

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*

***Piano Basics  
Foundation News***

**Editor**  
Karen Hagberg

**Layout**  
Teri Paradero

**Translators**  
Chisa Aoki  
Teri Paradero

**Production and Distribution**  
Linda Nakagawa

**Send Articles to:**  
**Piano Basics Foundation**  
67 Shepard St. Rochester NY 14620  
kh@hagbergsuzuki.com  
585-244-0490

**Memberships / Subscriptions**  
Linda Nakagawa  
242 River Acres Drive  
Sacramento, CA 95831  
916-422-2952  
g.nakagawa@comcast.net

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*Please Never Give  
Up!*

*Let's Continue to Repeat  
the Same Things Over and Over*

***By Haruko Kataoka***

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter  
Vol. 10 No. 4, September 1, 2000  
Translated by Chisa Aoki and  
Teri Paradero  
Edited by Karen Hagberg

After many years of continuous piano teaching, I am surprised to have learned so many things about how to conduct life from the very individuals, teachers and children alike, whom I have taught.

There is a teacher in the United States, an older woman with a bright and lively personality. Her heritage is Russian, and she is very proud to be from a very musical family where every member plays a musical instrument. She participated in the annual teacher workshops that I have taught for quite a number of years. She has even been to Matsumoto to study on more than one occasion. I can still vividly remember her first lesson nearly twenty years ago. She played the Twinkles with a very loud, harsh and noisy tone. Her tempo was all over the place. I wondered how in the world this could be fixed. I remember Dr. Suzuki saying that, as a teacher, it is never an option to tell someone they are so bad that they should quit. So I said "Let's start by fixing the tempo by using the metronome set at 72. Please play with the metronome." She did not do this, however, for the next 10 years. Nevertheless, she would attend my workshop every year with enthusiasm. Every time I would say, "Let's start by fixing the tempo..." I thought to myself that it was impossible for her to change considering her age. I even thought that perhaps coming to the workshops was her only means of enjoying life.

However, in the past two or three years, she started practicing the first Twinkle Variation with the metronome. Every time we met she said, "I always practice with the metronome set at 72," and about two years ago, she was able to play calm and steady Twinkles.

This June, she came again to a workshop. She had aged quite a bit. Lingering effects from an automobile accident left her with limited mobility. She was still able to walk but was dependent on a wheelchair to be effectively mobile. For her lesson she played Bach's Minuet 2.

My belief is that when you learn the Basics, in other words, how to use the body, how to use the fingers, how to grasp the basic structure of a piece, it does not matter how easy or difficult the piece is, you can play an easy piece or a difficult piece equally well. It is the same whether there are a small number of notes or many notes. The most difficult thing to do is to play simple pieces musically.

She played her piece unimaginably well compared to the way she used to play in the past. When her Basics improved, the wonderful musicality with which she grew up amongst her musical family members had the chance to be expressed so richly in her music. She is proof of what I have always believed. I was truly moved.

I would like to share another story, this time from Japan. A teacher who has been studying with me for a very long time was organizing videotapes. A tape of her lesson from ten years prior surfaced. After she watched it, she commented apologetically, "My lessons with you now, Kataoka Sensei, are exactly the same as the taped lesson from ten years ago. You have been saying the same thing to me, and I am just starting to understand and be able to do it. Forgive me for taking so long!" She was one of the teachers that did worry me in the beginning, and I would wonder what she might possibly accomplish.

However, today her accomplishments are awesome.

I am truly happy to be granted such experiences from all of you. Never give up! That goes for me too. Whether you are an adult or child, we are all the same. We are all human. Don't resign yourself to being old! You must believe in not giving up, no matter what.

## ***From the Editor:***

Summer is almost upon us, and we are hoping to begin re-entry into more normal life. Experts tell us there are still a number of unknowns, and the pandemic continues to rage in many parts of the world, however. Life as we knew it before is not returning anytime soon.

The Summer Olympics in Tokyo is a case in point. The pandemic is surging in Japan with only around 5% of the population vaccinated at this point. The vast majority of the people in Tokyo, fearing that foreigners will bring more virus with them, want the event cancelled altogether, but organizers, recognizing this is an event which normally takes place just once in four years and has already been postponed a year, are planning to hold it. Young athletes have already had to extend their training for an entire twelve months by now. What a shame if the event must be postponed again. Foreign spectators will be banned, and all others severely limited. The Olympics will not be the same no matter what finally happens.

