

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 26 of 31)*

By Haruko Kataoka

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When children are very young, their left-brain knowledge of the world is not developed. But that is precisely what is so wonderful. Their native right-brain sensibility is immediately instinctive, however. It is a seemingly God-like quality. On the other hand, what children do not possess is stamina. We must not forget this. Children are very well equipped in the areas of concentration, patience and the ability to exert effort that are several levels higher than adults. But because they do not have stamina, they do not have the lengthy attention span necessary to complete tasks. We need to realize this when we approach them; otherwise we will fail.

Young children have not yet learned to deal with issues of everyday life. They cannot differentiate between what is advantageous or disadvantageous, what is loss or gain. That's why they have no motivation or worldly desire. If someone does not push the 'ON' switch, they will not be able to utilize their inherent wonderful ability to concentrate, be patient, or exert any effort. I believe that parents are first in line to turn the switch on. More specifically, it is the mother. This switch is the concrete, visual manifestation for what I believe actually symbolizes love. So if there is no parent who says, "Let's practice," a child will never do it on his own. I use this example often. Let's say you send your child to the supermarket to buy one lemon. I imagine that the child would straight away zoom over to the store, pluck a lemon off the mound of lemons on display, buy it and zoom back home with it. However, if I go to the store, and even though I am not one to shop with any kind of frequency, I would stand in front of the mound of lemons, note the sign with the price of 100 yen per lemon, and as a result, pick out the best lemon available. This is the kind of distinction or knowledge that a child lacks. Please take this developmental difference to heart, and the rest is the exactly the same as adults. The significance of this sameness explains why treating children like children results in their refusal to listen to us.

Please indulge me to boast a little. I have the ability to have children listen to me. It is because I treat them as full-fledged adults. Quite a while ago, right before a group of lessons for very young children, an American teacher forewarned me that there was a child in the group who refused to listen to

anyone. I told her, "Yes, it's okay." Within two hours, many children had lessons. When we were finished, I asked which child was the one who wouldn't listen. The teachers looked a little mortified. They were saying that perhaps my English wasn't so good and I therefore I didn't speak so much and that is why the child listened to me. That was not the reason. It was because I seriously and earnestly worked alongside the child. I worked one-on-one with him as a fellow human being. Children are able to sense this. No matter where they come from, whether they are English people or German people or anyone else, they can tell instantly. They understand immediately that you are an equal and that they must properly respond to you as such.

Nowadays, with the passage of time and age, I have come to know one thing that I can ask children to get their attention. Perhaps, you might try this yourself. If a child is just not paying attention to what we are doing, I ask them, "Are you a baby?" I tried this in Japan and one hundred percent of children say that they are not a baby. I also tried this in America and one hundred percent immediately reply with an emphatic 'No!' This is how much children despise being treated like infants or children.

Another case in point, when we music teachers plan for the children's concerts, we are especially careful about what gets printed in the program. Our first biggest concern is that the children's ages are correct. Of course, it is important that the names are correct. Name mistakes upset parents. However, if a child's age is less than their actual age, that child is very angry. If a seven year old is printed in the program as a 6 year old, it is a huge offense. They declare, "I am NOT 6 years old, I am 7 years old. Why did you make this mistake?" You know, on the contrary, 17-, 18-, 20-year-olds prefer having their ages printed younger than they are. However, young chilc *(Continued on page 3)* that they despise being treated like a child. No matter what it takes, they would like to be treated with the same regard as adults. So in aging just even a little bit sooner, they are aspiring to be treated like adults.

As I mentioned previously, because children react instinctively, judging all matters with their sensibility, they do not make mistakes. However, because they don't think of consequences they misjudge situations that involve gain or loss, advantage or disadvantage. Children being truly

pure of heart can distinguish good from bad. However, it is very confusing/perplexing for children when they have to make a judgment call which involves loss or gain depending on their course of action or a decision.

