

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

*How to Capture
the Hearts of Children*

(Part 1 of 3)

By Haruko Kataoka

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Introduction by Dr. Kazue Iinuma of the Iinuma Clinic, parent of a longtime student in Dr. Kataoka's studio:

I would like to introduce Haruko Kataoka Sensei. She started piano at the age of six and performed on many occasions at an early age. In those days she was considered a prodigy, a genius. In 1955, she became very interested in the late Shinichi Suzuki Sensei's Suzuki Method, the music education that does not begin with the musical score, but instead focuses on listening to each and every tone.

This prompted her to move to Matsumoto. Ever since then, she has been actively involved in research for the piano department of the Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto. The Suzuki Method is a highly regarded music education today within international circles. Kataoka Sensei has traveled abroad every year since 1972 to teach the Suzuki Method.

Having just returned from her travels a few days ago, she has consented to join us at our request amidst her very busy schedule. For the last 10 years, she has been working on a totally innovative endeavor involving the simultaneous performance of 10 pianos. I remember my utter surprise when my old traditional way of thinking was completely overturned by this project.

In 1986, she received the Arts and Culture Award of Matsumoto City, and in 1990 she was the recipient of an honorary doctorate in Music from the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky and in addition to other such honors.

I would like to share my personal experience. My daughter was one of Sensei's students. Now, there is a saying, "Every child is nurtured, depending on the parent." I have to admit I am on the top of the list of ineffective parents. The day before a lesson, I used to make my daughter

practice like crazy. When I realized this last minute practice was useless, I would think of skipping the lesson. But my daughter would insist on going anyhow, and I had no choice but to take her. Ever since that time I am a parent who owes a great deal to Sensei.

What is so amazing about Sensei is that, despite my ineptitude as a parent, she would still continue to encourage my daughter and patiently maintain her interest in music. While teaching us both the skill of discerning the most beautiful tone, I am so grateful that we, both of us, parent and child, received general education for human life as well. I am filled with awe to have witnessed Sensei's vitality and wonderful romanticism, not only as a parent but as an individual human being.

Without further ado, I invite Sensei to begin her talk and share her thoughts with us.

As so kindly introduced by Dr. Iinuma, my name is Haruko Kataoka. First, I would like to talk to you about Dr. Iinuma, who shared so much in her introduction. I am so impressed by her modesty, a rare quality in this day and age. Dr. Iinuma is truly a wonderful mother. It has been thirty years since she brought her three-year-old daughter for piano lessons. She told me then that because she worked and was

very busy, she would be unable to attend lessons. Unsympathetically, I told her that I would not teach a child whose parent was not present at the lessons. As we were discussing our differences, I dismissed her in my mind as someone who could not succeed in my studio.

The following week she showed up for the lesson. She continued to come to lessons without a single absence until her daughter entered middle school. It wasn't until much later that I happened to hear that she was an extremely busy pediatric doctor at the National Hospital.

Ignorance is bliss and a very powerful thing. I used to reprimand her repeatedly to quit her job and start sincerely focusing on the education of her child. Dr. Iinuma has probably forgotten all this. The grandmother would bring the little girl to my studio, and Dr. Iinuma always adjusted her schedule to be able to meet them at lesson times. I was so impressed. What an incredible mother! I have met so many wonderful individuals who have influenced me and I am finally just starting to understand their impact. It is my fortune today to have this opportunity to see you again and I thank you, Dr. Iinuma.

It gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity to talk in front of an audience of pediatric doctors. When I

was in grade school, we were acquainted with many families of medical professionals. I had overheard my mother and other adults saying that the most outstanding doctors were pediatricians and surgeons. It was impressed upon me since childhood that within the medical field, pediatricians are eminent.

Recently an article was written in the Asahi Newspaper about a famous person. I chuckled to myself as I read the article because it confirmed my longtime opinion. It said, that the work of a pediatrician is monumental and that this medical specialty is chosen with the prior knowledge that it is not a particularly lucrative field, and thus pediatricians cannot be bad people. Since I work in the world of music education involving children, even though I am not a doctor, I can truly empathize with the work that pediatricians do. The writer of the article added that if you happen to see the sign for a pediatric practice when you're walking down a street, remember there is a good person in there. Reading such an article really lifted my spirits.