Another international competition is on my mind lately, the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, since one of our Suzuki Piano Basics students, Parker Van Ostrand, student of Linda Nakagawa, will compete. This is an event that is scheduled only once every five years, and has already been postponed from last fall. The Preliminary Round in which 160 students will compete for just 42 spots will happen in July, in person, in Warsaw. The competition itself features 80 competitors (38 have been qualified to skip the Preliminary Round) and is scheduled for three weeks in October. Just now, however, our government and the Polish government severely restrict travel from here to there. The poor competitors still are not sure about the logistics of entering the Preliminary Round. They have been told they will be tested for Covid and, if positive, will be immediately eliminated from the event altogether; and it is possible for non-symptomatic, vaccinated persons to test positive, especially after international travel. This rule is in place for the competition in October as well. Will

foreigners be allowed in the audience? Will there be an audience?

The delays, the postponements, and the unknowns are taking a toll on an entire generation of our young people. Children have been faced with one disappointment after another. As teachers a major portion of our task is to help them through this time: to create ways to recognize their achievements and to mark their milestones. This has been a time that we will all recall for the rest of our lives, and, as they get older, our students will recognize the heroic

lengths to which teachers went to help them through this.

So is this the last issue with our Covid Snapshot feature? Only the pandemic, and you, will decide. I'm happy to continue receiving your contributions of articles and/or graphics sharing ways in which you have inspired your students to keep going through these dark days. And let us all hope and pray that the darkest of these days are behind us.

Karen Hagberg, Editor

## ***COVIDSNAPSHOTS***

### ***Something We've Never Done Before***

***By Karen Hagberg***

How does a piano teacher get students and families to watch a one-and-a-half-hour pre-recorded recital on YouTube? On April 17, the third virtual recital during Covid was held in Bruce Boiney's studio in Louisville, Kentucky. He named the event Something We've Never Done Before because none of the pieces played that evening had ever been heard before in his studio. There were pieces inspired by famous paintings and places, movie themes, Ragtime, jazz, Appalachian, and Celtic music, and even a Brahms piece. The performers were all teens and pre-teens, dressed up for a formal event.

To encourage the remote audience's attention, Bruce circulated an "I Spy" sheet, a series of questions about the performers and the pieces. Those who came to the next lesson with answers to the questions received cookies! If that weren't enough, there was a contest to guess the amount of time, in hours and minutes, that Bruce spent editing the video, which included titles, lead-in portraits and graphics and four different camera angles. The closest guess would receive a \$50 Amazon gift card.

In his letter announcing the recital Bruce reminded parents to help their children to take the event seriously, but also to make it fun as a family activity with snacks and possibly a watch party with other families. This is the YouTube link to the recital: <https://youtu.be/claFPhNvnYU>



Bruce Boiney editing his “Something we’ve Never Done Before” recital. It took 79 hours and 24 minutes.



Cecilia May won the “Guess My Editing Time” contest and the \$50 Amazon gift card with her guess of 80 hours, 53 minutes.

# COVID

## SNAPSHOTS (cont'd)

...and the I-Spy sheet:

### Recital I-Spy

Something We've Never Done Before  
Virtual Recital - April 17, 2021, 7:00 p.m.  
Suzuki Piano of Louisville

1. At the beginning of the program, students are playing pieces inspired by famous paintings. How many of these pieces are there?
2. One of the paintings has a United States president in it. What is the name of the president?
3. Which performer dressed like a person in their painting?
4. Scattered throughout the program, there are pieces from movies. How many are there?
5. Which of the movies have you seen?
6. Among the performers, there are two girls with the same name and two boys with the same name. What are their names?
7. Which performer is playing with a bandaid on his or her finger?
8. Which performer is wearing bacon and egg socks?
9. Which performer is not wearing shoes?
10. Which performer is tall enough that the overhead camera shows when he bows?
11. A glissando is when you use the back of the hand to glide up the keys quickly, playing lots of notes in a row. It only happens once, but it's very dramatic. Which performer does this?
12. A tremolo is when you rock the hand back and forth quickly, alternating between two notes. One piece does this several times in the left hand. Who plays this piece?
13. One person does a special technique you shouldn't ordinarily do, but it's written in the music! She reaches inside the piano and strums the strings like a harp. Who is it?
14. One of the performers is not currently a student in the studio. Who is this special guest?
15. What is a piece or performance you really liked? What did you like about it?

