

Chrysalis

The child in the video had a plump round face, smiled broadly and feet dangled from the piano bench. Then the camera zoomed in. A proud mom capturing her youngest child's short, stubby fingers. The right thumb placed on middle C. There I was, a happy kindergartener proudly playing "Mary Had a Little Lamb". I lost count of how many times I watched and re-watched that video. It brought back many warm memories.

Seven years later, not only had my body changed, but I had also transformed into a different pianist. Somewhere along the way, I had concluded that the slightest deviation in classical music composed by great masters was sacrilegious. I did not allow myself to make mistakes. I strived for perfection and high scores on piano exams.

Then, the crying and frustration joined into the fray.

Happy, carefree practices gave way to self-criticism over the imperfections. Nerve-wracking piano exam preparations led to anger, tears, and irritation. No longer was I the same pianist. The mere thought of piano practice became a dreaded task. My hands were shackled, and my shoulders borne the weight.

J.S. Bach's Invention No. 4 in D Minor and my first outburst are forever linked together in my memory. I recall it so vividly. The hurt was so raw. Trills are decorative parts of the music when the pianist plays two alternate notes in rapid succession. When performed to perfection, it heightens the beauty and complexity of the piece. However, my adolescent fingers were unable to keep up with both the speed and timing. Instead, Bach's 5-measure trill turned into thorny notes pricking until my fingertips bled. This seemingly simple section planted the seed of self-doubt.

I was lost and had not learned to advocate for myself. Instead of asking my piano teacher for help, I avoided the piano. I practiced just enough to make it through another lesson. My mom let me flounder for a while and eventually gave me two options. I could quit now or try a different method. Although she is not a pianist, my mom showed me all skills can be applied to different aspects in life. Her advice was "don't bite off more than I can chew". I slowed down, broke the trill into manageable portions, and played bit by bit. Through tackling the problem head-on, I confronted my fear and persisted until the end. After I triumphed over my hesitancy, every time when I played the same segment, the feeling of accomplishment and joy flooded over me. Little did I know, the 5-measure trill would be nothing compared to my next challenge.

I find comfort and thrive when I know what is expected of me. Just when I was rebuilding my confidence, jazz music came into my life unexpectedly. This new genre turned my world upside down. Its melodies, rhythm, and technique were so different from classical music. It seemed so unregulated, casual, and flexible. I was scared, confused, and had no idea of the expectations. It was as if I was thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool and was expected to swim.

Up until last year, I had never performed any improvisational pieces, but not playing was not an option. My music teacher, Josh, and my advisors at school noticed my serious personality, and they were on a mission to help me. Have fun. Relax a little, they said.

Instead of classical music, we are learning jazz at school. I am a good student and a reliable pianist for the jazz band. Am I comfortable as a jazz pianist? The obvious answer was no. For two years, Josh encouraged me to break out of my shell. He even offered me a solo at our music concert. My heart raced at the thought of performing in front of a packed audience at the Palace of Fine Arts. The thought of playing an unscripted piece and created in the spur of the moment seemed impossible. Despite my hesitancy, I accepted the role because it was expected of me. Surprisingly, after several rehearsals, I found the experience to be quite enjoyable. Perhaps it was the freedom of choice that improvisation offered or the joy of accomplishing something I thought was extremely difficult, either way, I felt a jolt of newfound confidence. I was extremely thankful to Josh for the opportunity he gave me and for the faith he had in me – even when I did not find it in myself. These experiences slowly but surely breathed happiness back into me.

This moment has changed the way I view myself. Instead of shying away from a difficult challenge, I now embrace these experiences as opportunities to grow. Jazz music is about taking risks. By playing different notes and experimenting with different tempos, the musician expresses the connection between his heart and his instrument at that particular moment. Not only can this be applied to music, but I am also starting to apply this mindset to every aspect of my life: take risks, venture into the unknown, and learn new things. Playing jazz has taught me that even though there may be established ways to accomplish certain tasks, one should always be open to new ideas and methods. This is because improvisation allows for different styles, and each new style is like offering a new approach in the real world. Jazz music may just be a small part of our world, but it plays a big part in showing how our world works.

This week we are playing “Listen Here” by Eddie Harris at school. Happiness flows through the notes, and a smile spreads across my face. From playing one note at a time to complicated and intricate rhythms, piano has brought out the best in me. As the music fades out to the applause of Josh, I look around in happiness and see my classmates sharing the same broad grins across their faces. I leave the music room with a sense of joy, accomplishment, and satisfaction. I climb the stairs to my locker with the notes to “Listen Here” still fresh in my mind.