

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 Ability to Pay Attention

**By Haruko Kataoka**

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter  
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Translated by Chisa Aoki and Teri Paradero  
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During a piano lesson, there are things we cannot play. We need practice to be able to play them. So have you ever thought about what kind of practice is necessary?

At the lesson, the teacher may say, "You practiced this well," or "This place needs more practice," or "Please practice this part before next lesson." The student then replies with a cheerful, "OK."

However, there are different kinds of practice. Practice can be generally divided into good practice and bad practice. With good practice, we must specifically determine what section needs work and how to fix it. Then, we must practice with concentration and meticulous attention while listening. We must be able to differentiate between musical sound and noise, all the while being careful that the body is not unnatural so that we achieve good body balance and control, taking the time necessary to do repetitions with utmost effort. *This* is good practice. Practicing like this every day enables us to play those difficult spots.

I am convinced that we can choose between thinking we can do something and realizing that we cannot. The issue is the mindset with which we approach a task. Those who are aware that we cannot do something, for

example, can practice understanding that we must focus with attention to every aspect of the task at hand. Because we focus with attention every day, the very ability to focus with attention is being developed.

On the other hand, people who believe they can already do something approach a task with total abandon. So even if they spend the same amount of time practicing, their careless playing only results in developing the ability to play recklessly.

We may take the example of the ubiquitous *do sol mi sol* accompaniment of the left hand. This does not apply to left-handed people as much, but it is very difficult for those of us who are right-handed. At first glance, *do sol mi sol* seems easy. Most people who play the piano think they can play *do sol mi sol*. It is possible that they have no doubt about it.

Over the course of time, while researching how to produce musical sound while simultaneously maintaining a natural state of the body and using the hand in a natural way, I discovered how to play *do sol me sol* with beautiful sound without becoming unnatural.

Specifically, the very important first note, *do*, the sound that plays the beat, is played with the fifth finger. Because the fifth finger is weak, we tend to make the finger stiff and therefore be unable to produce the kind of sound we intend to make. Then the next problem is with the *sol* that should be played lightly twice. Because we are using our thumb for this note, if we are not careful we end up pushing the key or forcibly hitting it. It is a difficult problem to use the five fingers of the not-so-dexterous left hand to play *do sol me sol* with control, being able to ride the rhythm naturally (the task of the left hand is to provide natural rhythm).

I feel that I am still not able truly to do it myself. Whether I am playing with students during lessons or practicing by myself, I devote the utmost care and attention when playing *do sol mi sol*. If, each and every day of the 365 days of the year, we take the utmost care and attention, we will unexpectedly one day be able to do it well.

That is why the goal of practicing is not that we are able to play *do sol mi sol*. Instead, it is the nurturing of the ability to pay attention that results in being able to play it.

I am not a master performer but a master teacher, so I would not know exactly how *virtuosi* do it. However, I have a feeling that for them it is not about whether they can do it or not. Their focus of concentration comes from their entire being, performing with musical sound that comes from paying attention. Their performance of music is the result of absolute and complete attention to producing musical sound.

Bad practice is unequivocally the complete opposite of good practice. Without paying attention and merely making any sort of careless sound at the piano, is the worst kind of practice. If the teacher does not demonstrate where attention is needed, the poor student will end up putting a lot of effort doing bad practice. This is tragic.

I had heard that Matisse, the world-famous painter, lamented as he was dying that only recently had he been satisfied with drawing a single line and now it was time for him to die. No matter the field, great artists always approach their work with the mindset that they cannot do what they are trying to do; and then, they produce incredibly wonderful results.



Teachers at Piano Basics Workshop, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 2017.  
Photo by Suzanne Lichtenstein.

# ***The Purpose of Talent Education***

***Speech by Ogiwara Sensei delivered at  
Philadelphia and Sacramento workshops, August 2017  
Translated by Chisa Aoki, Teri Paradero and Haruko Sakakibara***

Dr. Shinichi Suzuki defined the purpose of Talent Education in Matsumoto this way, “To teach music is not my primary purpose. I want to nurture the growth of human beings.”