# ***Balance, Fear and Panic***

***By Karen Hagberg***

***Reprinted from Matsumoto News, February 1990***

When we fall down, there is an accompanying feeling of fear and dread. We all experience the *feeling* of falling from a high place as we are “falling” to sleep or while dreaming. Some have actually fallen: from ladders, down flights of stairs, or as in my own case, all too many times from the back of a horse. The feeling of disorientation during a real fall is profound, and it takes time to regain a sense of equilibrium.

Human beings are meant to be creatures in balance. Physiologically, we possess an intricate system of canals in our inner ears which keep us feeling in control of our movement. If illness affects this part of our anatomy, we become dizzy and physically out of control. This sensation is as disturbing as our experience when actually falling down. Any small disruption in our normal state of balance renders us helpless and panicky.

**The problem at the keyboard is that most of us never learned to stand up and then to walk, and here we are now trying to run and dance.**

There is no feeling more akin to stage fright than the fear of falling. Kataoka Sensei explains this by claiming there is

no such thing as a memory slip. If we falter or stop in the midst of a performance we have simply lost our balance and have, literally, fallen down.

What seems to be a problem of memory is really only the problem of re-orienting ourselves after a fall. This takes time, and is as disturbing to an audience as it is to the performer. When we experience stage fright, it is because we know we are facing the very real danger of falling right down in the midst of our performance. It is no wonder we are afraid.

There is no feeling more akin to stage fright than the fear of falling. Kataoka Sensei explains this by claiming there is no such thing as a memory slip. If we falter or stop in the midst of a performance we have simply lost our balance and have, literally, fallen down. What seems to be a problem of memory is really only the problem of re-orienting ourselves after a fall. This takes time, and is as disturbing to an audience as it is to the performer. When we experience stage fright, it is because we know we are facing the very real danger of falling right down in the midst of our performance. It is no wonder we are afraid.

The question, of course, is how to learn not to fall down. Kataoka Sensei sometimes asks us who fell down on the way to her studio that day. Of course, none of us did. Nor, when we set out from home, were we afraid of falling. Healthy people have learned to do everyday things in a state of balance by first learning to stand up and then to walk and

then to do more risky things like running, dancing, or riding a bicycle.

The problem at the keyboard is that most of us never learned to stand up and then to walk, and here we are now trying to run and dance.

**During the very first piano lessons a young child can learn to stand up and to find good balance on the keyboard.**

As Kataoka Sensei explains it, our playing the piano is very dangerous indeed, and we know it. This is why we are so afraid. We are afraid of falling. It is a real fear, not just paranoia, because we actually *do* fall whenever we attempt anything “dangerous.” Performing is *not* like walking on solid ground for most of us, it is more like walking on a tightrope, and a wobbly one at that. It is definitely not something we anticipate with calm or serenity.

During the very first piano lessons a young child can learn to stand up and to find good balance on the keyboard. If this is not taught carefully, everything after that is dangerous. Each step of the way, when beginning to “walk” naturally on the keys, balance is the most important aspect of what the student is learning, for without it nothing else can be learned securely.

**Every joint, from lower back to shoulders to elbows to wrists to each individual knuckle in our fingers must be used in a natural**

Because Kataoka Sensei understands this Basic principle so well, none of her students play with fear and panic. They play with the same attitude they have

while walking to school. They are not afraid of falling at all. This is why any ten of them can play difficult pieces simultaneously on ten pianos with total ease. It is truly amazing to witness this.

If teachers are to have good students they must know how to teach good balance—to teach how to stand up and then to walk. There is no other way. Teachers need constantly to research good balance, their own as well as students and performers. Teachers need to be experts on the subject of balance.