Because understanding gain or loss, advantage or disadvantage, is absolutely missing in children, we must take them very seriously. This is true not only in piano lessons. It is relevant in all aspects

of daily life, where important issues must be very clearly communicated and explained to children. Furthermore, because children are in such a rush to grow up they are keenly observant of everything that happens in the home. This means they will emulate what they witness in the home. For instance, if a mother tells me how annoyed she is that her child has bad manners, I respond, "Wait a minute, here, aren't you the one with the bad manners in the first place?"

If we, as adults, do not have this kind of self-reflection of our own behavior, I believe there is no chance for a child to be able to succeed and to develop what is good.r

Suzuki Piano Basics Web Site and discussion group:

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

The Danger of Comparisons

By Laura Kauppi

Last year both of my cats had to wear a cone on their heads after being fixed. Echo adjusted exceptionally quickly and spent her time learning new ways to move with the cone. Luna, on the other hand, did not, and spent much of the two weeks trying to remove the cone. Tiny seeds of resentment began growing between Luna and me.

She did other annoying things. Echo keeps her coat shiny and sleek from careful grooming regardless of the season, but Luna's is always dull. And Luna eats too much. Echo adorably begs for human food she knows she can't have, but Luna

just eats every kind of cat food in sight without discrimination.

And Luna just doesn't try hard. Echo quickly found the best part of the house was the bathroom window. It's high, it's warm and it has a great view. Luna, after trying to jump up there twice, stopped trying.



It was all too easy for me to label her the “difficult, disappointing child.”

How often have I shown quiet concern when I hear a parent say “I have one good kid, and one other kid” (or the like). How often had I wondered what it took to get to that space, and yet here I was. (OK, OK, I get it, my cats aren’t children, but bear with me. I’m just trying to show how insidious this is!)

I felt guilty, but I KEPT doing it. Every time Luna did something off, I added it to the pile. When Echo did something adorable, I added it to that pile. Full disclosure? I wanted to stop. It was just too easy to keep comparing.

Eventually, someone stopped me. When we took the cats in for their yearly checkup, they weighed almost exactly the same. Despite looking overweight, Luna is actually a healthy weight for a house cat. It was hard for me to believe, but the vet explained it’s her fur! She has really thick fur, which makes her look chunkier AND

less sleek than her sister. The vet reported she cleans herself just fine!

After that, I felt called out. I’d fallen into a trap I thought I was knowledgeable enough to avoid. I worked hard to fall in love with Luna again, noticing the adorable way she kneads anything soft, the way she stops doing something if you say “no thank you:” not out of fear, but out of respect, the way she has to have things just right before lying down (is that not relatable?!).

While I think this situation has mostly righted itself, I think there is always a danger for new situations to crop up if I let down my guard. It is our nature constantly to compare (perhaps a relic of early humans who needed these constant comparisons to stay alive). Whether we compare this year to the last, or an ex to our current partner, or our children to our sibling’s child, the potential for our labeling and consequent disappointment remains.

If Luna had been my only cat, I never would have thought any of these things. I would have delighted in her antics, assumed her coat was healthy and never categorized so much of her behavior as “bad.” These comparisons only existed because I had another cat to compare her with. This can happen with so many things. I have heard many people say “2021 was an awful year.” While that might have been true, there definitely were good moments in 2021, even if they were few and far between. In 10, 15, 30 years what will they remember? They will only remember saying “2021 was a bad year.” They will have lost their good moments forever.

Unfortunately, this also can happen within our families. My brother was the “easy kid.” I, on the other hand, was not.

As a piano teacher, I can see this happening in families, both with sweeping generalizations (such as when one child is labeled “the difficult one” or “the unfocused one”) and in hundreds of small ways (such as when one child learns to play both hands in 2nd grade and the other child starts hands together in 6th grade or when one child knows the answer in a game right away, or has a “better” lesson).

