

# Comment on "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education — The Introduction Chapter"

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## ABSTRACT

Professor Dan Zhaoyi is a famous piano educator in China, who has cultivated a large number of award-winning pianists in international competitions, made great contributions to piano education in China and accumulated valuable teaching experience in his decades of piano teaching career. The collection of papers written by Professor Dan Zhaoyi, "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education", is a comprehensive collection of his achievements in piano education. The author starts from the "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education — The Introduction Chapter" and summarizes Professor Dan Zhaoyi's theoretical and practical guidance on the initial teaching of piano, such as parental guidance, music education concepts, issues that need to be paid attention to at the beginning, relaxation training, inner hearing training, score recognition, etc., in order to further explore with colleagues in the piano art field.

**Keywords:** Dan Zhaoyi, Piano education, Introduction to piano.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Dan Zhaoyi has been engaged in piano teaching for over 50 years. His achievements in piano art education are of great significance and have far-reaching impact. He has made significant contributions to the achievement of significant breakthroughs in art education in China. The miracles and demonstration effects he created are portraying a significant page in the history of Chinese art development. The "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education" was planned by the Higher Education Research Institute of Sichuan Conservatory Of Music and published by Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press in 2013. This collection of writings has a wide range of content and diverse forms, covering professional works, academic papers, letters, and memos. It is a systematic summary of Professor Dan Zhaoyi's decades of piano teaching practice. The issues discussed in the book have high reference and practical value for both professional students and amateur piano teaching, and reading this book will be of great benefit.

From the preface section, it can be understood that Professor Dan Zhaoyi, a piano educator who has trained world champions, was born in an

intellectual family of surgeons. During his studies at Sichuan Conservatory Of Music, Mr. Dan Zhaoyi was fortunate enough to become a student of Professor Zhou Guangren. This was an important turning point in his career development and a new motivation and great motivation in his life. In the more than 3 years of studying with Professor Zhou Guangren, he mastered the scientific methods and skills of piano performance and set the goal of studying hard and endless pursuit. Mr. Zhou Guangren's noble teacher ethics and personality charm have become Professor Dan Zhaoyi's lifelong role model. In 1978, on the 14th year of Dan Zhaoyi's undergraduate graduation, he began to truly teach. His characteristic is seriousness and when encountering problems, he will think carefully and solve them steadfastly. In the following decade or so, he published a large number of papers related to piano education and cultivated internationally renowned pianists such as Li Yundi, Chen Sa, and Zhang Haochen. In this book, one can learn Professor Dan Zhaoyi's honest and serious attitude, thinking about, discovering, and solving problems, as well as practicing, theorizing, and practicing again.

## **2. PROFESSOR DAN ZHAOYI'S DISCUSSION ON CHOPIN STYLE**

Professor Dan Zhaoyi's research on Chopin's music style began when he was preparing for Li Yundi's International Chopin Piano Competition. In preparation for this competition, Professor Dan Zhaoyi embarked on the journey of "approaching Chopin". From this section, it can be seen that learning a style is a process of research, practice, perception, integration, absorption, and sublimation. Not only Chopin, but also any composer can gain insights and improvements through the methods taught by Professor Dan Zhaoyi, namely, starting from studying biographies and theoretical works of composers, delving deeper into the overall characteristics of musical styles during the period, and playing music. He summarized the positioning of Chopin's music performance methods as four points, which are worth people's in-depth consideration. When playing Chopin's works, it is important to avoid percussive sounds. Melody is very important in Chopin's works, and one needs to inject emotions and avoid flashy skills. The performers need to immerse themselves emotionally and integrate themselves with the piano.

## **3. "PIANO TEACHING AND GUIDANCE FOR CHILDREN"**

The first book included in this "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education" is "Piano Teaching and Guidance for Children". It is created based on Professor Dan Zhaoyi's teaching accumulation of over 30 years, based on the basic stage of children's piano learning training, and from the perspective of parents and piano teaching guidance work. The whole book is divided into "Preschool Chapter", "Introduction Chapter", "Basic Chapter" and appendices. The characteristics of the book are popularity, systematicness, convenience, and practicality. It is Professor Dan Zhaoyi's dedicated work to laying a good foundation for piano learning and cultivating good learning habits for children throughout the country.