For those of us whose early training did not teach us this, learning good balance must start from the beginning, playing very simple things. We too, not just our students, must have an adjustable chair, for the slightest change in our situation at the keyboard will radically affect our balance. We need constantly to work on our posture, for we can only relax and achieve our balance when our body is naturally lined up, with our head placed firmly and securely on top of our spine. Every joint, from lower back to shoulders to elbows to wrists to each individual knuckle in our fingers must be used in a natural and relaxed position. Kataoka Sensei often demonstrates that the misuse of even one of these joints causes all the others to compensate in unnatural ways

**But, really, successful piano teachers are the same as people who succeed in teaching gymnasts or horseback riders or ice skaters.**



In those moments when we achieve balance, few though they may be at first, we instantly know it. The body does not resist our attempts to play the piano. This is such a rare and free and natural feeling that we cannot help but want to feel that way all the time. Achieving this feeling must be the focus of all practice, because all else flows from this, and without it we cannot do anything.

As piano teachers, we are teaching, first and foremost, a skill of the body. It is easy to limit our teaching to intellectual things, for there has been endless intellectual discourse on the topic of music and of performing it on the piano. We can easily fill our students' heads with information.

**While we work diligently on our own balance, we need to become experts on our students' bodies and how they use them.**

But, really, successful piano teachers are the same as people who succeed in teaching gymnasts or horseback riders or ice skaters. They are those people who can train bodies to maintain their natural state of balance even while performing tasks beyond those called for in everyday life. When we witness a great performer in any of these areas, we may ask, "How do they do it?" The answer is, simply, that they do not lose their equilibrium in the midst of formidable challenge.

**This is why, when teaching piano, we must be training bodies, not minds... piano teacher's job is to teach physical ability.**

While we work diligently on our own balance, we need to become experts on our students' bodies and how they use

them. The manner in which people use their bodies is a very interesting thing. Everyone is different. Positioning a student well at the keyboard is not a simple matter, nor is understanding the subtle ways in which balance may be lost and then how to correct it. One of the many great and remarkable aspects of Kataoka Sensei's teaching is that she has made a lifelong study of these questions and constantly devises new ways of correcting problems in her students' bodies and in the way of using them. Her diligence in these areas is what makes her a great teacher—it is why her students play so well, so effortlessly, as if simply walking to school.

**This is what Kataoka Sensei calls research.**

I, and most pianists I know, have a burning desire to learn to play, to perform, without panic. We love to play the piano. There is something really wonderful about playing the piano. But so many of us who have spent our lives trying to do it with ease, with some sort of serenity and calm, cannot face even a non-threatening performing situation comfortably. This is a legacy we do not want to pass on to our students. This is why the question of learning and then of teaching balance becomes so important. This is why, when teaching piano, we must be training bodies, not minds. Of course, a student will have a natural intellectual curiosity about music, but this needs to follow, not to precede physical ability if the ability is ever to flourish. The piano teacher's job is to teach physical ability.

Look at your hands when you play. Feel your body. Are you uncomfortable? Do your hands move in awkward ways? Are

your wrists wobbly and unstable? Is the sense of touch in your fingertips intact, or has it been deadened by years of hitting, rather than caressing the key? Do your shoulders and neck hurt after several hours of practice? Does your posture disintegrate? Only by constantly asking these questions of ourselves and by correcting each problem in ever more subtle ways can we become good models for students. It is an ongoing process that can never end. This is what Kataoka Sensei calls research.

As we think about these things in ourselves, we begin to be able to teach them to students. It is never alright simply to conclude that some students have an easier time of it than others. Students have come to us to find an easier way. All of our students want to play easily and naturally, without having to worry about falling down all the time. Let's be good

teachers and give the gift of balance to every one of our students.



*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.*

*Over thirty 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***

**July 19-23, 2021**

**St. Louis, MO**

St. Louis Suzuki Piano Teachers' Association  
Piano Basics Workshop

With Rae Kate Shen and Karmalita Bawar

Contact Patty Eversole (314) 496-3520

[paeversole@yahoo.com](mailto:paeversole@yahoo.com)

<http://stlsuzukipiano.tripod.com>

**NOTE: The re-scheduled Tokyo Olympics and uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 virus will prevent the Japanese teachers from coming to the United States this summer. We will hope that they will be able to return for workshops in February 2022. Updates will follow.**

**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).