

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*

The First Experience Is the Most Important in Everything!

By Haruko Kataoka

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter
Vol. 6 No. 4, September 25, 1996
Translated by Chisa Aoki and
Teri Paradero
Edited by Karen Hagberg

Piano Basics Foundation News

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Next Deadline: October 20, 2016

In 1955, I moved to Matsumoto and observed Dr. Suzuki's violin lessons every day for the first year. Neither the very young beginners nor the advanced students looked at the score while playing the violin. This seemed very mysterious to me.

I started piano lessons when I was six years old. At lessons, the score was always placed on the music stand of the piano and the teacher said, "Always keep your eyes on the score." Several lessons afterwards, "Now that you can play straight through the piece, memorize it for the next lesson." I remember trying very hard to memorize pieces.

Since I was six years old, the majority of the lesson time was spent looking at the score while playing the piano. So I had many questions in my mind. I wondered if playing violin is an easy task since violinists manage to play without a score; I wondered how you could teach a young child only by having them listen to the recording, without having them look at the score at all.

I began to wonder if this method could be applied to piano. I had my doubts, because

in piano we use both hands to play not only a single melody but also an accompaniment. Still, I gave it a try. The Suzuki Method is so natural, but in the beginning I found it hard to believe that piano students could play without utilizing the score.

Surprisingly, I came to realize that students can learn a piece so much easier if they listen to the recording a lot before playing it instead of looking at the score. This is true for a piece from Book 1 as well as for a Mozart Sonata. Furthermore, students are able to play so much more musically.

This method of using your ears to listen to the sound first and then to be able to reproduce that sound was unthinkable to me back then. It is because I was taught, from the time I began piano lessons, to use my eyes and to make sound based on what I saw in the score.

Children who begin to play the piano by listening to sound with their ears first and then reproducing the sound do not have the task of memorizing because by the time they are able to play a piece from beginning to end they have already memorized the piece.

For 40 years since 1955, every student that I have taught can do this. Many years ago, I had a student who was asked to accompany at a chorus concert for an elementary school graduation ceremony. Because it was a suite of four or five songs, it was very long. On the day of the concert, the music teacher told her that there would be a page-turner. When she responded that it would not be necessary, the teacher

pleaded, “Hey, there’s always a chance you’d forget something. Please look at the score while you’re playing.” My student complained to me about it. She said, “Sensei, how is it possible that I would forget?”

When this music teacher started studying music, he probably started the same way I did. Looking at the score and then producing the sound was ingrained in him. When children initially begin with a good method of study, they will demonstrate wonderful ability.

Lately, the eventual farsightedness of aging has caught up with me. So when I look at a score and make an error in reading because of my sight, I play the wrong note(s) based on what my eyes see, possibly a note that could not exist in music theory. I experience the woe of being unable to lose the habit of playing what I see with my eyes.

Still to this day when I play a piece, I remember the pang of panic that I used to experience a long time ago – that nagging fear while playing the piano that if I don't have the score in front of me I would forget something.

The initial first experience is of utmost importance. When you learn a natural, proper, correct method from the beginning, what you have mastered will be of great use throughout your life. On the other hand, if you begin with less than the optimal way, that ingrained skill will haunt you throughout life as well.

To be continued...

What Learning the Basics can Accomplish

*Speech delivered at the
International Suzuki Piano Basics 10-Piano Concert
Sacramento, California, August 16, 2014*

By Keiko Ogiwara

*Translated by
Haruko Sakakibara
Edited by Karen Hagberg*

We are so happy to see so many of you here today. The big applause for each piece was really encouraging. Thank you!

Students in Suzuki Piano Basics have accumulated the important basics from the very beginning of their learning. These include learning to hold a correct posture, playing above the keyboard, striving to produce beautiful sound with their ears, and listening to the model performance recording at home.

Because they all learn the same principles wherever they are, playing with ten pianos in unison becomes possible even in an international concert like this.

These students gathered here in Sacramento to begin daily rehearsals for this 10-Piano Concert on July 30th. During two weeks of group lessons, they had to pay attention to important elements such as tempo, dynamics and musical expression, and were asked to repeat hundreds or thousands of repetitions of small parts at home. It was important to do this in order physically to acquire performance skills. It was a big challenge for each one of them.



Keiko Ogiwara, Jillian Zuck, Keiko Nozawa, Jonathan Zuck, Keiko Kawamura at post-concert banquet. Photo by Sally Zuck.

However, now, on this stage, they must be all experiencing a great sense of accomplishment. This joy is only theirs because they are the ones who went through it. The mutual learning process with the piano in a group of ten players also developed valuable memories of friendship.

