

# 寿 Early Piano Education in Japan 愛

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LAYING THE FOUNDATION

By Midori Koga

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Hochschule für Musik in Salzburg, Austria, and has recently been appointed clinician for the Frederick Harris Company, a Canadian music publishing firm. Born in Japan, Koga grew up in Vancouver and studied with a Japanese teacher for her first eight years.



rigorous, detailed and sophisticated. Development of technique, reading and rhythmic skills, solfege, ear training, sight singing and sight playing are all considered crucial for the training of young pianists.

However, piano education in Japan often has been criticized for the emphasis on technical development and lack of attention given to fostering creativity and developing independent thought. While Japanese musicians have always made a strong impact on the major schools and competitions in the West, often their

presence has been of a short duration as they soon disappear from the international scene. Some of the reasons for this phenomenon have been attributed to music education and the culture in Japan. [See Shoko Takegami-Ozawa, "The Independent Music Teacher in Japan," in *American Music Teacher* (April/May 1992), p. 24]. There are problems inherent with a curriculum that focuses strictly and methodically on technical development. However, there are benefits to an education that provides beginning piano

students with a thorough foundation of musical concepts. Systematic drill training of technique and other fundamental music skills is the trait in the Japanese piano curriculum that has been criticized, yet the skills themselves are invaluable tools with which students may explore music. The problems arise when these fundamental musical concepts are not broadened to challenge students' creativity.

### Laying the Foundation

A common characteristic in all areas of Japanese education is that the initial training period ensures that fundamental concepts are firmly established. This is true for math, science and language subjects in public schools,

Since the early 1930s, Japan has held a respected position in the international music community. Although a relative newcomer to the arena of Western music, Japan has produced many international competition winners. It also has sent a great number of musicians, pianists in particular, to study in Europe and the United States. The consistently high level of pianists coming west attests to the fact that Japanese music students receive effective early music training. Music preparation for the average pianist in Japan is



the traditional Japanese arts such as *Aikido* (martial arts) and *Ikebana* (flower arranging) and extracurricular music education. Even before the fundamental concepts are introduced, students must learn the lessons of discipline, obedience and patience. It is believed that true learning can begin only after these traits have been mastered.

The Japanese terms *Giri* and *Gaman* are difficult to translate into English. The words mean determination, sense of honor, discipline and perseverance (*giri*) and stoicism and patience (*gaman*). *Giri* and *gaman* are cornerstones of Japanese philosophy and culture. From the beginning of an educational endeavor such as piano study, it is understood that parents and teachers as well as students have made an unspoken contract to strive, through discipline and perseverance, to lay a solid foundation of knowledge and technical proficiency of the instrument. Success is less of an issue. What one learns through the process of perseverance is of highest importance.

During the summer of 1997, I visited lessons and classes that illustrate typical teaching methods and philosophies of early-level Japanese piano education.

### Private Lesson with a Five-Year-Old Student...

#### Ear Training and Singing

Sae-chan has taken piano lessons for about six months with Murakami Sensei; "chan" is a term of endearment for young children and "sensei" is a title of respect for Japanese teachers. The lesson begins with a solfege singing exercise. Sae sings *do mi sol, do fa la* or *ti re sol* in response to her teacher who plays tonic, sub-dominant and dominant blocked chords on the piano. The pattern is presented in a chant-like manner with a strong rhythmic pulse. The teacher plays each chord three times using the following rhythm: ♩ ♩ ♩ Sae sings back the correct solfege syllables and correct pitches using the given rhythm. She has a lovely clear voice, a good sense of pitch, and although somewhat shy initially, she quickly warms up to the task. The next activity is similar. Sae imitates three-note melodic motives that her teacher sings and plays. Still using solfege syllables, Sensei plays and sings such phrases as *do re mi, re mi fa, mi sol do*, which Sae echoes. Then the teacher continues the same activity without the syllables. Sae listens to the pitches



on the piano and responds by singing the solfege syllables and correct pitches. This was more difficult for her.

