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# A comparison of Suzuki piano recordings

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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)

–Jenny Macmillan  
[Jenny’s comparison tables will follow in a later edition of the *NZSJ* – ed]