

A Pianist with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Dissociative Disorder

The Sound of Happiness by Asuka Noda

—”Saved by the Words “You are Wonderful as You Are” —

Story by Sayuri Sakaguchi

Asuka was not diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) until she was 22 years old. A target of bullying, changing schools, dropping out, and attempting suicide...though misunderstood by others and moving on hesitatingly, a pianist who never seized to struggle and follow her instinct is now about to take off.

With what a happy expression does she play the piano. Every time she finishes one piece she claps her small hands with enthusiasm, applauding herself and her audience. A glowing smile on her face and sounds full of tenderness...

On October 19, 2016, the 34 years old Asuka Noda’s piano recital was held at the Oji Hall in Tokyo. It was her first performance in Tokyo. In the first half of the show, she performed five classical pieces such as *Fantasia-Impromptu* by Chopin and in the second half, she performed five self-composed original pieces. For the encore, she improvised her present feelings into a piece of music and fascinated her audience.

In an interview on the day before the concert, Asuka said, “The second half of the concert consists of songs that I myself composed so I feel like I am introducing myself and saying, “this is who I am.” “I am nervous to know whether people who hear these songs would take me seriously and whether they might think of me as a ‘strange child.’”

“A strange child”—Since childhood Asuka lived in the midst of the misunderstandings of people surrounding her. Born in Hiroshima in 1982, she started studying the piano at age 4. Her mother, Kyoko’s tutelage was strict. Kyoko would play a chord and ask, “what sound is this?” If Asuka would give a mistaken answer, mother would yell, “No! That’s wrong!” Asuka kept at the piano, weeping.

Asuka later moved to Miyazaki City, (the capital of Miyazaki Prefecture on the Island of Kyushu) due to her father’s job relocation. In elementary school, she was asked by her teacher to pull out the weeds in the school playing ground and continued to do so even after the school bell rang. She was scolded for this and could not understand the reason why she would be reprimanded for doing just what she was told to do. If she was told to “right face” Asuka would face left. She was not able to move in line with others. But her parents continued to believe that Asuka’s unique words and actions were just their daughter’s distinct personality.

Ban on Piano Playing Leads to an Attempt at Suicide

Asuka already dreamed to be a pianist when she was in the second year of elementary school but self-mutilation started when she was in eighth grade. In the first year of high school (sophomore year in the U.S. system) she experienced bullying and she could not attend school anymore. She transferred to a different high school, recuperated, and in the year 2000 she was accepted into the (National) University of Miyazaki straight from high school. However, as soon as she was enrolled, she experienced panic attacks due to stress resulting from human relations and started to faint from hyperventilation.

Asuka passed out often, and she visited a psychiatrist. She was diagnosed at this point with dissociative disorder. When a person has dissociative disorder, strong stress triggers a breakdown of identity. There is temporary loss of memory of a certain event or one may be seized by a feeling that one lives in a capsule, and these senses may at times lead to loss of self-control.

Asuka's psychiatrist made a judgment that "perhaps the piano may be the cause of the problem" and did not allow Asuka to play the piano for six months. During the period of her hospitalization Asuka swallowed liquid detergents, cut her wrist and repeated attempts at suicide. She recalls, "I could not understand why the doctor was taking the piano away from me. I could no longer restrain my feelings and had no way but to act violently."

According to her father Yoshinori, once Asuka was discharged from the hospital, "true hell started." Asuka started to wander around the neighborhood in the middle of the night or she would cry and scream and try to jump out of the window on the second floor of the house. There were nights when Yoshinori would sleep, tying his arm to his daughter's with a cord. Kyoko wrapped her daughter in her arms to quiet her. There was even an incident in which the police stepped into their residence because a neighbor had suspected and reported abusive treatment on hearing Asuka's screaming cry.

Withdrawal from the university was made after the first two years. And one year hence, Asuka started to mention, that her wish was to "play the piano." She was accepted into the Music Department of the Miyazaki Women's Junior College (present Miyazaki Gakuen Junior College) as a long-term non-degree student. Here Asuka encountered Professor Sachiko Tanaka who was to change her life.

"Professor Tanaka would definitely not speak negatively about the lack of my technique, or the small size of my hand or about my right leg (discussed in the latter part of this article). She would accept all of it by saying, 'so be it.'"

Professor also said, “Your sound is wonderful as it is.” For Asuka who had until now continuously repeated self-denial or who had no choice but to give up, this was “like a light of salvation, a frame of mind that was totally new and surprising.”

