

# 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*

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## BASICS

**By Haruko Kataoka**

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### ***Basics Foundation News***

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When looking up the word *basics* in the Japanese dictionary, it says "the foundation of any pursuit from which develops growth and change." Furthermore, upon looking up the term *foundation* we find it defined as "the most important, crucial juncture in any discipline." This is so true. In the beginning of any learning process, we must handle the basics with the utmost care.

The study of academic subjects in school, whether it be Japanese, mathematics, English, etc, inevitably involves very important basics pertinent to each discipline. I know a student who attended an interim school where he focused on basic skills and theory of mathematics for a year while he was waiting for another chance to enter a university. As a result of this work, he developed the confidence to solve any problem he encountered.

Basics are of utmost importance in the world of sports as well. Being a physical discipline, results are immediately apparent depending on how the body is used. Therefore, those in sports never fail to be aware of the basics and to

take care of them. Music is the same. The way in which the piano is played is also the same. When the basics in piano However, the way children have been traditionally educated in music has been based on the mistaken premise that children are naive and immature. Music has been taught irresponsibly as fun/play time and as recreational activity, forgetting the basics altogether. Music is sound. It is not something one can see. You cannot touch or hold it in your hand. Therefore it is easy to lose focus and teach in a careless, superficial and improper way.

Architecture is, quite obviously, an exact science. If a structure is built carelessly, disregarding building codes, it will not be safe. Thus we find the same situation in buildings. Buildings constructed with disregard to the basics will result in disaster, just like the six-story building in Egypt that collapsed during an earthquake (magnitude 5.8 Richter scale, October 12, 1992 in Cairo, resulting in 552 fatalities).

It is clearly evident that if the first floor of a building is not built properly, it is impossible to build the second floor let alone a fifth floor. However, in the world of music education, we see teachers working on the fifth floor while carelessly ignoring the basics and without a solid first or second floor. The reason why we collapse under the pressure of a state of emergency (when performing in a concert, taking an entrance exam, etc) is the same as a carelessly constructed building.

What are the basics for music? In the case of piano, the fundamental basic is how to produce tone that is the most

playing become abilities, any piece can be understood and then it becomes possible to be able to play any piece.

musical, heartfelt and ringing. In order to produce such a tone, both a musical instrument (such as a piano) and a human being is necessary. The other basic issue concerns the condition of the human body that is able to control this musical instrument.

Whenever a human being does something physical, it is of utmost importance to take care of maintaining a natural body without the use of any unnatural physical force. In order to play the piano, we use our fingers. To figure out how to be able to use the fingers in the most natural and effortless way is the foundation of piano playing. Furthermore, basics are always simple. They are so simple that human beings tend to forget them. For some unknown reason, human beings are drawn to complex challenges. Of course, this is not necessarily a bad human trait, but we must not forget the simple basics.

From early times, prominent music pedagogues have been well aware of the simplicity of basics. With this understanding, they composed practice pieces or etudes (Czerny and Hanon, among many) that are very correct theoretically speaking and effectively reinforce basic techniques. Adults, armed with the understanding of the importance of the basics, can commit to doing many repetitions of simple basics using these traditional, theoretically correct etudes. However, if children are made to work only on the basics in these kinds of etudes, they will become bored and start to dislike music.

Consequently, we must find a teaching method that isolates the basics while using pieces (Suzuki repertoire) that are musically enjoyable for children. Those of us who teach children must be very careful. Mothers...please do not feel bad or think that your children don't measure up just because they are assigned the same things over and over. Please do cooperate with this method.

Let us study the basics from Book 1, and then again in Book 2, Book 3, Book 4, and so on. The repertoire gradually becomes a little difficult but the basics are always the same, and will continue to be studied in advanced pieces. The basics are the same for advanced

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## From the Editor

Some may have thought that this newsletter has gotten “stale” in the past few years, with our reprinting of Dr. Kataoka’s articles and my writings from Matsumoto News. But as this last newsletter goes out, I want to remind all Suzuki Piano Basics teachers that Suzuki Piano Basics really succeeds when teachers fully appreciate the value of repetition. I came to this Method over forty years ago being frustrated with the way my piano-teacher colleagues seemed to jump around from one new idea to the next, ditching the materials they were using last year and replacing them with the newest thing they heard about at a workshop. They seemed to choose repertoire for their students willy-nilly, always wanting to teach different pieces, as if teaching the same pieces was somehow uninteresting.