At this point, I would like to talk to you about Matsumoto's Suzuki Method. For some of you, this may be your first time to hear about this. Shinichi Suzuki was a violinist. He was born in 1898 in Nagoya. His father was the first man in Japan to start manufacturing violins.

The Suzuki Violin from Nagoya is still well known to this day. As the future successor to this excellent company, Dr. Suzuki was sent to business school. Afterwards, before the second World War, he went to Germany to study music for 8 years. Upon his return to Japan, the war had worsened and he moved to Kisofukushima (nearby Matsumoto). At about this time, a culturist in Matsumoto invited him to move here. Dr. Suzuki was attracted to this city where there was not yet a single child able to play the violin. This was how and why music education for children started here in Matsumoto.

During his eight years in Berlin, Dr. Suzuki was repeatedly told that the Japanese have no musicality no matter how much or how hard they may try. I remember my own childhood piano teacher, who also studied in Germany for eight years at about the same time Suzuki Sensei was there, told me the same thing. They must have felt that Europeans were implying that culture was inborn and those who did not possess such cultural abilities could never be taught. This constant disparaging reminder prompted Suzuki Sensei to ponder this problem. He believed that it couldn't be true about the absence of musicality. On the contrary, anyone can hear and appreciate beautiful music. This is when he realized the Mother Tongue Method of education.

The implication of the Mother Tongue theory is that people from any country in the world can speak their native language effortlessly. Of course, language in terms of literature is an entirely different matter, but the simple ability of fluent speech is acquired by everyone.

In Germany, no matter how hard Suzuki Sensei tried to communicate in German, his poor pronunciation could not compare with the perfect accent of three-year-old German children. However, it was safe to assume that Germans are not born predisposed to speak German fluently. He realized that it is because German children have been listening to German every day since birth that they can speak fluently. This is the truth.

I feel that Japanese is a very difficult language. Recently, I have felt such pride in being able to speak Japanese that when I go to America, I have bragged about it. By contrast, English is simple and therefore easier, but why can't they understand me? It is my pronunciation. For example when I say the names of pianists such as *Ho-lo-bi-ttsu* or *Lu-bin-shu-ta-in*, they don't know who I am talking about. So I say over and over, "You know, *Ho-lo-bi-ttsu*, *U-la-ji-mee-lu Ho-lo-bi-ttsu*." Then, finally, because they are music teachers, they say, "Aah, Horowitz!" with pronunciation totally different from mine. Of course to me it doesn't sound so different, but

with even subtle nuances it is hard for them to understand what I am saying.

That is why Suzuki Sensei's Mother Tongue Method of education is so wonderful. It was not just a passing thought. I feel it was an exceptional and wonderful revelation. If children from birth (and of course these days we say from the time of conception) are raised listening to good classical music every day, nobody can say that the Japanese have no musical aptitude. This was the great experiment in our town of

Matsumoto. We now have succeeded in proving this theory to be true.

Because there was such a person as Dr. Suzuki, it is now possible to have Seiji Ozawa and his Saito Kinen Orchestra perform in Matsumoto, a city that has become renowned as the City of Music in Japan. And of course, it goes without saying that Matsumoto is furthermore honored by having the most outstanding and prominent Shinshu University Medical School.

From the Editor:

Greetings Teachers!

Hope your school year is in full swing, and that your studios are thriving. Through the past many months, I keep hearing from teachers that you miss getting together with each other at workshops to continue your research on Suzuki Piano Basics as well as missing extra opportunities for your students to perform and have masterclasses at these events.

So I invite you, until workshops start up again, to use this newsletter as a forum for communication with each other. What are your questions? What are your solutions? What pearls of wisdom have you gleaned from your students or from your parents? What creative opportunities are you giving your students amid Covid restrictions? What

would you like to share with teachers you only see at workshops and whom you are missing?

So here's a CHALLENGE: I would like to hear from EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU to send me a bit of news from your neck of the woods. It may be as short as a sentence or one photograph (with a caption). Let's have the next newsletter filled with shares from ALL OUR MEMBERS!! (Please send submissions to me at khagberg1943@gmail.com BY DECEMBER 15, and THANK YOU!)

Happy and peaceful holidays to you all.

