

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*

# Natural and Unnatural

**By Haruko Kataoka**

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter  
Vol. 12 No 5, October 7, 2002  
Translated by Chisa Aoki and  
Teri Paradero  
Edited by Karen Hagberg

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Forty some years ago when, having been very impressed with Dr. Suzuki's philosophy, I had decided to move from Tokyo to Matsumoto, there was a cello teacher from Tokyo who would visit Dr. Suzuki and talk about his studies with the virtuoso cellist, Pablo Casals. I heard him say something that sounded mysterious to me, something that has stayed in my heart all these years.

On asking Casals how to play the cello well, Casals answered simply, "Play naturally."

I heard this immediately after arriving in Matsumoto, when I was just at the beginning of my own research about how to play the piano well. This answer, similar in my mind to the answer to a Zen riddle, was incomprehensible to me at the time. It seemed like trying to hold onto a cloud. How to comprehend the meaning? Why would he not kindly teach in a more concrete and specific way.

Now, after forty years of research and teaching children and teachers, I have come to understand the meaning.

If someone were to ask me now how to play the piano well, I would reply, 'Play naturally, in a natural state.' I would say this because it is the truth. More than anything, being natural is most important. Being unnatural is the worst thing you can do. Casals' answer contains the most wonderful, most absolute truth.

To play the piano with ease and enjoyment, you must think about how to use the body. When you sit in front of the piano, what would you do in order to NOT be unnatural? The first, and most important job is to be sure you are not using unnecessary force in your neck, shoulders, arms, hands and legs, and that you have good posture. This means that you must assume good posture with a relaxed body, and that your center of gravity should remain down around your hips, never rising up above that area, and that the hips should be strong. For your body to remain soft, flexible and relaxed, you must have great body balance. Attaining this balance is also the job of the hips, in the place where the center of gravity is held. Many people, instead of relaxing their bodies, support their bodies with stiffness. The relaxed body, with the

balance and the center of gravity in the hips, is the natural state. On this earth, this posture is the easiest and most effortless (in that it doesn't require much practice) for moving naturally, for fingers to move naturally, to be able to play well.

This is Basics. If the Basics of posture, balance and relaxation are overlooked, and you put your attention on other things, you will never get to the next step. Strangely, people do not like to research something as simple as being natural. Instead, they always obsess about difficult things, or things that appear to be difficult, or things that look impressive. They think they already know and understand something as simple as these basics so they forget about it. Then they accumulate years of playing unnaturally by playing difficult pieces without being able to support a natural body. As they age, they are not able to play well or to enjoy their playing. All of those many years at the piano--it is a tragedy.

Casals said, "Play naturally." The importance of being natural; that people do not concern themselves with being natural; that they are not interested in what it means to be natural: he understood all these things. That is why he said, "Play naturally."

Let us not destroy the naturalness in the bodies of children. Even people who are a little unnatural can return to the normal state. Let us try. Not only in piano, but for everything in life, isn't being natural the most important thing? xxxxxxx

# *Children Are Wonderful!*

*“Isn't it strange? I could play it right away.”*

**By Haruko Kataoka**

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter

Vol. 12 No 5, October 7, 2002

Translated by Chisa Aoki and  
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My student turned to me after playing a reading piece and said, “Isn’t it strange? When I started playing this piece, I could play this whole piece right away.” [Under similar circumstances] this would be so not only for her, but for anybody. The piece in the reading book was also to be found in the Suzuki Method Book 1. This ten-year-old had played it about four years previously, by ear, without looking at the music. She did not remember it consciously as something that she played four years ago, but her body remembered, and that is why she could play it right away now, while viewing the written music.

This piece was so easy for her to play compared to the other reading pieces at the same level, it is no wonder she felt strange about it.

Every time something like this happens, I am reminded again, and am always moved, by how amazing human beings are and how wonderful childhood is. When you are a child, what you hear from birth or see, whether you like it or not, everything is stored not only in your brain but also in your body. When this information is needed, it is automatically retrieved for our use throughout life.

Therefore, I think we must provide children with the best environment. However, we realize that within our daily life, the reality is that we do not know how to accomplish this.

For those studying piano, of our five senses we must think about the sense of hearing. Provide students with recordings of the best music by the best performers every day (it can be the same piece). Also, please take them to great, wonderful concerts. Attending concerts becomes a lifelong treasure in children. When they need it, it will always be there for them.

***Piano Basics Workshop  
Orange County, California  
February 2019***



Participants at February 2019 Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop in Orange County, California: Back row: Stela Popa, Lana Ramsay, Linda Nakagawa, Naomi Wysong, Rebecca Mauss, Keiko Kawamura (teacher), Keiko Ogiwara (teacher), Connie Snyder. Front row: Melody Schwarz, Mei Ihara, Bruce Anderson, Karen Huffman, Rita Burns, Carol Novak, Chisa Aoki, Rae Kate Shen (workshop Director), Jill Austin. Photograph by Ken Matsuda (Interpreter)

Workshop participants missing from photo: Linda Carrier, Renee Eckis, Colette Rigney, Dorifel Acoba, Louise Selle, Lori Armstrong, Lori Bolt, Jo Shannon, Jackie Block and Diane Densmore.

## **Heads Up Members!**

Due to travel complications accompanying the 2020 Summer Olympics in Japan, there will be no summer workshop scheduled with the Japanese teachers next year. Please make your workshop plans accordingly. Thanks.