There may be some people who believe that children’s talents will naturally grow even if they are left alone. This is too optimistic. It is as if we are waiting for crops for years without planting any seeds. If we want crops, we need to exert the effort of planting and of creating a good environment for growth.

As Dr. Suzuki stated, Suzuki Method teachers are teaching in the hope of nurturing their students to become capable human beings through music. Children love to perform on stage but do not like daily practice. They may be reluctant to come to the piano, or their practice may end in a very short time.

However, such students will have a chance to change when they experience the joy of a good performance after much timeless effort and hours of practice. Moving fingers while keeping the body natural is not easy, but with repetition they are able to accomplish their goals. In this way children learn the value and meaning of exerting effort.



Ogiwara Sensei with Suzanne Lichtenstein’s student, Ittai L. Philadelphia workshop. August 2017.  
Photo by Suzanne Lichtenstein.

Nowadays, such effort is scientifically defined as *noncognitive skill*,\* the major ability that meets challenges throughout life with the power to strive. If this noncognitive ability is nurtured during childhood, it exerts great influence on future lives.

Dr. Suzuki said that diligence and effort on the part of parents will create their child’s destiny by instilling the important values that determine happiness.

Let us believe in another famous saying Dr. Suzuki left for us: “Any child can develop positively. It solely depends on how we raise them.”

*“Noncognitive skills is being studied by educators both in Japan and here in the U.S. It may be defined as skill acquired in childhood that influences adult outcomes. Those fortunate enough to have acquired such skill are prepared for the success in life. It strikes me that noncognitive skill is what we Suzuki Piano Basics teachers nurture in our students.*

Coincidentally, I am in the process of reading a book called *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* by Angela Duckworth. What the author calls “grit” in her book is, in effect, *noncognitive skill*, the ability to sustain interest in, and effort toward, long-term goals. She and her colleagues have researched the correlation between *noncognitive skill* and cognitive performance, *i.e.* academic achievement.

After reading the book, a parent in my studio texted: “I love this book...thanks for recommending. It changes the way you perceive things.”

It amazes me that Kataoka Sensei, decades ago, understood what research on *noncognitive skill* has now proven, as evidenced in her article in this issue about good practice that must be done with utmost attention and effort. I urge everyone to study this subject. It will help teachers and parents appreciate what we endeavor to nurture in our children and the impact it will have on their life journey as human beings.

Teri Paradero

## ***Extended Scholarship Application Date Aids Early Planners***

As we start off a new school year and a fresh semester of lessons, we teachers begin planning our budgets and schedules for 2018 Research workshops and 10-Piano events. The SPBF Scholarship Committee has **EXTENDED THE SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION DEADLINE!** All applications are due **NOVEMBER 30th, 2017**, for consideration of any 2018 event featuring Senseis Ogiwara and Kawamura.

Teachers who are new to Suzuki Piano Basics (within the last five years), traditional teachers, or others who have never experienced a Research Workshop are urged to apply along with “old-timers.” **Requirement:** you must be a current member of SPBF. If you are not yet a member, you may submit your membership request and annual \$40.00 dues at the time you apply for a scholarship.

**SPBF MEMBERSHIP** applications and dues should be sent to:  
**Linda Nakagawa, 242 River Acres Drive, Sacramento, CA 95831**

**SCHOLARSHIP** applications should be mailed or e-mailed to:  
**Hannah Hall, 10105 Merioneth Drive, Louisville, KY 40299**  
**correctthecause@gmail.com**

You do not have to know the exact dates of the event you wish to attend, as many of them may not yet be scheduled. If a scholarship winner becomes unable to attend the expected event, the monies will be left in the Scholarship fund or provided to another applicant.

Application form and guidelines may be downloaded from the Piano Basics website:  
<http://core.ecu.edu/hist/wilburnk/SuzukiPianoBasics/#S> . Click Scholarships on the Home Page. You may also e-mail a request to Hannah Hallt at [correctthecause@gmail.com](mailto:correctthecause@gmail.com). Hannah Hall, Chair, Scholarship Committee.