Karen Hagberg

Attention Teachers

Your membership/renewal forms are attached. Please remember to renew, enroll your families, and invite a colleague to join! We try hard to support continuing education and student exchanges between Japan and other countries, activities we are presently missing, but will resume as soon as it is safe. Thank you for your continued support.

Suzuki Piano Basics Method

By Linda Nakagawa

Suzuki Piano Method of teaching, as developed by the late Dr. Haruko Kataoka, is the best way of teaching piano to beginners.

Music is sound. It is not so easy to make a musical sound on the piano. Unfortunately, it is very easy simply to push the correct key on the piano and play the notes that are composed. If we allow students just to play the correct notes, they will race through Book 1 in no time, then Book 2, then Book 3. And what is accomplished? Only the ability to play the notes that are written on the page. There is no guarantee that what is “played” sounds musical.

Music must touch the heart and soul. I believe that the human voice has the greatest potential to attain that goal. Sadly, of all the musical instruments, the piano has been at the bottom. However, the modern piano does have great potential. Just listen to Rubenstein, Horowitz, Michelangeli, Lipatti, Gulda, Argerich, and Lupu. They have the ability

to make the piano sing. From the beginning we must help our students to develop that ability.

Because we teach young beginners, we need the best technique to demonstrate the best singing tone, starting with one note. It must be effortless. It takes patience to develop the skills of piano playing. The worst is to teach with one’s mouth. I truly miss the workshops with Kataoka Sensei, Ogiwara Sensei and Kawamura Sensei. Having had to develop a more natural technique myself, a complete and radical change from the way I was playing, I have learned so much, both from taking and from observing lessons. Hopefully there will be more opportunities in the future.

All the *basics* of piano playing and producing a good tone should be taught in Book 1 and continue forever. It takes more than one week or one month or one year to develop an *ability*. It is wonderful that the students do not learn how to read in Book one. It gives them a chance to

develop their ability to hear and we can teach many of the *basics of piano playing*, such as right and left hand independence, melody and accompaniment, how to play chords, Alberti bass, staccato, legato, taking care of the thumb and the pinky, keeping good body balance, relaxed body and the independence of the fingers. And we have to continue this teaching throughout the books, while learning the scales and reading through Method Rose and the Czerny Etudes. The Czerny Etudes are fascinating. They are short pieces, but there is so much music (piano technique) in them. I have only had one student get through all the books, but even those that finish just a few of them, if taught

correctly, develop a strong *basic foundation to play the piano*.

Let's help our students make the piano sing. I have heard so many very advanced students and professional pianists able to play pieces by Chopin, Liszt, Beethoven etc. The music is very good because the composers wrote wonderful music but, listening carefully, one might hear the same sound from beginning to end (which is boring), or worse, unpleasant noise.

Learning how to teach this method has been a wonderful journey. I am so fortunate to be able to share what I have learned with my students.

Beginners Need the Best Piano

By Karen Hagberg

From Matsumoto News, Vol.3, no.1, August 1990

(Editor's note: This column has, over the years, been the most requested for reprints, so I'm sure the elders in our membership will recall reading it. Just this week I had lunch with a former student, during which we realized that ALL of my students who went on to become professional musicians and music teachers were provided with grand pianos from the beginning of lessons. In most cases their parents were considered excessive and maybe downright foolish to make such a big investment in a young beginner. For me, this realization made me understand, yet again, the subtlety and nuance that children hear and appreciate, and their ability to have full-blown aesthetic experiences.

I wrote this after returning from Japan and teaching at a workshop that required me to

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teach on a single, miserable spinet piano in a room that had no sound barrier from the

adjacent teaching studio. I felt so sorry for the children and for the parents who had paid good money for what they thought would be quality education. I spent most of my sessions telling parents why it was impossible for good teaching to occur in such a setting and why they should seriously consider providing their children with better instruments. Looking back, I realize I could have at least entertained the students for the week, but I was coming from a place of total despair. The best I could do at the time was to try making parents understand and then to go home and write this column.)

How can tone be taught on instruments that cannot produce tone? Without a good piano, how can playing the piano be taught at all when the first basic skill any student needs is learning to hear and to produce good tone? The answers to these questions seem obvious, but most teachers and parents have not yet seriously faced these answers and their translation into practical reality.

