

No. 1 Piano Paralympic in Japan
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Abstract: The author describes her participation in the first International Piano Festival for the Disabled in Japan in January 2005.

Key Words: Piano, disability, triumph

One fine day in June, my handphone rang. A Japanese-sounding lady introduced herself as Ms. Akiko. I was working as a piano accompanist in a ballet school then, and she was working in another branch. And through the school, she got my phone numbers. Her university teacher in Japan, Mr. Tokio Sakoda, who is the president of IDP (Institute for Piano Teachers & Disabled in Japan) was planning to host the 1st International Piano Festival for Disabled (Piano Paralympic) in Japan at Yokohama on 10–11 of January, 2005, and she was asked for help to look around for participants from Malaysia.

When I received Ms. Akiko's call, it was already very near the deadline for submitting our audition video tape. During Akiko's search for suitable candidates, she got to know Ms. Mei Fong, who is the director of Music Professionals Academy of Performing Arts as well as a music lecturer at University Malaya. Ms. Mei Fong was keen to help out in this event. Together they helped me record the audition tape and send it to Japan just before the closing deadline. Ms. Mei Fong was later invited by the Paralympic Committee to be one of the judges at the Competition.

Around September, I got a call from Ms. Akiko saying I made it to the 1st round. This qualified me to perform a variation based on the theme "Sakura Sakura" either arranged by myself or someone else. I needed to prepare and submit the score by November.

I hold a Diploma in Solo Piano and Music Theory, Critique and Literature, but I have never made any arrangement of my own before. So Ms. Mei Fong's friend Ms. Yong Joh Lin helped us improvise as many variations of Sakura as possible. I've always been taught and encouraged to develop my own sense in playing a piece the way I feel it should be played. Through these intuitions and feelings I – together with Ms. Akiko's Midas touch retaining the original Japanese flavor of the theme - was able to edit, transpose, and rearrange the variations.

So finally, on the 7th of January, 2005, I departed by myself from Changi Airport, as I live in Johor Bahru, and both Ms. Akiko and Ms Mei Fong live in Kuala Lumpur. This was the first time I had traveled long distance by myself. The airline which I had chosen to fly by, All Nippon Airlines, was concerned, as from what the ticketing officer in the K.L. branch office told me, they have never before taken a passenger paralysed from the waist down unescorted. But I am grateful to the officer-in-charge for her very prompt help in contacting both Narita and Changi Airport to ascertain my smooth transition from wheelchair to cabin, and vice-versa, finally resolving the situation with

Mr. Tokio Sakoda's assurances that I am fully able to take care of myself. When I checked-in at both Changi and Narita Airport, my seat was already reserved. The seven and a half hour journey on the plane went smoothly. I am grateful to all the staff at All Nippon Airlines for their very kind response and assistance.

At the airport, we were all welcomed and met by our genial host, Mr. Tokio Sakoda, who came personally to the airport to meet as many foreign guests and participants as he could. Mr. Tokio Sakoda did not have more than 1 or 2 hours of sleep, preparing and seeing to all our needs prior to, and during, our stay in Japan—for a 67 year-old man—this was really hard on him. During the rest of the day, guests and participants from all over the world, such as Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, China, Taiwan, U.S.A., France, Spain, and Hungary came pouring in. I was the only representative from Malaysia out of ninety-nine participants.

It took about two hours to get from Narita Airport to the National Olympic Memorial Youth Centre in Tokyo, where accommodations were provided by our organizer during our stay in Japan. The Centre is like one big Olympic City serenely enclosed with accommodations, restaurants, arts building, and sports hall amidst the busy and towering skyscrapers outside.

On the 8th, we were welcomed to a tea ceremony. It was so important for us foreign participants to have a taste of the traditional Japanese tea and the articulate way it was made and served. Afterward, we were all treated to a performance of a traditional Japanese instrument, the Koto. The lady who played the Koto was so kind as to show me her music score, which is so different from our music notation. The score has been passed down to her from her teacher and their teachers.

At 6 pm, we were given a Welcome Dinner by our host. By then, all foreign and Japanese guests, judges and participants had arrived. We all had such a great time introducing and getting to know each other. After the dinner, the participants were asked to give a short performance and interviews by NHK TV, Japan.

I was told the programme was immediately aired on NHK channel the next day, rousing such a great response that people from all over Japan came to Yokohama hoping to see the performances. Unfortunately, all tickets had already been sold.