# ***On Reading Music***

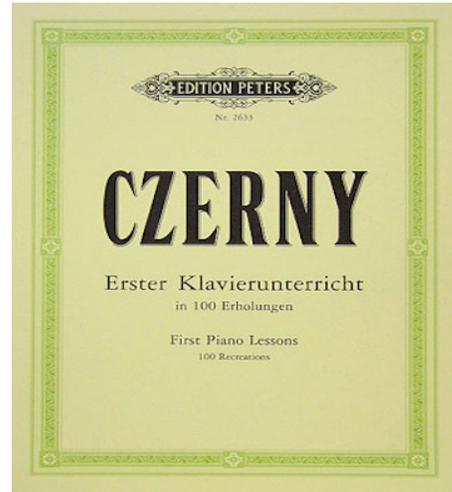
***By Karen Hagberg***

***Original version published in Matsumoto News, Volume 1, no. 2***

For some time now, I have noticed a general confusion whenever Kataoka-Sensei talks about the subject of teaching reading. What she means by reading music and what most of us in North America understand to be reading music do not appear, at first, to be the same thing at all.

We have a concept that there are (besides improvisation) two types of piano playing. The first is where we learn a piece by practicing it for a long time, hopefully ending up with performance quality. The second type of playing is with music in front of us, playing a piece we may never have played, or heard, before. We refer to this second type of playing as “sight reading.” We assume that the quality of the practiced music will be higher, but we value the ability to play any piece at sight.

Kataoka-Sensei, on the other hand, seems to define reading as the ability faithfully to reproduce *everything* that is written or implied: to play in good rhythm with strong downbeats and lighter upbeats; to play longer notes with more weight than shorter ones; To hold notes for their full value; to play legato perfectly, with a smooth, singing line with no accents and no overlapping; to play quiet endings; to follow the dynamics, fingerings and phrasings faithfully.



When students fail to do one or more of these things in a piece long since memorized, she often tells them that they cannot read music.

In this latter case, we are inclined to say that the person cannot *play* well, despite the fact that the person may have sounded all the notes printed on the page. Kataoka-Sensei, on the other hand, insists that the result of reading is *sound*, and that being unable to execute a given musical direction, or to follow the Basics of music as they manifest themselves in singing, means, in essence, that you cannot read it. Reading, without the ability to execute what is there, is virtually worthless, except maybe for passing a theory test.

We must agree that being able to reproduce the various musical directions on a page of music is of prime importance; and, in that sense, that good reading is dependent on good technique. Without technique, a person cannot execute everything that appears in music.

For example, we have been taught, intellectually, that 2/4 time consists of a strong downbeat followed by an upbeat, the preparation for the next downbeat. But if

we have not learned to make downbeats and upbeats sound different from one another (like inhales and exhales, as Kataoka-Sensei says) our playing will sound heavy and tedious and without a sense of good rhythm, a sense of life, of nature. Whenever I record my own performance, I hear the difference between my felt sense of rhythm and how much rhythm I am actually able to put into my sound. Kataoka-Sensei has said that when tape recorders first became popular and she heard herself play on tape she thought the machine was broken. Most of us were not trained to hear how we really sound while we are playing. Playing *forte* and *piano* is also a physical technique. Of course, we learn what those words mean, but do we have the technique actually to play loud and soft, or do we just like to think we are making this distinction because we can see what the music is telling us to do? In recordings of myself, I hear that I have great difficulty playing loud and soft.

All musical symbols, including note values, phrasings, fingerings, articulations, tempo indications, and time signatures can be perceived intellectually or they can be actually executed: transformed into the sound the composer asks for. But without technique, this transformation does not take place.

Technique is the Basic that must be taught before effective reading can happen. Then, symbols on the page must be coordinated with techniques already learned. Once this begins to

happen, the ability to “sight read” develops naturally.