# More on Practicing

By Karen Hagberg

From Matsumoto News, Vol.2, no.1, August 1989

The very week I finished my last article on the topic of how to practice, I had my first lesson on the first movement of Bach's *Italian Concerto*. I played through the piece, but it was shaky. There were places where I stopped altogether, and I was audibly battling my usual nervousness. It felt like quite a jump to go from my Book 1 and Book 2 lessons to this.

When I finished, Kataoka Sensei said, "I have a question. How did you practice this piece?"

I thought how ironic it was that my practice habits would need correction immediately after I had felt I had learned enough about practicing to write about it.

Yes, I had practiced hands alone, in short sections—but only about 60% of the time. In my article, I had quoted Sensei as recommending 80% hands alone practice, so I had not even been following the advice I published. But, this being Bach, Sensei said I need to practice hands alone 90-95% of the time. "If you like to hear the piece hands together, listen to Glenn Gould," she advised.

And no, I had not used the metronome enough, which is **all** the time.

**Practicing this way, Sensei assured me, will give me balance.**

Then Sensei marked four left-hand 16th-note passages, 2-16 measures in length, to be played slowly, ten times each day with the metronome in groups of four 16th notes with two beats on the first 16th and one beat on the other three, and then five times in groups of eight 16ths with two beats on the first note, and then one or twice with even 16ths. Practicing this way, Sensei assured me, will give me balance. Losing balance, not a memory slip, is what causes me to "crash and burn" during a performance, as a violinist friend aptly describes it.

This practice routine takes about 45 minutes. With nine other pieces to prepare for my graduation recital, this is *all* the practice I can devote to the first movement of the *Italian Concerto*.

When I first arrived in Matsumoto, in the fall of 1988, a trainee with very little previous training, and no experience performing, was preparing her graduation recital. She had so little confidence that her lessons often ended in tears. Everyone was worried that she would be unable to perform the *Italian Concerto*, a required piece. At each lesson, Sensei would give the same assignment, similar to mine: practice certain passages slowly with the metronome many times each day.

**At each lesson, Sensei would give the same assignment...practice certain passages slowly with the metronome many times each day.**

After each lesson the student complained of not having time to do this sort of practice. Her recital was just a few weeks away, and this slow practice consumed all her practice time. It was a luxury she felt she could not

afford. There was only time to play through the piece hands together and up-to-tempo.

Despite the student's conviction that slow practice was neither advisable nor possible, Sensei reiterated the same assignment persistently at each lesson. She patiently taught over and over again that balance, not memory, was the problem, and then demonstrated the kind of slow practice that produces balance for a pianist. It became clearer and clearer to those of us observing the lessons how valuable balanced repetitions are (the slower the better) and how worthless, even destructive, unbalanced repetitions can be. Fortunately, the student also saw this in the last few weeks before the recital and began taking Sensei's advice seriously. To the amazement of all, her performance of the *Italian Concerto* at the recital was solid and secure. This was a great inspiration to me.

So I am learning what constitutes good practice; I have seen it work miracles in students. The big question is: What keeps me from doing it as well as I know how to do it? What keeps me from doing it all the time and not just some of the time?

First, I was not taught how to do it from early childhood. It is new to me,

and therefore difficult, as an adult, to learn. Or, more specifically, difficult to **do** what I only know in my head.

**She patiently taught over and over again that balance, not memory, was the problem, and then demonstrated the kind of slow practice that produces balance for a pianist.**

Second, good practice takes great effort of concentration, of aural attention. Practice with anything less than total concentration is very boring. Only with concentration does it seem interesting, even fascinating. However, more often than not, sadly I do not expend the effort to get past the boredom of practicing with poor concentration.

Third, beneficial results of good practice take a while to happen. In the meantime, it is not easy to remember that all this slow-motion work can result in ease and security in performance at high speed. It is hard to believe that repeating what is easy can result in what had previously been impossible. It goes against reason. We need faith to sustain good practice—faith in our teacher, faith in our Method, faith in ourselves. We need *really* to want an excellent end result, rather than being happy with pretending to play well in a room by ourselves or being merely entertained or lulled by our ability to create vague suggestions of great works.

Finally, with good practice we try as hard as we can. For many of us, expending less than our total effort gives us a convenient excuse if the end result is not good. Conversely, it is fairly terrifying to try as hard as we can and risk the possibility of producing something that seems inferior, or worse, worthless. To undertake good practice, therefore, is to take a great personal risk.

Even as I am just beginning to learn about good practice, I sense it is the key to virtually everything else in life.



*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***

**April 28, 2019**

**Matsumoto, Japan 10-Piano Concert**

Leave April 11; Return April 29  
Registration period past  
Contact Karen Hagberg, 585-978-0600  
[khagberg1943@gmail.com](mailto:khagberg1943@gmail.com)

**July 22-26, 2019**

**St. Louis, Missouri**

St. Louis Suzuki Piano Basics Workshop  
With Rae Kate Shen and Bruce Anderson  
Contact Patty Eversole 314-496-3520  
[paeversole@yahoo.com](mailto:paeversole@yahoo.com)  
<http://stlsuzukipiano.tripod.com/>

**June 15, 2019**

**Sacramento, California**

**Deadline for Scholarship Applications for August workshop**

Contact Hannah Hall  
[correctthecause@gmail.com](mailto:correctthecause@gmail.com)

**August 2-6, 2019**

**Sacramento, California**

Suzuki Piano Basics Teacher Research Workshop  
With Keiko Ogiwara and Keiko Kawamura  
Contact Linda Nakagawa, 916-422-2952  
[g.nakagawa@comcast.net](mailto: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 ([khagberg1943@gmail.com](mailto:khagberg1943@gmail.com), 585-978-0600).

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

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

**Corrections to the Directory:**

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