Suzuki Piano Method is nothing like that. I recall Dr. Kataoka and Dr. Suzuki both hammering the message that something is learned only by repetition—by many, many repetitions (at times they would throw around the number 100,000). Not much is accomplished by dabbling into one thing after another.

We are leaving all of you with our website (to go there simply search Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation). On it, Dr. Kenneth Wilburn, with the help of our long-term member, Carol Wunderle Dry, has provided videos of Dr. Kataoka teaching every piece in the Suzuki Piano repertoire, videos of her lectures (with transcriptions painstakingly transcribed by Carol), editions of this newsletter for the past 25 years (also transcribed by Carol), an invitation to participate in Suzuki L (a site where Suzuki Piano Basics teachers may share ideas, ask questions of each other, etc.), and other interesting and useful information. It is all there for anyone to pursue the true teaching of Suzuki Method based on the fundamental principle of repetition.

Please consider making repetition the foundation of all your teaching.

I am proud of the work the Foundation has accomplished over the past several decades. The people who have worked so diligently to preserve Dr. Kataoka’s legacy have succeeded. It is our hope that, going forward, there will be teachers who remind themselves, on a daily basis, what made the Suzuki Method so successful, and that they utilize the materials on the website on a regular basis to deepen and enrich their understanding of this wonderful Method.

Editing this newsletter has been a great joy of my life. Thank you all for reading.

Karen Hagberg

students. Just as we watch our steps                      no matter what we do, we must always start with step one.  
when we walk, let us never forget that,

# *Suzuki Piano Basics Method*

## *Is the Best*

**By Linda Nakagawa**

There are so many thoughts and ideas roaming around in my head. Having learned so much by reading books and articles, having my own lessons with the Japanese teachers, learning to listen to my own sound and working with my students, I am very grateful how this method of teaching has enriched my life. I thoroughly enjoy working with my students and I believe that all the “Basics of music” are learned in the first two books of the Suzuki Piano Method. It’s really true and the better I get at teaching Books One and Two, the easier the following books become.

***We learn how to sit at the piano properly, how to position our arms, how to use each finger when playing a note, how to listen to our own***

Just think about Twinkle A and the “abilities” we start to develop in ourselves and our students. We learn how to sit at the piano properly, how to position our arms, how to use each finger when playing a note, how to listen to our own sound and much more. We must demonstrate with the sound that we produce, not by the words that come out of our mouths. We do this with lots of repetition and demonstration. That means we have to demonstrate the best sound ourselves. The students learn to listen to sound and hopefully work to create their best tone. This takes concentration on the parts of both teacher and student. Sometimes a student will try to play with me when I really mean for them to “listen” to my sound so they can try to better their sound. I always stop them because “how can one listen with concentration” while also playing?

However, as time goes on and the students can play the order of notes with the right hand, we need to play with them to help them with the beat, rhythm and melody. This goes on throughout Books One and Two. We are their metronome. They start to use the metronome after Minuet 2, but only for the two octave scales. It’s a very difficult thing to play with a machine. This ability takes time to develop.

Before the students start reading (at the beginning of Book 2), we are developing their ability to listen and produce different sounds. For example, right hand emphasizing beat one and playing a clear staccato and

***There is a lot of skill development to be learned in Book One...Book 2...reading one hand and one note at a time...then learning how to pay attention to the time signature, key signature, rests, voicing, articulation, etc.***

legato tone, and listening for “rests” in the melody. The left hand

also has to learn the skill of playing a deep beat one and with a soft “thumb” sound. And then the hands have to develop their independence (melody and accompaniment). There is a lot of skill development to be learned in Book One. Then there is Book Two. Students are introduced to reading one hand and one note at a time, then in time learning how to pay attention to the time signature, key signature, rests, voicing, articulation etc. I play a lot with my students mainly because I feel I have a better sound and rhythm, at least for a while. It is a fact that students take on the sounds and habits of their teacher. This used to scare me tremendously, but I decided I would just have to keep improving and trying my best.

