

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
Barbara Meixner
Sacramento Teachers
Research Group

Send Articles to:

Piano Basics Foundation
67 Shepard St. Rochester NY 14620
kh@hagbergsuzuki.com
FAX: 585-244-3542

Memberships / Subscriptions

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

Next Deadline: October 15, 2022

How to Capture the Hearts of Children

(Part 3b of 3)

By Haruko Kataoka

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter
Vol. 13 No. 10, April 5, 2004
from a Lecture delivered at the
39th Chubu Japan Medical Congress of Pediatrics, Matsumoto,
August 24, 2003 (4 months before Sensei's death in January, 2004)
Translated by Chisa Aoki and
Teri Paradero
Edited by Karen Hagberg

I am always contemplating, what exactly we should be teaching children. We should be teaching them the basics. Everything is about the basics. The one thing that I most lament is that present-day Japanese do not sit on a chair with good posture; nor are they able to sit on the *tatami* (straw mats on floor). We have lost good posture. This is another aspect of the sign of our times.

Since the end of the war, life on the *tatami* has disappeared. Now our life is conducted at a desk, sitting on a chair. We have lost the opportunity to develop the ability to have proper posture.

I saw a television program where a teacher neglects to ask the students to sit with good posture. As a result the students bring their eye level down to the desktop

resulting in rounded backs as they write. I wonder why this teacher does not teach good posture.

During the Edo period, when children were educated in temple elementary schools, the brush was the writing instrument. If your back was not straight, you could not utilize the soft end of the brush to write. With advances in civilization arrived the advent of modern day writing instruments like the ballpoint pen and the pencil. Because these writing tools are firm and solid, there is no need for the human body to be strong. People like my mother who were born in the Meiji period wore kimonos and lived the traditional Japanese way of sitting on the *tatami*. Upon returning home from school, my mother would sit properly and bow with her hands positioned in front of her knees and announce that she had come home, or else she would be scolded.

Nowadays, I feel that all basics have been lost---to sit properly with a strong back and to listen to a lot of classical music...

However, related to this topic of listening to classical music, much scientific and medical research has been conducted especially in the field of rehabilitation. In America, they have

made great strides and advances in this

area. About twenty years ago, I had the opportunity to go to a children's hospital in Calgary, Canada. Immediately upon entering the hospital, I noticed that classical music was being quietly aired from speakers mounted on the ceiling. Classical music continued to be played for the entire duration of my visit, so I asked a doctor if they played classical music all the time. He responded, "Twenty-four hours." I inquired what the reason was for playing classical music. He said that it helped patients tremendously particularly those who were seriously ill. With my limited ability to speak English, that was all I could manage to ask. However this experience has had a profound impact on me.

Various research about listening to classical music, more specifically, the music of Mozart, has shed light on the positive effects on the human body. So from the time children are born, or even sooner, when they are still in the womb, they should be listening to a lot of good classical music. Then, when they are born, all the adults who are involved in the children's upbringing must treat them as individual human beings and take the job of nurturing them very seriously.

Long ago, Dr. Suzuki said that mothers seem to think that because they have given birth to their children they are free to do whatever they want with them. Of course, in the beginning because babies are helpless, mothers change their children's diapers. However, they maintain this view of their children's helplessness through-out their upbringing. So parents forget to bring them up to be independent and self-reliant. This, Dr. Suzuki stated, becomes the problem. I am in total agreement.

Adding Community Service to Your Piano Program

By Karen Hagberg

Our longtime member, Judy Wely of Campbell California, reports on an

incredibly successful program, conceived in 1998 by her former

student, Maya Raman (see accompanying article), called Kids Helping Kids. Their recitals, with free admission, were always dedicated as fundraisers for various local children's organizations: Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, Second Harvest Food Bank, Children's Sub-Acute Hospital, Eastfield Ming Quong Foundation, Sunday Friends Foundation, and Child Advocates of Santa Clara County to name a few. Over the past 23 years, this effort has raised over \$85,000 from donations from concertgoers and support from local businesses. In addition to raising money, the students have donated hundreds of hours of time to efforts of local food distribution programs. A recent recital asked attendees to bring a stuffed animal to augment their donations of toys to the local firefighters' Toys for Tots program.

