need to teach it at an early age. Even the best American conservatories begin at the beginning in first-year theory classes. There is plenty of time to learn theory after learning how to play.

• ***Be a Piano Teacher, Not a Form and Analysis Teacher***

Analyzing pieces of music can be an intellectual fascination. I always enjoyed doing it. I even taught my youngest students about ABA form in the very earliest pieces. But this did not help them play the pieces. I used to think that knowledge of musical form would help me really to understand and to memorize long pieces, but it does not. On the contrary, it causes words like “bridge passage” and “development section” and “coda” to pop into my mind when I should be concentrating on the sounds I am producing.

Kataoka Sensei refers to a section of music by playing the first note or two and then saying, “Now play this part.” A section of a piece is a sound. Students may play without breaks in concentration if words do not interfere with the continuous flow of this sound. One cannot play securely with the intellect. The smallest intrusions of intellect, in fact, create breaks in concentration which inevitably cause problems in performance.

Kataoka Sensei recently told me that she notices a trend in the students of many Suzuki teachers. The students play extremely well in the beginning but become less proficient as their level advances. I asked, “why do you think this happens?” She answered it’s because after the beginning lessons, the teachers, in an attempt to keep lessons ‘interesting’ stop teaching the basics.” So I asked, What do they teach do you

suppose?” And she said, “Oh maybe music, or something like that.”

The central reason for Kataoka Sensei’s success with students is that she never stops teaching only the Basics of how to play the piano. All her lessons are virtually the same—at all levels. In the midst of a concerto, she will stop a student to explain that in 3/4 time one must count 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Or in the Chopin *Scherzo* she will talk about keeping balance when playing a note with the thumb.

Why do students remain interested and motivated while Sensei repeats herself week after week, month after month, year after year? It is because she has taught them to play lots of difficult music very well; they can learn it quickly, and it feels effortless. This is all the motivation necessary—probably the best motivation there could be.

We are all free to decide what kind of teacher we want to be. Some people, on reading this, may decide they prefer being music teachers. But a teacher whose students *all* play well is a piano teacher; because a piano teacher teaches how to play the piano.

[Author’s note: If, after reading the above, you wish you knew more about how to teach children how to play the piano, the only way I know is to attend workshops given by the teachers from Japan who studied with Kataoka Sensei from childhood and who now devote themselves to preserving her unique Suzuki Piano Basics Method. See [Upcoming Events](#) for next scheduled workshops.]



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.




Are you caught in a **studio rut**?

Are you feeling tension creeping into your own shoulders and then seeing your students mirror it?

Are your students practicing a lot, but **lacking the incredible tone** you know they could achieve?

Does the thought of asking for **more Twinkle repetitions** put you in burnout mode?

If you answered YES to any of these questions,

it's time to attend a workshop! 

If you have ever attended a workshop featuring Senseis Ogiwara and Kawamura from Japan, you know how such an event can spark your own enthusiasm, transform your own playing, and jump-start even your most challenging student.

Since 2016, the SPBF has been offering scholarships to teachers wishing to attend workshops and other events featuring Senseis Ogiwara and Kawamura.

"I didn't know about this!" you say.

Well, consider this your personal invitation to apply for a scholarship for the next round of workshops in the United States or a Piano Basics event in Japan. **PLAN NOW!** Prioritize it in your studio financial planning and broadcast the benefits to your students.

Who is eligible for a scholarship?

- Any teacher member of the Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation may submit an application.
- This Scholarship is designed especially for teachers who are in their initial stages of teaching Piano Basics, or who have been teaching Piano Basics only a few years. **If you are a teacher trainer, please let your trainees know about this!**
- If you are already a well-established Piano Basics teacher who has previously attended Research Workshops in the States, you may apply to attend an event held in Japan, such as a 10-Piano Concert or other Japanese Piano Basics event.



How much money will be awarded?

- The amount of money awarded per year will depend upon donations received by the Scholarship Fund that year.
- The highest award will be **full tuition** to the event requested. Multiple full scholarships may be given. Partial scholarships may also be given, based on need and the amount of money that remains in Scholarship Fund.
- Scholarship benefits cannot cover travel expenses, due to legal restrictions.

Where can I apply?

- Scholarship Application forms and guidelines are posted on the current Piano Basics website:
<http://core.ecu.edu/hist/wilburnk/SuzukiPianoBasics/>
Click on the tab marked "Scholarships"

When is the deadline?

- Great news: there is no longer a deadline! Scholarship funds are available for the current year, but **ONLY** until the annual amount budgeted has been depleted. First come, first served. After that time, applications will be considered for workshops the following year.

How can I give to the Scholarship Fund?

- If you would like to make a donation, simply add it to your SPBF renewal, or mail your gift to:
Piano Basics Foundation, 242 River Acres Dr., Sacramento, CA 95831.

Please notate "Scholarship" in the memo portion of your check.

Your donation, no matter how small, fosters community and helps the world of Piano Basics grow ever better. Without your gifts, SPBF will not be able to grant this great opportunity. Thank you again for your continued generosity.

For all questions pertaining to scholarships, or if you would like to join the Scholarship Committee, please contact Hannah Hall, Chair:
correctthecause@gmail.com or 502-415-5122.

Piano Basics Foundation Upcoming Workshops/Events

February 14-18, 2019

Orange County, California

Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop
With Keiko Ogiwara and Keiko Kawamura
Contact Rae Kate Shen, 909-794-9461
raekshen@ymail.com

April 28, 2019

Matsumoto, Japan 10-Piano Concert

Leave April 11; Return April 29
Contact Karen Hagberg, 585-978-0600
khagberg1943@gmail.com

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
Karen Hagberg (khagberg1943@gmail.com, 585-978-0600).

Suzuki Piano Basics Web Site and discussion group:

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