#### Creative Work

At this point, Sae asks if they can make a song. Apparently, this is a favorite activity. The teacher establishes the tonal center—A major—by playing the primary chords. The object of the game is to alternate phrases between teacher and student with every other phrase returning to the tonic. Sae is told that there was a magnet inside the *do* which tries to pull their singing voices back to the resting tone. Initially, the phrases were very short (X denotes a 1 beat rest):

Question: *do re mi X*

Answer: *mi re do X*

Question: *mi fa mi X*

Answer: *re do do X*

Within a few minutes, the teacher-student team expands its songs to four-measure phrases:

Question:

*do re mi mi fa sol sol la sol sol XX*

Answer:

*sol la sol fa mi re do do do do XX*

They chuckle when Sae reaches the resting tone too quickly and needs to repeat *do* several times. Sae obviously enjoys this portion of her lesson and has to be coaxed to shift to the next activity. Thus far, she shows a remarkable attention span and concentrates intently on each successive activity.

#### Finger Exercises and Sight Reading

The finger exercise book contains two-measure exercises for sight reading and finger strengthening. Sae claps the

rhythm, sings the phrase using solfege syllables, then finally plays the pattern on the piano. The sequence of first addressing rhythm and singing a melodic phrase, then taking it to the piano, was consistent throughout the rest of the lesson with all of the pieces. While Sae's musical training focuses heavily on ear, pitch and rhythmic development, note reading is also integrated into lessons.

#### Note Copying and Theory

Sae shows Sensei her copy book with written homework. Since she is in the early stages of note reading, the assignment was to copy notes from middle C to treble clef C. The activity of repetitive copying is a familiar exercise used to help Japanese students learn and memorize the Japanese alphabet and *Kanji* characters (idiograms).

#### Repertoire

Sae uses translated versions of "The Music Tree" by Frances Clark and "Dozen A Day" by Edna Mae Burnham. Her lesson lasts about seventy minutes. She becomes a bit restless in the second half of the lesson but completes each task beautifully without complaint. Her mother is in the room throughout the lesson, taking notes, listening and watching, but otherwise staying in the background. Her mother, also an amateur pianist, obviously plays an important role in Sae's lessons and practice times. Her support and help are crucial to Sae's successful preparation each week and result in steady musical development.

### Beginning Piano Class in the Yamaha Group Piano System

The Yamaha school is located in a

business section of town, very close to a subway station. Since the main method of transportation for young parents and children is the train and subway system, the location is important for easy access. A large waiting room with colorful decorations and a reception desk welcomed the children and parents. There were about four or five large studio classrooms for the classes and smaller rooms for private lessons. Each classroom held about twelve electric pianos for the students, and at the front of the classroom there was an acoustic piano as well as a keyboard synthesizer. The walls held large white boards picturing giant grand staves. The children in this class—ages 5 and 6—had been studying for about nine months. All of the classes I observed were quite small, between six and eight students, and the mothers accompanied their children and participated in most activities.

#### Rhythmic Development

The class begins with recorded music. The children and their mothers join the singing and simple hand motions. The music uses a basic pop sound with a drum track and orchestral instruments. The children obviously enjoy the music very much. The teacher is vivacious and charming, and the children are drawn to her energy and enthusiasm. Other activities in this introductory time are based on rhythm. Children listen to other examples of recorded music, move to the beat and decide whether the pulse is grouped in triple or duple meter.

#### Ear Training

The children then gather around the piano for ear training. After the tonal center is established with tonic and dominant chords, the children play a game with those two chords. They are asked to sit on the floor whenever they hear a tonic sound and leap to their feet when they hear the dominant sound. The ear-training drills continue

with individual pitch recognition. Again, they are given the tonal center (E major), then asked to sing and call out the solfège syllable after a single pitch is played on the piano. Initially, the children sing back the answers as a group. As they become more comfortable, the teacher calls on individuals to respond. This exercise is then expanded to three-note melodic imitation. All of the children are successful with these drills. As a group, the children sing popular folk



songs—Western and traditional Japanese songs—with their teacher. They are quickly able to determine the scale degree of the beginning pitch and sing the song with solfège syllables. Even at this early stage, all of the children seem comfortable with the language of solfège and pitch relationships.

#### Repertoire

After the ear training and rhythmic development activities, the children return to their electronic keyboards and prepare to play an arrangement of “London Bridge” using tonic and dominant chords blocked in the left hand. Although there is a written score for this, the children rely on visual fingering cues from

the teacher to play the melody and chords. Students in this particular class, still in the first few months of piano study, are not yet fluent in note reading. Instead, the mothers help their children find the correct pitches.