The reason why he wrote this book was because, at that time, with the reform and opening up, people's material and cultural levels were greatly improved, and the piano, as a musical instrument, entered millions of ordinary families, sparking a "piano fever" nationwide, and music education was increasingly valued by people. After many studies, it was found that music can assist in the early

development of children's intelligence, and the precise movement of fingers can become the foundation of children's intelligent development, which is also one of the important reasons why pianos in foreign countries are so popular. However, in the face of such an environment, many parents of piano-learning children were in a dilemma: they had no way to start tutoring their children and were restless when their children have poor classes. At this time, Professor Dan Zhaoyi attempted to provide a kind of help to the tutors. For this reason, he wrote "Piano Teaching and Guidance for Children", which was of great help to the various difficulties encountered by the "piano fever" at that time.

In the first chapter of the "Preschool Chapter" titled "The Role of Parental Guidance", Professor Dan Zhaoyi discusses in detail the knowledge of parental guidance. Due to the long process of learning the piano, it is not only dependent on the limited time of the teacher in class, but also on the parents' long companionship and hard practice. However, when parents are racking their brains when tutoring their children, and when the effectiveness of scolding, physical punishment, and material inducement is not good, for children who don't yet have the ability to think independently, what should they do? This is determined by the laws of children's physiological and psychological development stages, and it is also a problem that troubles many piano teachers. Professor Dan Zhaoyi, however, provides a solution, pointing out that tutoring should be a compassionate communication that requires a strict attitude, scientific methods, necessary knowledge and skills, and correct requirements to help children learn. So what exactly do parents need to do? From the method summarized by Professor Dan Zhaoyi: 1. Parents should be teachers' assistants. For children aged 3 or 4, it is up to parents to master how and what they practice every day. 2. Children's good learning habits and scientific practice methods should be cultivated. 3. Children's interest in music should be cultivated and developed. 4. Specific guidance should be provided for children's practice. Guided by the teacher's requirements and intentions, guiding children includes score recognition, skill training, music processing and performance, as well as error correction. These points are very helpful for a piano teacher, whether in communication with parents or in accompanying practice, and should always be kept in mind.

#### **4. THE CORRECT CONCEPT OF DAN ZHAOYI'S PIANO EDUCATION**

In real life, many parents regard the piano as a career path choice for their children because they want their children to be successful. However, Professor Zhao Yi once told people that the capacity of a major is extremely limited. Although music majors have been established in universities across the country, more people have entered the learning environment of piano majors than in the past, and almost every child learns piano, not all children who learn piano can be admitted to specialized institutions. Entering a specialized institution not only depends on the students' own conditions and level of diligence, but also on the tremendous efforts of parents. Piano teachers can provide correct music education concepts when communicating with parents who are determined to make their children follow a professional path. Learning music doesn't necessarily mean becoming a musician, but rather improving one's overall quality and broadening one's future path. Even if one doesn't engage in the piano profession, one must have a certain level of artistic aesthetic ability and always have a great passion for art, which is the main purpose of art education. People who study art will gain a rich spiritual world, which can enhance personal cultivation and cultivate correct values and a sound personality through the guidance of teachers. To give specific examples, the piano is originally a foreign musical instrument, and it is very popular in many countries around the world. In Vienna, there are more pianos than cars, but not everyone is engaged in the piano profession. Gorky, Lenin, and Einstein all had high musical literacy. The former British Prime Minister Heath conducted the Central Orchestra to perform symphonies, the former French President held a piano solo in London, and the Mayor of Boston played Mozart concertos... They were not professional musicians, but could use music to support their careers. When communicating with parents, piano teachers should cite these examples, not only for parents who hope their children to be successful, but also for parents who believe that without specialization, there is no need to study hard. Teachers can also tell them the importance of learning a musical instrument well, which can add glory and color to their future career and provide great help for any future career. Parents must help their children broaden their horizons, avoid rote learning of a certain subject, and encourage them to listen, sing, and dance more. Listening can include children's songs, instrumental

music, etc., until symphony, cultivating children's sensitivity, interest, and love for music. When children learn the piano, they also need to learn singing, because the basic elements of singing are very helpful to the piano. "Children who start learning instruments without singing are destined to have no music". Children can also learn more dance, dance and rhythm are interdependent, and the sense of rhythm can be cultivated and trained in dance. Being able to well sing and dance is a great benefit for children's piano learning and performance.