I’m rather horrified to admit there were times, as a beginner teacher, I played into parental comparisons, finding myself saying out loud things like “your brother could do this faster,” and “at least one kid had a good lesson.” Hopefully I have evolved to where I will no longer engage, but I can easily see what happens to parents. It’s insidious, it sometimes feels like venting, and it’s dangerous since it can rob parents of the joys and achievements of a tiny person who means the world to them.

How do we stop making these harmful comparisons? First is to be aware of when we're making them, out loud or even just mentally. If one slips out, it can be repaired with an apology to the child, or by finding something positive to say. Noticing things I love about Luna helped me change how I framed my opinions about her behavior.

With music it's easy: EVERYONE has strengths (and struggles), whether you notice your child's good dynamics, smooth tempo, soft LH, good Twinkles or just that they showed up, you can find so much that they are doing well, without comparing.

Funnily enough, parents often compare their children using exact measurements (such as when child A was on Honeybee, when they finished the book, etc..), when



making music relies on so much more. Making comparisons, parents deprive themselves of recognizing non-linear achievements. Instead, try actually to listen to how the child sounds when they play a piece and to empathize with how they feel the music. Share excitement with each other.

I now wonder how many adorable moments I missed with Luna by treating her poorly. If there's a takeaway from my own mistakes, I hope it is to celebrate every person, every day, every year with its own identity and don't allow the thief of comparison, to steal a single moment of your life or the life of your child.

Researching Recordings

By Karen Hagberg

From *Matsumoto News*, Vol.3, no.3, October 1990

In my many years at music school I was required to do various different kinds of listening. There was the “ear training” part of basic music theory in which I was taught to recognize intervals, chords, harmonic progressions and non-harmonic tones. In classes on orchestral music I learned to recognize the sounds of the different musical instruments both alone and in combination and to identify the great works. In form and analysis class I learned to hear the formal arrangement of a piece as it was being played. In piano literature class I learned to recognize the styles of various composers, and in music history classes I was taught to identify music from various time periods and from different countries.

Some of this listening required a great deal of study and practice. I particularly remember, in a piano literature class, having to identify the opus number and movement of all the Beethoven Sonatas after hearing only the very first sound of the movement.

I do not recall having been required to listen for tone. In fact, I did not really begin listening intently to tone until I came to Japan. My former music education required me to listen to everything *but* tone. As is usually the case in Western education, we

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preoccupy ourselves with those things that can be analyzed—things that can be graded on examinations. We typically avoid the more elusive aspects of any

discipline in the context of academia until someone devises some way to quantify it.

It is no wonder then, that teachers may be confused about which recordings to recommend to their students, not having been taught to judge

It is no wonder then, that teachers may be confused about which recordings to recommend to their students, not having been taught to judge performances on matters of tone and on the basics of time, rhythm and melody.

performances on matters of tone and on the basics of time, rhythm and melody. I notice that teachers always ask Kataoka Sensei for advice on which recordings to use as if they, themselves, have no idea whatsoever.

It is unfortunate, however, if a teacher simply takes a recommendation, buys one recording, and listens only to that one recording, for it is in comparative listening that we can begin to understand why one recording may be better than others. To really understand this, teachers should be familiar with multiple available recordings. [Ed. note: Since I wrote this in 1990 it has become so easy to listen to multiple performances on the internet and that the task is no longer nearly so daunting, or expensive, as before.]

If we or our students are studying a certain piece, not only should we be familiar with many recordings, but it should be clear to the teacher, on hearing just a random measure or two, which recording is being played. Performances are that distinctive, and as teachers our ears need to be trained to such distinctions.

When I was in graduate school, a student submitted an audition tape consisting of copies of professional recordings. (This was before the days when video auditions were required.) One of the pieces was actually a recording by one of the faculty members judging the audition. Incredibly, nobody noticed that the various performances were not by the same person on the same piano, nor did the faculty member recognize his own performance! It was not until after the student

arrived at the school and obviously could not play well that people went back and discovered what had happened. In America we all come from a long tradition of not being taught to listen carefully. We have been taught by teachers who, themselves, were not taught to hear.