#### Junior Advanced Class in the Yamaha Group Piano System

The children in this class are 9 and 10 years old. After the third year of study in the Yamaha system, all children who wish to be considered for the special advanced class must audition to demonstrate aural rhythmic and musical proficiency. This particular class was one of the advanced classes. The level of competency was extraordinary.

#### Ear Training

Ear training at this stage consists of playing back a melodic phrase with harmonic accompaniment in response to the teacher. The students are asked to call out the chords being used—tonic, subdominant, dominant, supertonic and submediant chords. The next step is to sing the melody back in solfège. Each student then plays both the melody and accompaniment very competently. The next ear drill is a sing-back exercise. The teacher plays a two-voiced piece on the piano. The students sing the lower voice in solfège, phrase by phrase. This exercise takes

several repetitions but eventually they finish the entire melody.

#### Ensembles

Ensembles with five or six parts are a trademark of the Yamaha system. These ensembles are arrangements of quartets, symphonic or piano repertoire, popular songs and original pieces written by Yamaha composers. They provide an opportunity for young pianists to enjoy the art of chamber music in a keyboard set-



ting and to strengthen their sight-reading skills. The ensemble activity is a highlight of the class.

### Repertoire

All children in this class are enrolled in private piano lessons as well as the group class. The repertoire portion of class is similar to a master class. The children perform solo pieces on the acoustic piano, and the teacher then leads a discussion about the form, harmony, modulation, style and interpretation, and comments briefly on each performance. The children appear shy, perhaps because of the observers in the room that day, and no one shares ideas or responses. The performances are beautifully prepared and technically clean but seem to lack energy and individuality.

### Harmonization, Melodic Variations

Another Yamaha system trademark is the focus on harmonization and melodic variations. The melody is selected from one of the text books. The first assignment is for the students to harmonize it with primary, secondary and secondary dominant chords. This was an area of real strength. Having harmonized more than a hundred melodies during their piano study, all of the children seem comfortable aurally, theoretically and technically. This week's homework was to prepare a set of variations on the melody. One of the children prepared a set of variations in the style of Mozart and performs it for the class.

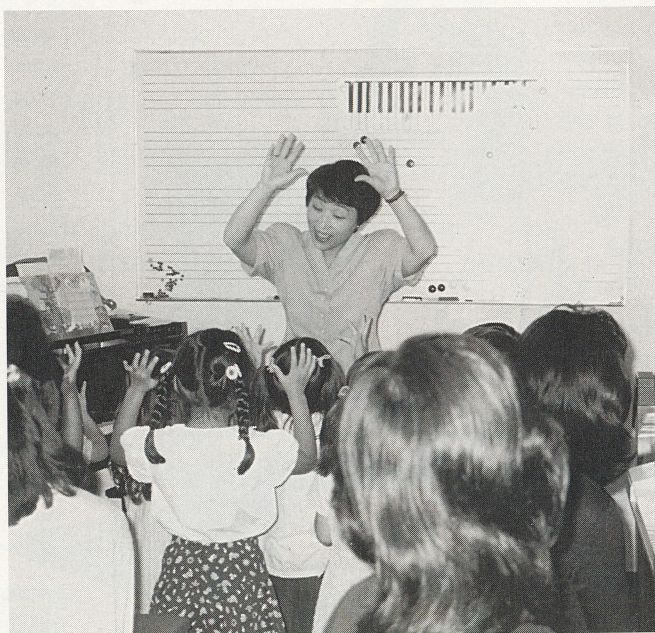
### Personal Observations

During my two months in Japan, I had the opportunity to observe many different music institutions and private studios at all pre-college levels. I found the greatest strengths of the piano curriculum to be in the first four years of study. While I was greatly impressed by the teaching techniques observed in Sae's private lesson and the beginning piano class of the Yamaha System School, they were rather typical examples of early piano education in Japan. Throughout my observations and visits, I was impressed by the abilities of the children and yet sometimes concerned by

a lack of freedom and room for creativity and individuality. As in any curriculum, there were strengths and weaknesses. I have summarized my reactions.