Dr. Shinichi Suzuki, who was the creator of Suzuki Talent Education, was nurturing human beings through the study of music. He left such a wonderful legacy for us so that we can continue, through the experience of learning music, to bring attention to the universal importance of concentration, patience, and effort.

This ninth 10-Piano Concert in Sacramento was a great success because of the dedicated daily teachings of Suzuki Piano Basics teachers both locally and out-of-state, with the help of loving parents who provided their unconditional support, and more than anything, the great contribution of each student's amazing effort. I would like to

express my heart-felt appreciation for all of you. Thank you so much.

(Keiko Ogiwara Sensei then complimented all the students individually on behalf of all three teachers from Japan who came to direct the rehearsals: herself, Keiko Kawamura Sensei, and Keiko Nozawa Sensei.)

International Suzuki Piano Basics 10-Piano Concert

Sacramento Community Center Theater

August 14, 2016



Logistics meeting before dress rehearsal. Photo by Shirlee Rickman.



Fur Elise performers. Left to right: BoiAn Nguyen-Sanh, Kia Aliakbar, Yana Kitazawa, Alexandra Gini, Richard Cordero-Melo, Matt Li, Janice Leung, Vivian Stacy, Claire Blanford, Hajime Uchikawa. Photo by Shirlee Rickman.



Front Row: Sachi Ohata, Parker Van Ostrand, Shiho Misawa. Top Row: Keiko Ogiwara, Yuna Takano, Keiko Kawamura, Natsuki Nishiyama, Yana Kitazawa, Kira Shimizu, Keiko Nozawa, Daisuke Nozawa, Hajime Uchikawa at post-concert banquet. Photo by Sally Zuck.



Kelly Domashinski and Ann Taylor backstage.
Photo by Margaret Domashinski



*Bowers getting to know each other backstage during rehearsals.
left to right: Miles Clunie, Julia Conner, Charlotte Hwang.
Photo by Shirlee Rickman.*



Community Center Theater marquee. Photo by Shirlee Rickman.



Concert co-host, Bruce Anderson interviewing Kate Schuette during the concert.



Stage ready for International Suzuki Piano Basics 10-Piano Concert, Sacramento Community Center, August 14, 2016. Photo by Barbara Johannes.



Final remarks by Keiko Ogiwara with interpreter Haruko Sakakibara.



Final Bow at the International Suzuki Piano Basics 10-Piano Concert, Sacramento Community Center, August 14, 2016. Photo by Barbara Johannes.

How to Hit a Hammer

by Kia Aliakbar, age 19

Student of Shirlee Rickman,
Fair Oaks, California

At first thought, it sounds rather odd to tell a student on his first day of piano lessons not to hit the piano keys (as if every person's initial urge upon sitting at a piano for the first time is to hit it). I found it strange when my piano teacher of 15 years, Ms. Shirlee Rickman, uttered those words. For all I knew the piano had done nothing to me. On the contrary, it stood there, wood shining, inviting me to take a seat.

Suzuki Piano Basics, as devised and taught by Dr. Haruko Kataoka, emphasizes that students hold their hands above the keyboard, and rather than press directly down on the keys, move their fingers in a very natural, tensionless, grasping motion. Dr. Kataoka first devised the Suzuki Piano Basics by closely studying the mechanics of famous pianists such as Horowitz and Rubinstein. It became apparent to her that the clear and smoothly controlled sound emerging from their pianos was in large part due to the way that they moved their fingers. They used the same grasping motion taught in the Russian school of piano. But why is this grasping, moving motion of the fingers so effective?

The piano is commonly thought of as a percussion instrument, where the sound is produced by a hammer that hits a string whenever a key is played. But if you take a look inside a grand piano it is easy to see that the strings of the piano are arranged in a way that is reminiscent of a harp. It

actually is a harp. However, rather than plucking the strings of the harp to make them vibrate, a piano strikes the string with a hammer. The question that the Suzuki Piano Basics posed was: What does a piano sound like if you use your fingers as if you were playing a harp? The answer was a resounding (pun intended) success. Dr. Kataoka and her students were lauded for the amazing sound they produced using this method of grasping the piano keys. Fifteen years later I am sitting behind a concert grand piano (that costs five times as much as my car) in the Sacramento Community Center Theater listening to Keiko Kawamura Sensei telling me, and the nine other pianists on stage playing the same piece, to look up at our sound. My gaze lifted from my moving fingers and began searching for this sound in the vast ceiling above. Two days later after performing in my 7th Suzuki International 10-Piano Concert, Ms. Rickman's warning finally made sense. Searching for my sound in the vastness of the concert hall made me realize that playing the piano is not a matter of pushing the sound out of the piano. Nor is it even a matter of pulling the sound out. In that moment I understood that, more than anything, playing the piano is about the relationship between the piano and the person playing it; that the job of the pianist is not to dictate what sound comes out of the piano but to communicate with the piano and convince it to produce the desired sound.