In the Suzuki Piano Basics community, the famous 10-Piano Concerts in Matsumoto, begun in 1990, were always designated as

fund-raisers for UNICEF, raising thousands of dollars to improve the lives of children around the world. Every 18 months generous donations were collected among the families of participants and from local and nationally-known businesses. After various disasters in Japan (Kobe earthquake and Fukushima tsunami), funds were raised to support victims. Kataoka Sensei received several commendations from the United Nations and from mayors of cities throughout Japan. The Sacramento 10-Piano Concerts were also fund-raisers for UNICEF and for tsunami relief.

Recently, we have heard from Ruth Miura in Barcelona, who has sent out an appeal for support of Suzuki teachers and families who are being displaced by the war in Ukraine (see earlier email). The need continues for this valiant effort.

Piano lessons need not happen in a vacuum. Students can be encouraged to share their abilities to impact their communities far beyond the confines of their teacher's studio. Children can be taught, and motivated by, a sense of purpose and the knowledge that they are able to help others.

What can we include in our education of the whole child? Whether it be fund-raising for good causes, bringing music and hospitality to nursing homes, or volunteering for local projects, children and young adults reap lifelong benefits from such experiences. Let's roll up our sleeves!



Ruth Miura with her young student and Ukrainian refugee piano teacher Alexandra Pershyna.

The First Kids Helping Kids Event

By Maya Raman, former student of Judy Wely

When I was five years old, I knew I wanted to be a doctor, not because I wanted to help people, but because doctors were prestigious and made a lot of money. Since I was five years old, I have played the piano. I did not take ordinary piano lessons. I took lessons through the Suzuki Method, taught by first listening to the music and then emulating the melodies and harmonies to the best of my ability.

From Twinkle Twinkle Little Star to Chopin's Fantaisie-Impromptu I would always follow the same process: right hand, left hand, hands together. Since my youth, the Suzuki Method has taught me to appreciate music through listening first and reading second. It was not until this time last year that I was able to fully understand the loving and nurturing that had been embedded in my playing for so many years.

In December 1998 my fellow piano students and I decided to put on a charity concert to raise money for the children of Eastfield Ming Quong. The

recital consisted of pieces played on as many as ten pianos at once, performed by students ranging in age from four to eighteen. We would call it the Kids Helping Kids Recital. The endless ticking of the metronome that was used to keep us on the beat lasted several hours until the point when we kids could all play in sync with each other. We did not allow ourselves to play anything less than perfect. Amidst the whining and bickering of kids who wanted to end practice, I sat there and began to understand the significance of our hard work and felt as though I had never been part of something so wonderful. On the day of the recital, nervous as I was, I sat down at the piano along with the six other girls for the last piece of the night, De Falla's Fire Dance.

I closed my eyes, breathed out, and brought my hands up to the keys. Silence. And then it began; the piece flowed with such exhilaration. At the climactic moment I perceived the meaning of my music on a whole new level. The fulfillment that performing brought me was more than personal satisfaction—it was something that I did for myself, the crowd, and the children of Eastfield Ming Quong. And when I stood up to take the final bow, I remembered back to when I was five years old playing scales, chords, and arpeggios at my weekly thirty-minute lessons, never knowing it would bring me this far.

A long time ago I used to want to be a doctor for all the wrong reasons, Now I can look at such a job knowing that there is so much more. Granted, I do not come from a low-income family, nor have I been raised under unfortunate circumstances, but I feel that using my strengths to help people who are less fortunate than I am is most fulfilling. And to think it all started with Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.



Maya Raman, former student of Judy Wely, Compton, California.