Kataoka-Sensei’s students can all read music extremely well. People wonder how she teaches reading. The short answer is that she teaches technique first, carefully and thoroughly in Book 1, so that students are able to understand *and faithfully to reproduce* what they see in a score when they begin to look at printed music (at the beginning of Book 2).

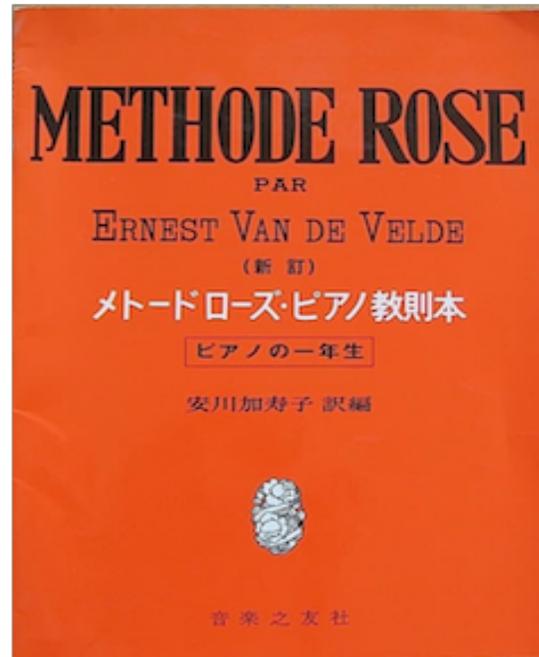
Students in her studio are never asked to “sight-read.” Rather they prepare one or more reading pieces (pieces they have not heard on a recording) each week. They begin with the *Méthode Rose* and continue through Czerny’s *Recreations*, followed by his Op. 599, 718, 748, 849, 299, and 740, followed by the Bach 2- and 3-part *Inventions*. At the lesson the music is open in front of the student, even though the student may have memorized it. The students are prepared to play the piece through, without stops or hesitations, following all the directions on the page. They are taught that failing to follow even one of these directions is a serious mistake. The score is referenced to point out the mistakes. Then Kataoka-Sensei demonstrates how the passage should be played, and gives the student exercises for technical challenges, *making sure, with many repetitions, that the student is able to do these properly at home*. Then she makes a very specific assignment, with numbers of repetitions, to be practiced daily. With correct practice, the student will attempt the same piece the following week. If still unable to achieve accuracy with technique, the process continues on that piece, sometimes for many weeks, until the student can really do it.

As reading pieces increase in difficulty, the Basic musical techniques are refined again and again. Usually, Kataoka-Sensei limits her refining to one concept per piece, possibly two. But the actual teaching does not become more complicated or even more subtle. She simply stresses the Basics she began teaching in Book 1: a good sense of rhythm; close

attention to note values and their relative weights; dynamics; phrasing; articulations; and fingerings. In this way, reading and technique become interdependent.

The succession of reading pieces is designed, in turn, to build technique. The only technical exercises Kataoka-Sensei teaches outside of these reading pieces are the major and minor scales. Arpeggios, octaves, ornaments, fast passage work, and all other basic techniques are learned in the reading pieces themselves.

Contrary to what many believe, Suzuki Piano Basics students taught in this way become excellent readers, able to produce *music* and not just a collection of notes.



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

**November 9-11, 2017**

**Salt Lake City, Utah**

Suzuki Piano Basics Workshop  
with Bruce Anderson

Contact: Cleo Brimhall, 801-943-1237  
[callcleo@msn.com](mailto:callcleo@msn.com)

**February 15-19, 2018**

**Phoenix, Arizona**

Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop  
with Keiko Ogiwara and Keiko Kawamura

Contact Gloria Elliott 623-466-7447  
[gelliott50@aol.com](mailto:gelliott50@aol.com)

**August, 2018**

**Places and exact dates tbd**

Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshops  
with Keiko Ogiwara and Keiko Kawamura

**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 [hagberg-drake@juno.com](mailto:hagberg-drake@juno.com), 585-978-0600).

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

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