#### **5. INTRODUCTION TO PIANO**

The "Introduction Chapter" discusses the issues that need to be paid attention to when one gets started, including the correct posture for playing the piano, the height of the piano stool, the footstool, the correct distance between the seat and the piano, the depth of sitting, and bad postures. For entry-level children, they can adjust their sitting posture from the above six aspects before starting to learn the hand shape of playing the piano. The basic point of hand shape is to relax and place the hand naturally on the keys. However, during the playing process, the hand shape is not stationary, and it is necessary to use the correct hand shape to perform various playing movements. Children's fingers are very weak and prone to developing bad postures and habitual movements. There are many types of bad hand types, such as finger folding, tension, etc. These can be solved by strengthening the support ability of the fingers. Finger support is a separate chapter, and Professor Dan Zhaoyi provides a detailed introduction to what finger support is and includes a large number of practice scores, which have high practical value. He has found that finger support training has not yet been placed in a sufficiently important position in piano teaching, which should be taken seriously. An excellent piano teacher should include finger support in a very important position in basic piano training. He has proposed corresponding exercise methods and auxiliary exercises for each finger, such as finger push-ups. These basic exercises are also very helpful for people to exercise their muscles nowadays, and they can be practiced in daily life.

The book emphasizes the first joint of the finger, and almost every child may experience the problem of first joint collapse, which needs to be corrected from the beginning. There are three key ways to correct it. Firstly, before a child touches a key, he should make his fingertips feel like they are grasping something inward. Secondly, teachers

need to let the child experience the real feeling of grasping. Thirdly, the children should focus on the preparation before pressing the piano keys with their fingers. From a physical perspective, when pressing piano keys, children's fingers push inward, making it easier for fingers to protrude and help overcome the collapse of the first joint in the direction of force. Due to weakness, a child's little finger is prone to lying on the piano keys. During training, the child can use their hands to support the third joint, while the first joint should protrude and then push inward like the previous method. The book only mentions that the first and third joints of the little finger must be supported, without emphasizing the second joint, because it doesn't matter if the second joint of the little finger collapses. The little finger needs to extend and play chords, requiring flexible operation.

## **6. THE CONCEPT AND METHODS OF RELAXATION IN PLAYING THE PIANO**

"Chapter 5: On Relaxation" discusses the concept of relaxation and various methods to eliminate it. In practical teaching, relaxation is a very abstract adjective. If the teacher only says the word "relaxation", children can't understand it. Professor Zhao Yi has helped teachers and parents understand how to relax in this chapter and there are many methods. Relaxation is a relative concept of tension, and the first thing to know is what causes tension. Some children are prone to tension while playing the piano, which includes both psychological and physical tension. Eliminating psychological tension is a prerequisite for eliminating physical tension. From the author's experience, one of the reasons for psychological tension is the fear of the piano. After all, younger children are not familiar with the piano, and it is normal for them to shrink when facing a pitch-black instrument that is much larger than themselves. Second, children may experience panic when facing criticism from teachers during class. For any reason, teachers should not scold students, especially younger children, in piano lessons, as this can cause psychological barriers. A piano teacher, no matter how high their professional level is, insulting students is definitely not a normal phenomenon. This is not something that a good teacher does. The same applies to professional learning. Being strict doesn't mean scolding students, but helping them meet standards. Fortunately, in the author's life experience, the teachers she met were all teachers with noble ethics