***Using the palm creates a bad sound no matter how beautiful the melody is and using the palm makes it extremely difficult to play with clarity.***

If they can develop most of the skills required in the two books, things really begin to get easier. After they finish their first reading book, I start them on the Czerny series, which is absolutely wonderful! Book 3 is mostly scales, but they’ve been playing scales for most of Book 2. So, at this level there should never be any “up and down” motion of the hands as the scale passages are

be played. A very common problem amongst pianists is that there is a strong tendency to use the palm. Using the palm creates a bad sound no matter how beautiful the melody is and using the palm makes it extremely difficult to play with clarity.

No matter how advanced the repertoire, Twinkles and “Down Ups” are needed occasionally to refine the hearing and balance the body.

Many years ago Kataoka Sensei observed that American teachers were beginning to be able to teach Basics quite well in Books 1 and 2, but that our students beyond those levels became weaker, less balanced, oblivious to tone, just sloppy. When asked why she thought that was the case, she replied, “Because after Book 2 they apparently stop teaching the Basics.”

Then, in answer to the follow-up question: Then what do you think they

ARE teaching? Her response,

“They must be teaching music, or something like that!”

Are we still teachers who rely on teaching “music” in the traditional sense instead of Basics after Book 2? Are we not happy with how our students are playing in Books 3 and up? Are we reluctant to pursue the kind of repetition that produces competent players?

Learning how to play the piano is not just decoding the black dots on the page. There are many skills needed to create beautiful sounds from the piano. These skills open the doors to the world of music. I strongly believe that, if we can teach the first two books thoroughly, and then the subsequent books THOROUGHLY utilizing the Basics in every lesson, this wonderful world of playing and making beautiful sounds on the piano is possible. We must continually listen to tone, pay attention to detail and try to remain in the world of sound. Knowledge is not enough—especially in the education that we do.

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**Suzuki Piano Basics Website and discussion group:**

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

# Unlocking the Heart

*By Karen Hagberg  
From Matsumoto News, Vol.3, no.6, January 1991*

“Play with heart; play with living soul.”  
“Beautiful tone, beautiful heart.”  
“Beautiful tone with living heart.”  
“Tone has living soul.”  
“Where love is deep, much can be accomplished.”

These are some of Dr. Suzuki’s most famous quotations. He says them often and writes them on the wall hangings he presents to visitors who come to his school. They embody the most elusive, yet probably the most important, aspect of musical performance. How are we to understand them?

First, I think we must fully realize the difference between music as played by a living, breathing human being and music produced mechanically, such as on a player piano. Before the advent of sound recordings, great pianists made piano cylinders that would then be mechanically “played back.” If we believe that this method of sound “reproduction” can adequately represent what the pianist did, we cannot possibly understand what Dr. Suzuki is talking about.

## ***Music is a fine art.***

Music is a fine art. Aesthetically, philosophically, it has been often considered the highest art form, the

one that comes closest to our human comprehension of perfection, or the ideal, or, if you will, of God. This is probably so, not only because musical composition can be works of art in themselves, but also because the person performing the piece adds an immediacy, a direct connection between the composition and the listener.

Musical performance is a wonderful thing. We not only hear a piece of music, but we can also experience another human being in the act of contemplating it. In the case of a truly great performer, this act of contemplation is so deep, so complete, that it can approach, or even define, the outer limits of our ability to understand perfection and beauty. Because the

***...what we experience is another’s heart speaking directly to our heart, a soul speaking to our soul. Dr. Suzuki is referring to these things.***

performer is a human being, the contemplation is achieved by what we call a heart and a soul; and what we experience is another’s heart speaking directly to our heart, a soul speaking to our soul. Dr. Suzuki is referring to these things.

Whenever I try to understand this phenomenon, I think about once having heard Horowitz play the first upbeat/downbeat of Schumann’s *Traumerei* (from *Kinderszenen*). These two notes were so beautiful that they immediately brought tears to my eyes. It was a sound that could only have been made by another human being. It could never have been mechanically produced. Understanding this is requisite to being able to study tone as “living soul.”

***...a sound that could only have been made by another human being ...never have been mechanically produced. Understanding this is requisite to being able to study tone as “living soul.”***

Kataoka Sensei poses the Zen-like question, "If a cat walks on a keyboard, do we hear the true sound of the instrument? That is, if a living thing which possesses neither a heart or soul in human terms produces sound on a configuration of strings and wood, is this the sound that constitutes what we call music?"