But performances are like people. There are no two alike. And we can, with enough familiarity, learn to distinguish among them and to determine the best ones to recommend to students.

Most of us know a few people we can recognize on the phone after all they say is "Hi." [Before the days of Caller ID.]. We

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recognize these voices because they have called hundreds of times and have said "Hi" in the same way. If we listen to a recording hundreds of times, its uniqueness becomes similarly very clear.

As I was writing this, a teacher trainee who has studied for many years with Kataoka Sensei came into my room as I was listening to a recording. "Who's playing?" I asked. She immediately said, "Glenn Gould." She had never heard this particular recording of a Beethoven Sonata and did not even know that Gould had recorded it. Nor was it one of Gould's more "eccentric" interpretations. She simply has come to recognize his sound as if he were her own mother on the phone saying, "Hi."

When teachers listen hundreds of times to several recordings of the pieces they are teaching, the really good ones become obvious. (Just for fun, add a recording of your own performance and try not to blame what you hear on the recording equipment as Kataoka Sensei has said she did when first hearing a recording of her own playing!) If nothing else, less good performances become boring after several hearings. We begin to appreciate how dangerous it is for children, who hate being

bored, to hear anything but the best performances.

Aside from the boredom factor, what do we listen for? Very simply, the Basics of music as best we understand them, the things we teach from the very first lesson: Beautiful, ringing tone; smooth and singing legato lines that rise and fall with natural crescendo and diminuendo; quiet, yet rhythmic accompaniments; good, strong overall rhythm; short notes and ornaments that are lighter in tone than longer notes; strong-beat notes that sound deeper and heavier than notes on weaker beats; space enough around every note so that it can be clearly heard. If a performer can execute a piece following, really following, these few principles that govern music as it is

... what do we listen for? Very simply, the Basics of music...Beautiful, ringing tone; smooth and singing legato lines that rise and fall with natural crescendo and diminuendo; quiet, yet rhythmic accompaniments; good, strong overall rhythm; short notes and ornaments that are lighter in tone than longer notes; strong-beat notes that sound deeper and heavier than notes on weaker beats; space enough around every note so that it can be clearly heard.

naturally sung by the human voice, not only will the performance be not boring, but it will be exciting, even brilliant. After hundreds of hearings you will not tire of it. Children will be excited by recordings that excite you.

There are only a handful of truly world-class performers. Piano teachers must understand the difference between these people and the rest. Otherwise, how can we possibly know what it is we are teaching? Why bother teaching mediocrity? Children, as we know, can hear the difference.

Of course, seeking advice and guidance in the matter of good recordings is fine. But the advice should be taken as a springboard to our own serious research, and not as an excuse for not doing the research at all.

[Postscript in 2022: Kataoka Sensei, in the 1980's while I was living in Japan, would point out that, when Dr. Suzuki began teaching, the recording of musical performances was a new technology. In those days, post WWI, only the really great performers made recordings, so the available recordings were, more often than not, very high quality. By the 1980's there were several different recordings of the popular pieces in the piano repertoire performed by players of all levels. This was valuable for

research, but Sensei always pointed out that it was dangerous if a teacher were to choose simply on the basis of cost or availability. In those days it was the practice of teachers to make taped copies of great performances for students' listening. Nobody listens to audiotapes anymore, and by now in 2022, we may hear dozens, even hundreds of performances on the internet of a single piece. Without specific guidance our students may be listening to really bad performances that they find with their first haphazard internet search. It is a new world.

What are your methods for getting students to listen to the performances you want them to be hearing? Please share

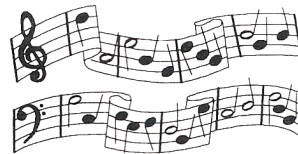
your ideas with other teachers here. Next deadline: April 15. Thank you!]



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.



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