Areas of strength in the curriculum:

- ◆ The curriculum is designed to provide a holistic music education for young pianists. The piano curriculum includes technique, reading and rhythmic exercises, solfege, singing, ear training, sight singing, harmonization and transposition.



- ◆ All students receive a strong foundation of the basic musical concepts necessary for successful music making.
- ◆ It is believed that children between ages 2 and 5 have the greatest capacity to learn new skills. For this reason ear training is begun at the earliest stages of study. In the same way that a native language is learned by immersion, a young child is able to develop a high level of aural awareness through immersion in ear training activities.
- ◆ Early training using the "moveable *do* system" ensures that students have a strong understanding of home key and pitch relationships.
- ◆ Exercises in harmonization and transposition are a regular part of piano study. This skill is taught methodically and thoroughly. Children begin with simple examples of five-finger melodies accompanied by blocked fifths. Within four or

five years students can harmonize complex melodies that incorporate modulations and secondary dominant chords.

- ◆ Note reading is also integrated early into the curriculum. Well-trained teachers relate solfege, rhythm and ear training skills to the task of note reading.
  - ◆ Some creative work was evident in the lessons and classes I observed. Examples of creative work included improvised melodic sing backs and compositions based on variations.
    - ◆ A strong practice ethic is firmly established for most young children and their families. This ensures that children progress consistently.
- Areas of weakness in the curriculum:
- ◆ During the first four years of piano study most children receive a thorough education in the basic musical concepts listed above. At this point, children are ready to expand, explore and experiment beyond the boundaries of the curriculum, yet they are not encouraged to do so. While family support is important and helpful during the first few years of music study, in later years parental involvement can become somewhat binding.

- ◆ Many of the group piano programs use Japanese pop recordings to develop rhythm skills. Most of the songs use similar harmonies, rhythm backgrounds and melodies, and lack musical variety. The drum track included with many of the pieces actually interferes with the development of an inner pulse. While learning to rely on the external beat established by the recordings, children may neglect to listen for and feel the rhythmic pulse.
- ◆ Note reading is encouraged from an early age in the form of note memorization. By the age of 7, children are already familiar with the ninety-two alphabet symbols of the Japanese language and have learned many of the 2,000 *Kanji* characters (idiograms) necessary for high school graduation. Memorization of symbols is a task with which many Japanese children are familiar. This is an impressive accomplishment, but it also is important

for children to understand intervallic relationships of notes. This area seemed to be neglected in the development of note reading.

- ◆ At all levels I heard performances that were beautifully prepared and musical and logical. Yet elements of risk, excitement, vitality and individuality often seemed lacking.

### Summary

The two months of observation and study of teaching methods in the Japanese piano curriculum highlighted one main point for me. There are both

strengths and weaknesses within the educational system in Japan and in the curricula of North American teachers. There is a great deal that we can learn from each other. Although many Japanese musicians travel to the West for musical study and exploration, it is rare that Westerners turn to the East, except to teach or perform. A cross-cultural exchange of ideas and philosophies would be valuable to both educational systems as each continues to develop and improve.

Although problems have been perceived within the highly structured "conditioning" teaching system of the



Japanese, there are many aspects of such disciplined work, especially at the earliest stages, from which we in the West can learn. The Japanese have always benefited from acknowledging and studying the strengths of other educational systems. It seems logical that we, too, can develop by observing and learning from others. North American children are gifted with individuality, creativity and unique thought. It is my hope that as pedagogues, we may continue to nurture these gifts while continuing to help lay a strong foundation of fundamental musical and technical concepts. All of us face a tremendous challenge: to learn from the best of other cultures while retaining the strengths of our own heritage.

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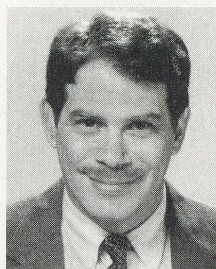
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Michigan State University offers the annual All-University Research Grant to provide opportunities for faculty members to pursue their research interests. Midori Koga applied for a grant in spring of 1996, and a peer review board granted her the funding for a research trip in May and June of 1997. Having studied in Canada, Austria and America, and having had some background with a Japanese piano teacher in her youth, Koga has always been interested in comparing music education systems in various countries and incorporating ideas from other cultures into her own teaching.