***The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?***

I never really understood what Mr Yandri, the chairman of my music department emphasized, “Music itself is healing, an explosive manifestation of humanity, a universal language, and most importantly it is the soundtrack of our lives...”

My interest in guzheng, known as the Chinese harp, which I frequently saw in my grandma's Chinese drama, started during the instrument exhibition at my school. From the right hand's string-plucking to the left hand's pushing of the string to alter the pitch and generate vibrato, everything about how it was performed screams elegance. I daydreamed of playing this instrument, pleasing my grandmother, and perhaps becoming as pretty as the lady in the drama. But, of course, learning new things isn’t easy especially when your teacher doesn’t speak the same language as you. However, Gui Lao Shi would simply move my hands to match the techniques and correct my form, allowing me to be part of the Chinese orchestra. As my dream seems to go smoothly, covid-19 happened. I simply couldn't grasp all of the new techniques being taught using only visuals and voices. Music class became my dreaded weekly lesson, where all of my frustrations would coalesce and my motivation to perform well would vanish.

What Mr Yandri said at the beginning played over and over again in my head. But why did I truly believe guzheng was a waste of time? At this point, my life skills teacher introduced me to the Gibbs Reflection cycle, a framework that assists individuals in identifying their issues, places for improvement, and actions they can take to learn from their experiences. Modifying it somewhat to meet my situation, the final resolution is to learn Chinese to understand Lao Shi so I can continue to learn guzheng. ‘If the language barrier is the main issue, isn't it something that can be overcome? Why can't I just put in more effort and devote more time to learning Chinese and practicing instead of squandering a once-in-a-lifetime solo performance opportunity? Obviously, the teachers must have seen something special in me if she chose me and gave me this opportunity.’ My reflection sessions provided me with the motivation I needed to begin practicing harder despite all of the underlying barriers.

Ever since, I resolved to devote more time and effort to learning the instrument. Putting hours and hours of hard work into learning chinese textbooks and flashcards, understanding specific guzheng terminology, and increasing my practice time. It would be inaccurate to say that the path was always smooth, but with the assistance of Google Translate, it was smoother. Two years later, I managed to get a solo performance. I was on cloud nine: I immediately called my grandparents and invited them to come watch my solo performance.

On D-day, I walked out and stood in the middle of the humongous stage with that fluttery nervous stomach feeling; I was shaking and my entire body seemed to be drenched in sweat. In the corner of my eyes, I could see my grandparents cheering me on, which gave me all the calmness that I needed. I plucked my first note, and the sound echoed throughout the concert hall. The rest of the song went off without a hitch, with no major blunders or nerve-racking moments.

At the end of the day, seeing my grandparents smiling, clapping their hands and being proud of me was worth all the tears and effort inputted for this. My grandmother is not a very expressive person, so the moment when she said, "Good job, I'm really impressed by you," and then proceeded to prepare her specialty, mishua, is one that will always hold a special place in my heart.

Throughout my guzheng journey, I realized that challenges come pre-packaged with life lessons. Whatever barriers there are between people, those are not impenetrable. I need to continually develop the ability to see the value in setbacks, learn from them, and have a positive outlook. Focusing on the rewards you will receive rather than the struggles just may be the pinch of motivation that I needed. Just as when I put extra effort into my learning process, I was rewarded with a solo performance, the ability to speak Chinese and feeling somewhat like the pretty lady playing guzheng. I guess now I can say that I understand the meaning behind Mr Yandri’s words now; guzheng is the soundtrack of my life!