*I can be who I am...*After realizing this fact, the sound of Asuka’s piano changed. She started to appreciate her own sound. The encounter with her teacher stabilized her condition and incited her passion toward the piano.

In 2004 at age 24, Asuka joined a five day study abroad program to tour the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. However she suffered a hyperventilation attack there. She was diagnosed as having Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD, known as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in present medical terms. Here on in the article the term ASD will be used). After returning home, her disorder was reconfirmed and Asuka’s parents felt at a loss on what to do with their daughter after being informed by the doctor that “ASD is a born dysfunction of the brain.” “What did I do wrong to give birth to a child with a defect?” Kyoko kept blaming herself and could no longer visit her daughter at the hospital.

ASD is a collective term for a disorder which is characterized by developmental problems in social and communication skills. Having challenges in understanding the feelings of others, not being able to interact with others, difficulty in learning words, having a very narrow scope of interest and an obsession for particular things are the shared traits.

Asuka had trouble looking at people’s faces when speaking to them, from when she was a child. She is not able to recognize a person by their facial features. She is not able to read someone’s expressions nor is she able to understand facial signs or body language. On her elementary school report card, teachers used to comment, “Asuka speaks to everyone without prejudice” but this had been just a result of “Asuka not being able to identify who was standing in front of her.”

“Developmental Disorder” or ASD was not well known in Asuka’s childhood days in the 90s. Parents thought the reason that their daughter did not see someone in the eye while speaking was because of her failed eyesight. They thought that her concentration on specific things was a virtuous trait. They never even dreamed that she had a disorder.

In Asuka’s case, it is thought that the dissociative disorder was caused by neglect of her ASD. In 2005, as an effect of the dissociative disorder, Asuka jumped out of a window on the second floor of her home and the bones of her right leg were shattered. She has lost the use of her leg since.

But Asuka on her part took the doctor's diagnosis in a positive manner. She was convinced by the physician's words, "It's not the lack of your efforts. It's because you had these disabilities from birth." Asuka found out that people with ASD are able to achieve more in the field they are interested in, compared to the average person, and more and more she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to the piano.

It's Alright to Be Who You Are

In 2006, Asuka entered in the 12th Mianichi Music Competition. She selected to play the *Trois Pieces Pour Piano* by Poulenc which she often practiced as a student.

Kyoko explained, "We were very anxious. Asuka was on crutches and our attitude was, after performing we will leave and go home. However the sound of her piano was completely different from that of the past. It resonated in our hearts." The outcome was winning the grand prix and this was a surprise to Asuka herself.

Asuka explains, "When I was little, I thought that I had to play the piano matching the sound befitting the piece in order to be ranked in the competition. I was holding myself back so as to win a place in the contest. Copying mere form was rough. But after being coached by Professor Tanaka, whether it may be good or bad, it became possible for me to produce the "sound in my heart." I started to accept myself just as I am."

During a concert Asuka's unleashed heart identifies with the emotions of the listeners, tenderly repairing the sores in people's hearts. Such is the sound of Asuka's piano.

In 2009, at the second "International Piano Festival by People with Disabilities" held in Canada, Asuka became a triple prize winner—a silver medal, the Originality Prize and the Artistic Prize. An original piece arranged by Asuka based on a Canadian folk song drew high praises with the words, "it seemed as if the god of the stage had possessed the pianist."

Visibility increased and Asuka started to be invited to perform at events. Miyazaki Telecasting Company produced a documentary of Asuka. She also appeared for two years in a row in the NTV Group's "24 Hour TV" (a famous long run nationwide program started in 1978 based on the idea of public charity). At age 29, she made an attempt at her first solo concert in Miyazaki. The concert was a great success with the Hankyu sub hall in the Kiyotake Bunka Kaikan Hall being filled with over 500 people.

If the parents had realized that Asuka had ASD earlier, they may have been able to prevent the dissociative disorder from happening. Yoshinori and Kyoko were tormented by regret and they apologized to their daughter. But Asuka told her parents, "because I live with feelings of sadness

and anxiety, tender sounds are produced and I am also able to compose music. Please do not apologize.”

On the day before the Tokyo performance, Asuka said, “I don’t know what makes a professional pianist but I am going to do my best so that this concert will become a starting point.” After the curtain, a long line of people formed in the lobby. At the front of this line was Asuka with a pen tightly gripped in her small hand. She was seen single-mindedly signing her book.

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