and well-rounded education, which is also the reason why she persists in learning the piano. Teachers not only preach and impart knowledge, but also deeply influence students' worldviews and outlook on life. A good teacher will become a role model for students throughout their lives, just like Mr. Zhou Guangren's influence on Professor Dan Zhaoyi. As a piano teacher, the most important thing is to help children develop an interest in music, making them curious and enthusiastic about learning the piano. When they enjoy listening to beautiful music, they will naturally overcome psychological barriers. After eliminating physiological tension, there is also muscle tension, which requires teachers to help children distinguish between parts that require force and those that don't, and correct excessive muscle tension. Professor Dan Zhaoyi has proposed two practical exercises: one is the arm lowering exercise that allows for free fall, and the other is the "suspension bridge" exercise. Both of these exercises can be done without the piano. After experiencing it firsthand, the author found that both methods are very simple and effective. The first method can effectively eliminate the tension of the entire arm and the second can eliminate unnecessary extra force from the entire hand. It should be noted that eliminating tension doesn't mean giving up necessary tension. If the muscles are not tense, there will be no movement. So there is a process of adaptation in training any skills or movements, which is not only difficult for children but also for any adult, so it requires deliberate practice. Relaxation should be hidden in playing and one needs to be careful not to shake his wrist casually. For this bad habit, if there are any signs, it should be corrected right away.

## **7. DEVELOPING INNER HEARING ABILITY**

Professor Dan Zhaoyi strongly agrees with the viewpoint of French piano educator Ziegler: "The piano performance skills learned by many talented people are not solely based on finger practice, but rather on the ability to adjust the performance effect by 'listening with heart' the sound that played". Nine out of ten must be used to listen to the sound of the piano being played. The body will stiffen unconsciously and also lose the internal connection of the melodic line. If the principle of "listening with heart" is followed for a long and effective practice, the body can relax and there seems to be no physical presence in the performance. "Only by adjusting the movements through the ears can people achieve a perfect state". From this, it can be

seen that listening to music with heart is very important, and it is difficult to achieve the goal of beauty if only helping to lift arms and force apart fingers. Teachers should follow a teaching principle that emphasizes true music and helps children develop a keen hearing for sound from the beginning, relying on their ears to learn. This not only improves children's own hearing ability and ability to adjust the sound, but also has the effect of drawing inferences about other cases from one instance. In practical teaching, metaphors can be flexibly used to enhance children's interest and cultivate their hearing ability through vivid and vivid metaphors. No matter what, verbal humor is always favored by students.

## 8. SCORE RECOGNITION AND PRACTICE

Starting from "Chapter 6: On Score Recognition", it has entered the stage of score recognition. From the recognition of notes to the performance method, it provides a detailed and systematic explanation of the most basic knowledge of score recognition, which has a comprehensive guiding role in teaching children score recognition. There are many textbooks suitable for children on the market now, but having such a detailed and comprehensive work is commendable. From this, it can be seen that Professor Dan Zhaoyi is well intentioned and conscientious. Professor Dan Zhaoyi not only teaches the piano, but also cultivates children's good learning habits, cultivates their emotions, enriches their artistic cultivation, and requires them to study with a strict and serious attitude. As he said, "This is much more important than learning one or two pieces of music". "Chapter 7: On Practice" mentions a large number of practice methods. Although these methods are "commonplace", they are instructive and classic methods that have been passed down. They not only have the function of identifying and filling in gaps in children's own practice methods, but also can help children learn good practice methods during teaching. "It's better to teach people how to fish than to give them fish". Teachers can't have a sparring lesson in class. Teaching students and parents these exercise methods will achieve faster results, which will be very helpful for children's future development.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Professor Dan Zhaoyi's achievements in piano art education are of great significance and have far-

reaching impact. The "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education" has comprehensive, scientific, and guiding reference value for piano teaching. Here, the author would like to thank him for his tremendous contributions to achieving significant breakthroughs in art education in China. Professor Dan Zhaoyi not only cultivates students' professional qualities, but also cares for them from the bottom of his heart. After becoming famous, he remains simple, indifferent to fame and wealth, amiable, and approachable. Piano practitioners should constantly absorb rich nutrients from Professor Dan Zhaoyi's teachings, and in their future lives, they will definitely find some answers from the precious spiritual wealth of "Dan Zhaoyi's Writings on Piano Education".

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