**...all music, on all instruments may be played...as if our bodies our hearts, our souls were wrapped around them, being one with the tone.**

When I was a teenager I wanted to play the 'cello. I sensed there was a special intimacy involved in playing such an instrument around which I could literally wrap my entire body; that a performer were actually *required*, on the 'cello, to play with heart and soul. I was discouraged by my father who obviously understood the nature of the instrument in the same way and considered it somehow too immodest for a woman to play. But *all* music, on *all* instruments may be played this way, as if our bodies our hearts, our souls were wrapped around them, being one with the tone.

How does one approach the piano, a very large, mechanically complex arrangement that we touch only with our fingertips, in the same way one plays a 'cello?

The complexity of the action of a modern piano has led many people, including teachers at prominent conservatories, to conclude that it matters very little how a pianist depresses a key, that the mechanical configuration produces the same tone, regardless. Such people content themselves with merely studying the ability to play all the notes of a piece,

which in piano music, where many things occur simultaneously, can indeed be quite a feat of coordination and mental effort in itself. But if this were all there were to playing the piano, we would not experience the range of expression we can hear at the hands of a great pianist. The piano is no less expressive than a 'cello or any other instrument. There is much more than the act of playing the notes. The art of playing the piano can only be studied *after* the notes are memorized and can be played. Playing all the notes is just the beginning, and it is, truly, the *easiest* aspect of a pianist's job.

But unfortunately, sitting before this big hunk of wood and strings, most pianists develop an adversarial relationship to the piano, one which actively prevents expression. The piano is hard, so our bodies become hard in response. We are impressed with the act of memorizing notes, so our brains become consumed with effort. Both physically and mentally we leave ourselves no room in which to contemplate, to listen to, the tone we are producing, the music we wish to make.

There are many challenges for the piano teacher: to understand the expressive possibilities of our

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instrument; to research in our own playing how to use our bodies to create the tone we know a piano can make; to open our hearts and love our own sound; and *then*, possibly most difficult of all, to teach these things to our students. The task is endlessly fascinating, as it is limited only by our highest aesthetic sensibility. There is, in other words, no end to the refinement we can comprehend and develop if we choose this as our work.

Kataoka Sensei says that the first prerequisite to entering this aesthetic realm is that this is what we must really want. We must want to hear music this way, to play it this way, and to teach it this way.

Then, with an ear developed for the sound we want to hear, we need to experiment making various sounds

and closely observe the operation of our body as it produces these sounds. We must stop hitting the piano, and rather learn to *take* the sound, to draw it carefully out of the instrument. We can learn to make one beautiful sound and then to make a range of beautiful sounds, all with a relaxed body, using the body in its entirety without force, but with love and care. No movement can feel awkward or unnatural. It is best to practice this on single notes at first, always making a more and more agreeable sound, until it becomes a sound we can love just for itself.

Then, in the simplest pieces, we can pay attention to rhythm and phrasing and articulation. What does it mean to play a downbeat, or a syncopation, or the highest note in a legato phrase? Kataoka Sensei says that these are the notes that require extra care, extra love. They need to be hugged, not pushed away from us or hit in an attempt at emphasis. In these simplest pieces, with our very heart and soul, we can aspire to loving every sound, singling out certain sounds for special attention. It is not enough to have a “feeling” for the music. Practice should involve transforming this feeling into sound. This is what it means to practice.

Teaching these things is not easy, as they are, although fundamental to the making of music, the most elusive aspects of our art. Kataoka Sensei uses various images and descriptions of what it is we are really doing. She tells us to imagine the piano keyboard as something soft, like cream cheese, or like the skin and flesh of another person whom we love. She often quotes Arthur Rubinstein who said he imagined the piano keys to be the body of a beautiful woman.

When we play for her, Sensei will say, “I can’t *hear* you. I mean, I can’t hear your heart or your soul. Where is *yourself* in the sound?” This leaves us to practice in a new way, trying always literally to increasingly love the sounds we make, to always make “the most beautiful sound in the world,” as she teaches us. “Ask yourself, *what* is it you are studying?” she always says.

It becomes clear that we cannot make beautiful sound with stiff bodies, or with self-consciousness, or with our egos wrapped up in our playing. Beautiful sound is made only by putting our entire attention onto tone and then by opening our heart and loving it.

Practice is the same as prayer or meditation, it is concentration. All human beings have a heart and a soul, so we can all put our hearts and souls into our sound if this is what we really want and what we practice with patience and fortitude, with the faith that, indeed, it can be done.



*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.*



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