Speaking “Piano”

Part 2&3 of 3

By Karen Hagberg

From Matsumoto News, Vol.3, no.4, November 1990

A person who can teach piano to another person is, simply, someone whose hearing of piano must be more acute—someone who can correct “foreign” (i.e. unnatural) sounds and movements of the body that create those sounds. As Kataoka Sensei always said, *anyone* can memorize a piece of music and play the notes, just as any Japanese person, with enough study, can read a page of English (even Shakespeare). But to *play* a piece well, or to speak English with ease and natural fluency, a person must be taught through sound. The student must come to hear something they cannot presently hear, and then to produce the natural sound with the body. There is no other way to fluency. One can spend a lifetime learning *about* music or *about* English (after all, these make for interesting study), but unless the ear and the body are developed together to create a natural sound, they will never be able to play or speak with the ease which we all fluency.

It begins with the ability to make a single

...to *play* a piece well, or to speak English with ease and natural fluency, a person must be taught through sound.

sound, a tone on the piano, one word in English. After this, another tone or another word may be added as the ability to flow naturally from one to the other is developed. After this, questions of natural rhythm and inflection may be addressed. In music, it is impossible to teach rhythm, phrasing, or dynamics until the body can make one natural tone and then to play two tones together in comfortable succession. It is impossible to speak English before being able to say “the” without screwing up the tongue and mouth in unnatural ways. Saying “the” correctly is the easiest way to say it.

Making a natural tone is the easiest way to play the piano.

I formerly taught piano as a Japanese teacher teaches English. I taught “about” piano playing, but my students could not play. I was unable to hear what they were doing wrong and then, of course, I was unable to teach how to make a good sound. I was happy if my students could memorize the

It begins with the ability to make a single sound, a tone on the piano, one word in English.

notes. My previous teachers taught me in the same way. I knew nothing else.

I always wondered how to distinguish a good performance from a bad one. It can be very confusing, because one always encounters a variety of opinions after a concert. I have always wanted to believe that this is more than simply a matter of taste. Why was it that the “great” performers were considered great? Why did some people still dislike the playing of supposedly great performers? I felt that there was an absolute standard to be applied somewhere, but I did not know what it was. I knew that I myself could not hear it. The question of absolutes in music and art preoccupied me for several years. I studied, and then taught the philosophy of

The analogy with language is helpful here. Any English-speaking person knows when they hear English spoken by a native speaker.

aesthetics in graduate school in an attempt to grasp our human concept of absolute beauty. But even that study left me with more questions than answers.

The analogy with language is helpful here. Any English-speaking person knows when they hear English spoken by a native speaker. The dialect may be wildly different. It could be standard American, or Australian, or Cockney, or African-American, or New England, but all of this English has one thing in common. The native speaker speaks it naturally, fluently, without having to think about it. It has a

natural, flowing rhythm. The tongue and mouth operate in a totally relaxed way. Pronunciation is consistent. Inflection flows easily. The foreign speaker of English, on the other hand, makes countless mistakes in every sentence: mistakes of pronunciation, declamation, inflection. Native speakers can identify the foreigner instantly.

The great performers play the way natives speak their own language.

The great performers play the way natives speak their own language. There are a variety of “dialects” if you will, but fluency is fluency. The less-good players (that is, *most* players) make a number of mistakes in every phrase. Some people are attracted to the playing of less-good players for the same reason I like speaking Japanese with other foreigners: people who can speak and hear only broken Japanese are attracted to the Japanese of other non-native speakers, for that is what they most easily understand. It does not mean, because some people like it, that this is good Japanese. The listener with the well-developed ear can distinguish true fluency, and will always prefer it. The great pianists play with their own personal dialect, but they are always natural and fluent. This is very different from the pianist who can play all the notes but who cannot hear or produce natural tone, rhythm, phrasing, articulation, etc., whose body struggles in unnatural ways in the attempt to produce a desired effect.

There are many levels of unnatural performance, of course, from the person who stumbles through a piece, sometimes actually stopping and making mistakes, to the person who can get from one end of a piece to the other without missing a note. But playing all the notes, in itself, is nothing if not done with ease and fluent, producing beautiful tone.

There is a concept in Zen that identifies expertise as the point at which there is no conflict between a person’s will and the

There is a concept in Zen that identifies expertise as the point at which there is no conflict between a person’s will and the resulting action.

resulting action. There are few endeavors in life in which

most of us experience this level of ability, but all of us speak our native language in this way. We speak whatever we wish to say without having to think at all about how to say it. Anyone who has ever tried to converse in a foreign language can appreciate just how wonderful this accomplishment is.

