



Jenny Macmillan

## **A comparison of Suzuki piano recordings**

New recordings of the Suzuki piano repertoire have been made by Seizo Azuma, co-chair of the ISA piano committee and a professor of piano at Tokyo University. When his recordings of Books 1, 2 and 3 came out in 2008, I was filled with enthusiasm. At last, we had recordings that teachers and pupils need and deserve. They addressed virtually all the reservations I expressed about available recordings in my article of 1999: Three recordings of Suzuki piano repertoire books 1 and 2: a comparison. The final sentence in that article was: 'There seems to me clear scope for a new recording which would need to be technically accurate and musically sensitive to inspire Suzuki pupils'. I feel this has now been achieved. I hope that those who are used to the recordings by Haruko Kataoka (which I find aggressive at times), Valerie Lloyd-Watts (which I find insipid), or William Aide (in which some pieces are a little fast) will enjoy this new recording.

Professor Azuma's musicianship in his performances of Books 1, 2 and 3 is superb, his playing lively, rhythmical and characterful. The sound quality is excellent, as is the recording quality. But, as we progress through the revised Books 4 to 7, which were brought out in 2010, I become less enamoured with Azuma's recordings. Although the tone remains good, performances become a little pedantic, heavy, sometimes noisy and too fast. To me, they lack variety, flexibility, intensity, delicacy and magic.

Azuma's baroque playing is rather solid – pieces such as Bach's Inventions and the Prelude and Fugue need more variety in the quality of sound. His romantic music could do with more flexibility, shaping of phrases and sense of direction. It lacks subtlety, missing the Spanish spirit of Granados or the French atmosphere of Debussy. However, I did enjoy Azuma's performances of the classical repertoire. The fast movements are lively and energetic, if sometimes a little on the quick side. His slow movements, particularly that of Mozart K545, demonstrate very sensitive playing – serene and expressive.

Of course, I am setting the bar very high. I listen to recordings of the Suzuki piano repertoire by Angela Hewitt, Murray Perahia, Alfred Brendel, Andras Schiff, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Daniel Barenboim and other luminaries. Who could possibly hope to perform like these international recitalists?! In any case, at the Book 6 and 7 level, students should be listening to many different performances of each of their pieces, not relying on one performer.

Azuma's Book 5 recordings are useful adjuncts to further listening to top performers. It is in the early stages of learning that families need superb recordings instantly available, and Azuma's recordings of Books 1, 2, 3 and 4 certainly provide that – they are exemplary.

Having been dissatisfied with the recordings available prior to Azuma's, for my pupils I made a number of my own recordings, including elementary pieces played slowly and hands separately (introducing each piece with 'ready and') to help pupils in the early stages of learning and so they can listen and play along with them. These are on my website: [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk)



	<b>Kataoka</b>	<b>Aide</b>	<b>Lloyd-Watts</b>	<b>Azuma</b>
<b>Tone quality</b>	Harsh, forced RH.	Pleasant tone.	Shallow tone, especially in bk 2.	Excellent tone.
<b>Dynamics</b>	Good; nice echoes, even when not written in the score.	No echoes or dynamic contrasts until near end of book 2.	Almost no echoes or dynamic contrasts.	Narrow dynamic range, contrasts not clear; no unwritten echoes.
<b>Phrasing</b>	Phrases weakly shaped. Monotonous repeated notes in Allegretto 2.	Gently shaped phrases. Sensitive ends of phrases in book 2. Repeated notes lack variety in Allegretto 2.	Good phrasing. No variety in tone of repeated notes in Allegretto 2.	Gently shaped phrases. Bridge passages in Beethoven 1st and 2nd movements lack flexibility.
<b>Balance between hands</b>	Mostly good. Well-blended LH broken chords. Happy Farmer: RH accompaniment too strong.	Accompaniment clearly audible – useful for studying LH. Sometimes a little too strong, eg Short Story, Happy Farmer.	Good.	Excellent.
<b>Legato between repeated notes</b>	Ranging from fairly good to very good.	Good but not excellent.	Very poor in book 1, poor in book 2.	Excellent.
<b>Speeds</b>	Mostly good, but Ecosaise too slow and Twinkle Variations and Minuet 2 rather fast.	Mostly good if on the fast side, but some, especially early book 2, too fast, including Twinkle Variations, Christmas Day Secrets, Short Story and Minuet 2.	Mostly good if on the slow side, but some too slow, eg Twinkle Variations, Allegretto 1, Allegro and Ecosaise.	Lively, energetic. Speeds mostly excellent, but Clair de Lune and Minuet 2 too fast.
<b>Musical endings to pieces</b>	Slight slowing down at ends of pieces.	Slight slowing down at ends of pieces in bk 1. Good variety of ritardandi in bk 2.	Abrupt endings to pieces in book 1. Only slight ritardandi in bk 2.	Excellent musical endings.