Early at 8.30 am on the 9th, we got on the bus for Yokohama Minat Mirai Hall, one-and-a-half hours away from Tokyo. My performances were divided into two days. On the 9th, I performed the "Sakura Sakura" arrangement for the panel of judges to decide whether or not I would make it to the final 18. After my performance, I was able to attend the performances of other participants at another hall. I saw so many disabled performers with disabilities more severe than mine. They came on stage to perform to let the world know just how much a person with a disability can do even if they needed assistance in holding up their hand to play. I was really touched and my dreams and ambition of becoming a music teacher for the disabled, as well as a music therapist came back to me again. It's hard for disabled persons to find employment in Malaysia, especially in the field of music. Many times I was pushed to the verge of giving up the

hope of ever finding a career in music. But whenever I touch the keys of the piano, I am amazed that the music never fails to give me the strength to move on, and the power to hold on to my faith. I am more determined than ever to share this gift God has given me with as many disabled persons as possible.

At last, the announcement for the eighteen finalists came. So many reporters and cameraman from different TV channels were all crowding for a good shot at the name list; my friend Ms. Akiko had to fight her way in to get a good look. And seconds later she was running to me saying my name was on the list! I was touched beyond words. If not for being really late to catch our bus, I think Ms. Akiko and I would have hugged each other and cried.

The next day, I had to catch the first bus at 8.30 am to Yokohama again. I played Haydn's Sonata in E minor, No. 34. Afterwards we went onstage again for a prize ceremony, where every disabled individual was given an award based on their achievement. All the judges awarded me the Technical and Artistic, as well as the High Achievement, Prizes. I got into the next level of competition and performed "Sakura Sakura" again for the final panel judgment. When the result was finally announced, I was so happy that the 1st prize went to Sun Yan, who has a visual impairment and is from China. He is amazingly talented. I was fortunate enough to catch one of his performances, and I was truly awed by his talent and the ease of his playing. It was a great triumph indeed. He is really fortunate to have Mr. Yang Jun for his mentor. Mr. Yang is a well-known music professor in China, with a heart of gold and is a born pianist. Mr. Yang was also invited to Japan as one of the judges.

Second and third place prizes went to representatives from Russia and Poland respectively. Both are amazing pianists in their own respect. The event closed with a farewell dinner celebration, rounding off with the top three prize winners performing their "Sakura Sakura" yet again to our delight. We caught up with last minute photo taking and leaving our contacts with one another. Throughout the two days at Yokohama Minato Mirai Hall, every foreign participant was assigned a volunteer who spoke the participant's language. That greatly helped us. I was lucky my friend Ms. Akiko is Japanese; she has been such a great friend, assistant, escort and translator throughout my stay in Japan that I did not feel homesick or worried at all during the 5 days I was away from my home and family. Our volunteer Mr. Ishikawa at Yokohama has been wonderfully helpful and kind. He was always running around, making sure of our performance schedule, and checking that our bus did not leave for Tokyo without us. We could not have had a better time than we did throughout the 2 days in Yokohama Minato Mirai. This was the very first Piano Paralympic held, and we all think the organizer did it wonderfully.

We must thank the Japan Foundation and the Piano Paralympic Committee for sponsoring our airfare, food, and lodging expenses. We owe a big thank you to Mr. Sakoda for having put this event together. The event was a dream come true. For the past 10 years, Mr. Sakoda, a former associate professor at Musashino Academia Musicae (Musashino Ongaku Daigaku), a private music college in Tokyo's Nerima Ward, has

worked to show people with disabilities that their condition need not be an obstacle to giving the ivories a good workout. *Otsukaresama deshita, Sakoda-sensei*, your dreams have helped us realize our dreams too! *Arigatou gozaimashita!*

My friends and I look forward to the 2nd Piano Paralympics to be held in Canada in 2009. It is an amazing opportunity for people of different disabilities and countries to be gathered together, sharing the same love of music and mutual regard for each other's achievements. We hope more countries will come forward with their support and participants and that this event can be brought to all corners of the world. Till we meet again, Sayonara.

Lee-chin Heng was born with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI), and has used a wheelchair since a bad fall at the age of 7. She and her OI friends have set up a society for people with Osteogenesis Imperfecta in Malaysia. She is a private music tutor and plans to start a music institute one day for persons with disabilities. As music has always been to her what a true friend is like in times of adversity; she hopes to bring this friend to as many disabled persons' lives as she can and she also hopes people will one day recognize disabled persons for their abilities rather than staring at them wide-eyed. Lee-chin can be contacted at lc_h02@yahoo.com or +6-013-771-2088. She has also set up a website for OI Society www.oisociety.cjb.net.