...playing all the notes, in itself, is nothing if not done with ease and fluent, producing beautiful tone.

When a performer’s intention comes into their playing with similar effortlessness, that person is truly playing with ability. A pianist struggling against the physics of the piano and the physiology of their own body cannot combine the will with action at all. They may, indeed, play all the notes, but a trained ear will recognize the performance as one of a “foreigner,” full of obvious mistakes.

The ability of young children to learn language and to play music is always startling when we encounter it.

The ability of young children to learn language and to play music is always startling when we encounter it.

There are so many examples that I hardly need to cite another one, but I cannot resist. I have recently been teaching English to a brother and sister ages 12 and 10 in preparation for their family’s move to the U.S. next year. Already these children have developed the usual problems Japanese people have in pronouncing English, as most of the English they have heard has been spoken by other Japanese people. I spend most of my time with them trying to get them to be able to make the sounds we use in English, but it is difficult for them. “Thursday,” for example, is very hard for them to say. It usually comes out in four syllables: “Sa-roo-zu-jay.”

These children have a four-year-old brother and a very wise mother who sits in the room with her younger son during my lessons while he plays quietly off in the corner. When I am drilling a word over and over again, encouraging the two older children to move their tongues and lips and mouths so that

they can say it correctly, the little boy sometimes quite absentmindedly repeats out loud to himself, "Thursday, Thursday, Thursday, Thursday," with no Japanese accent whatsoever. He sounds just like an American child. The older children are really jealous of him.

Yet again, this experience has shown me how very easy it is to teach young children. All a teacher need do in the beginning is to teach parents how to provide the right environment. It is also clear how very damaging the wrong environment can be. The two older children may never speak English without an accent, but the four-year-old can already produce all the sounds he will need in English effortlessly. If the older children had been exposed to fluent English at an earlier age their present task would not be nearly so difficult.

Teaching children is easy. They can hear subtle differences in tone, and their bodies are flexible. And despite the fact that we are not great artists ourselves, Suzuki Sensei assures us teachers that, with the help of great recordings, we can, we *should*, teach all our students to play better than we ourselves do.

Suzuki Sensei assures us teachers that, with the help of great recordings, we can, we *should*, teach all our students to play better than we ourselves do.

Teaching people who have been brought up in a poor environment, however, requires the patience to insist that listening be developed and that the body be used naturally. When working with her trainees (all of us having been taught piano by teachers who did not teach us to listen, by teachers who are like Japanese English teachers), Kataoka Sensei often stops us after just a note or two and tries over and over again to have us hear that those first notes are full of mistakes. Lately, she often compares our playing to mumbled speech. Sometimes we just cannot hear what she wants, and it makes

her very frustrated. We often wonder what she is talking about. This must be how my English students feel.

Kataoka Sensei likes to tell a story she read about Bach, who experienced the same frustration while conducting his choir at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. He tried to get them to sing a good *legato* line. Finally, in desperation, Bach tore off his wig and threw it at the singers. Kataoka Sensei loves this story. She says, "I wish I had a wig I could tear off and throw at you. Imagine what a dramatic effect it would have. There I'd be, without my wig, just like Bach. Maybe then you would understand you are not playing *legato*."

It began with my confidence that they *could* do it, followed by my insistence that they *must*.

Yes, it is very difficult to get students to open their ears and hear things they have not been taught to hear, especially when they *think* their hearing is just fine. My English students think they are speaking English too. As their English teacher, however, it is my job constantly to assure them that they are not speaking English until they are doing it naturally. This is the only way they can learn to do it. I must say that, since taking this new approach, my students sometimes surprise me with entire sentences spoken as easily as I would say them. It began with my confidence that they *could* do it, followed by my insistence that they *must*. Piano students, too, will consistently improve if taught in this way.

We need to be careful not to teach our students to play like "foreigners."



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.



*Happy
Autumn!*