Conventional thinking has it that a young piano student “grows into” their piano—that it is fine to begin on grandmother’s beat-up upright, then to move to a newer spinet or console, and then, the truly unusual students, the ones who have demonstrated great “promise” after several years of study, may merit a grand piano. It is assumed that young students will “make do” on whatever instrument may already be in the home, or on the least expensive model the family can find. These days, many students even try to learn “piano” on electronic keyboards.

When a teacher tries to teach from the beginning through tone, the beat-up old instrument, the cheap new one, and the electronic keyboard all make it difficult, if not impossible, for the student and

parents to comprehend the essence of the lesson. An inferior instrument creates a major stumbling block in the student’s ability to learn to play. This seems so obvious, yet the reality is that most people still cling to the conventional idea that beginners can get along on any old instrument for the first several years.

And yet, the small child is the one who can really hear subtle differences between tones—who can really understand and appreciate the tone of a fine instrument. Children do not learn the way we adults do. They have the ability still to learn directly through their senses. This is how they so perfectly learn their native language without ever hearing the words “verb”, “noun,” or “sentence” for example, and with perfect pronunciation. As teachers and parents, as adults who can no longer learn in this way ourselves, we need to stand in awe of this incredible process and to use it in all our teaching. The only alternative is to attempt to teach children through their undeveloped intellect as if they were miniature adults. This is why so many teachers do not teach children under the age of seven, a time when it is believed that they can begin to understand explanations and exercise reason. Adults cannot learn a language as successfully as a child can, however. They cannot learn to play the piano as well either.

Conventional thinking has it that a beginner needs to learn many things before a good instrument is ever necessary: reading music, learning notes to pieces, basic music theory, etc. But if many months and years of instruction ignore the issue of tone production, a student’s ears become deaf to it, and by

then it is too late. It is as if we were trying to teach our babies to speak English with

Children do not learn the way we adults do. They have the ability still to learn directly through their senses.

grammar points without having them hear good, fluent spoken English.

At this point it may be useful to consider the dichotomy we assume exists between the Suzuki Method and other so-called “traditional” methods of teaching piano. This issue of good instruments is a case in point. As a student and teacher of the Suzuki Method, I can say with certainty that the philosophy and general wisdom behind this method have helped me understand that good teaching is good teaching, and no single method has the corner on good teaching. There are many fine teachers who have never heard of the Suzuki Method. The best of them teach on fine instruments and require that their students practice on them. All good piano teachers teach through tone, and not with verbal explanations.

In your community there is probably a teacher who stands out above the rest. Who is that person—the one whose students consistently perform well and who outshine the others in the area—whose students at a conservatory are the best? It is always the teacher with the best instruments, without fail. This is not surprising. It is no secret.

We Suzuki teachers distinguish ourselves because we constantly research what is basic to successful pedagogy. We talk about tone and the importance of fine

instruments. We make an issue of these things because music is sound; it is tone after all. We, along with parents, are then faced with a very real and practical dilemma. Fine pianos are expensive and take up a lot of space. Being serious about piano study takes lots of money therefore. A good instrument, however, is a necessity, not a luxury.

Insisting on good instruments for your child ...simply means that you have come to understand what is required for successful study.

I recently asked a Suzuki violin teacher about the investment required for the beginning student. He said that a really good small violin costs around \$250 these days. It takes up no space and can be carried around to performance sites. A good piano, on the other hand, costs at least \$8,000 [N.B. these figures are at least double today] and cannot be transported. This is the reality for the pianist. When performing, we are forced to play on someone else’s instrument. A good teacher must make sure that

All good piano teachers teach through tone, and not with verbal explanations.

performances can happen on a good piano. It is not always easy to find one, and it needs to be tuned just before the event. All this adds up to quite an expensive proposition, but the alternative is setting our students up for failure.

Insisting on good instruments for your child, at home, in the teacher’s studio, and in performance venues, does not mean that you have become a fussy

prima donna, setting unreasonable standards for your child. It simply means that you have come to understand what is required for successful study.

The miracle of children's ability to learn when placed in a rich learning

environment is a constant source of wonder and awe. Our job is to know what factors are necessary to create this environment and to provide them as best we can.



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.



Upcoming Events:

None are scheduled at this time that have been reported to our Editor. If you have an event planned that you would like announced to our membership, please send information to Karen Hagberg (khagberg1943@gmail.com) and it will be broadcast by email to our membership in a special mailing.