	Kataoka	Aide	Lloyd-Watts	Azuma
<b>Rhythm</b>	Tendency to play almost 16th-dotted 8th instead of two equal 8th notes in Allegro, all Bach Minuets and Arietta. Happy Farmer: LH first quaver too long. Beethoven 1st movement: grace notes too loud.	Accurate. Beethoven 1st movement: acciaccatura played before beat instead of on beat.	Accurate. Beethoven 1st movement: acciaccatura played before beat instead of on beat.	Very accurate, rhythmical playing.
<b>Articulation</b>	Christmas Day Secrets: RH first quaver played staccato instead of given its full length. Beethoven 1st movement: slurs not articulated.	Christmas Day Secrets: RH bar 4 last note not played staccato. Inventive articulation in Bach and Mozart Minuets – inappropriate here?	Short Story: RH 3rds not played staccato.	Short Story: RH 3rds not played staccato. Beethoven 1st movement slurs not articulated.
<b>Rests</b>	Rests omitted in Honeybee, Clair de Lune, Cradle Song and Melody. Previous note held too long in Long, Long Ago, Minuet 1 and Beethoven 2nd movement. Incorrect final bar in Happy Farmer.	Most rests accurate but previous note held slightly too long in Honeybee, G minor Minuet 1 and Cradle Song.	Rests reasonably accurate but previous note held too long in Clair de Lune, Minuet 1 and G minor Minuet 1. Inaccurate rests in final bar of Long, Long Ago, Happy Farmer and Melody.	Rests excellent except in Minuet 1 in which LH crotchets before rests are held too long.
<b>Twinkle Variations</b>	RH fast and light with LH accompaniment. Variations 1–3: all about the same speed but too fast at MM82; Variation 2: no dynamic contrast; Twinkle theme: even faster at MM86 but good legato between repeated notes.	RH only. Generally too fast, but speed varies for each variation – Variation 1: MM80; Variation 2: MM72, some dynamic contrast; Variation 3: MM76; Twinkle theme: much too fast at MM92, fairly good legato between repeated notes.	RH and LH two octaves apart. Variations 1–3: slow and ponderous at MM66; Variation 2: no dynamic contrast; Twinkle theme: too fast at MM88, no legato between repeated notes.	All variations in RH, then all in LH. Each variation is too fast and at a different speed (c84, 80, 88) but Theme is beautifully legato at an excellent speed of 72; Variation 2: no dynamic contrast p-f-p.



	Kataoka	Aide	Lloyd-Watts	Azuma
<b>Note accuracy</b>	Good.	Good.	Clair de Lune: two incorrect LH notes.	Good.
<b>Recording quality</b>	Good.	Good. Very clear – every note audible.	Good.	Good, though piano action is just audible.
<b>Summary of good points</b>	Good dynamics; good balance between hands; good legato between repeated notes; mostly good speeds.	Good tone quality; sensitive phrasing; musical endings; mostly good speeds if on the fast side; clear recording quality.	Good phrasing; good balance between hands; mostly good speeds if on the slow side.	Excellent tone; excellent balance between hands, excellent legato between repeated notes; excellent musical endings; accurate, rhythmical, lively, energetic playing.
<b>Summary of bad points</b>	Harsh, forced tone; weakly shaped phrases; disturbing uneven quaver rhythm in places; many rests omitted or inaccurate.	No dynamic contrasts within pieces; some accompaniments quite strong; some pieces too fast, especially at beginning of book 2; inappropriate articulation in Bach and Mozart.	Shallow tone, especially in book 2; little dynamic contrast; very poor legato between repeated notes; some pieces too slow; abrupt endings; rests not always accurate; incorrect LH notes in Clair de Lune.	Dynamic range could be wider and dynamic contrasts clearer; a few pieces too fast; gaps between pieces too long, especially between Beethoven 1st and 2nd movements.

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**Jenny Macmillan** has a thriving teaching practice in Cambridge and is an ESA piano teacher trainer. Her own three children all learned piano by the Suzuki approach. Jenny has written extensively about the Suzuki approach and her articles feature on her website:

<http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk/>

She has published a book:

***Successful Practising*** A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers

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