The “mother-tongue approach” of the Suzuki Method teaches students to listen for the sound they want to come out of the instrument while the Suzuki Piano Basics technique of fluidly moving the fingers is the best way to explain to and convince the piano to produce that sound. So yes, no matter how you play the piano you are always inevitably hitting the strings with a hammer. But in human relationships, things usually don’t go right if you start a conversation by hitting someone. Our relationship to the piano is the same. Therefore, the best way to “hit” a hammer, is not with flat force, seeking only to get through a piece. Rather, it is with the measured and graceful movement of a finger, asking the piano to take you on a musical journey.

I’m sure the audience would like that too.



Kia Aliakabar, Photo by Shirlee Rickman.

Opportunities are Very Rare

By Linda Nakagawa

August 14, 2016 was the date of the 9th Suzuki Piano Basics international 10-Piano Concert held in Sacramento, California. Students and teachers worked hard to make this the most successful concert. Only with the help given by the teachers from Matsumoto, Keiko Ogiwara, Keiko Nozawa and Keiko Kawamura, was the mission accomplished.

Many ask why we choose to do a concert like this. My answer always is, “for the sake of the children.” The piano is a solo instrument and unless one accompanies singers or other instruments, or plays in chamber music or with an orchestra, it is rare that piano students be given the opportunity to have a group experience, let alone play in unison with nine other pianists. When students first get together, they are

most concerned about their own performance. However, as they rehearse with one another and work together practicing becomes a work of art from the heart.

Children from pre-school to young adult are given the opportunity to share in this rare experience. The students, parents and teachers make a commitment. Everyone makes a promise to themselves to try their very best. The daily lives of family and friends become interrupted and one learns to make sacrifices for the good of the 10-Piano Concert. Students realize that they are not the center of attention. And yet they learn they are a very important piece being part of a group. Eventually they realize it is a big responsibility and this is how they learn to take on the responsibility.

We teachers must also take on a responsibility. We have a responsibility to our students. We must try harder to attend workshops with the teachers from Matsumoto. It is fine to study locally with each other within the United States, but believe me, it is not the same. Many years ago a teacher from North America, who graduated from Matsumoto told me that it was no longer necessary to continue to study with Dr. Kataoka and that I should study with the teachers here in the North America. Thank goodness I have a stubborn streak and did not take the advice. Kataoka Sensei is no longer with us but the teachers she taught to carry on her legacy still are. There is much more to learn from them!

I have seen the strengths and weaknesses of my own students who participated in workshops and 10-Piano Concerts and hopefully learned from them. Hopefully these experiences will help me to become a better teacher. In the past years, I have observed many groups of students

rehearsing for the 10-Piano Concerts. Their souls are ignited and their passion is revealed when they allow their hearts to open. Yes, sometimes there are tears, anger and frustration. But there is always joy and exuberance too!

Opportunities are rare. Don't let them pass you by.



Rehearsal on stage. Photo by Shirlee

Piano Basics Foundation Upcoming Workshops/Events

February 2-6, 2017

Louisville, Kentucky

Suzuki Piano Basics Workshops
with Keiko Kawamura and Keiko Ogiwara
Contact Bruce Boiney 502-241-5921
boiney@suzukipiano.com

April 30, 2017

Matsumoto, Japan

Suzuki Piano Basics International 10-Piano Concert
Contact Karen Hagberg, 585-978-0600
kh@hagbergsuzuki.com

Deadlines: For teachers without students: 11/15/16

February 9-13, 2017

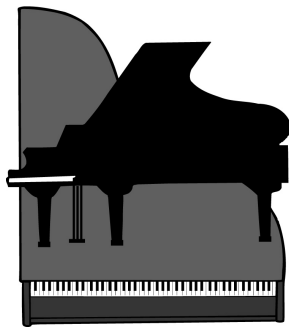
Orange County, California

Suzuki Piano Basics Workshops
with Keiko Kawamura and Keiko Ogiwara
Contact: Mei Ihara 714-997-8692
mihara14@att.net

August 4-8, 2017

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Suzuki Piano Basics International Teacher Training Workshop
with Keiko Kawamura and Keiko Ogiwara
Contact in Philadelphia: Janet Kaido 267-251-0429
janet@alumni.curtis.edu



August 11-15, 2017

Sacramento, California

Suzuki Piano Basics International Teacher Training Workshop
with Keiko Kawamura and Keiko Ogiwara
Contact in Sacramento: Linda Nakagawa 916-422-2952
g.nakagawa@comcast.net

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 (kh@hagbergsuzuki.com, 585-978-0600).

Suzuki Piano Basics Web Site and discussion group:

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