My piano playing journey began when I was seven years old. It had been my dream to learn how to play the drums, but I got a small keyboard for my seventh birthday. Three months later I would start lessons. I was told that after I learned how to play the piano, I could learn any instrument that I wanted to with ease. This appealed to my seven-year-old self, as it meant that I could just learn to play the piano, and then I could finally learn how to play the drums. As a kid, I was always mesmerized by the drums I would see at church. It looked so fun to bang on drums and produce fun rhythms. However, as time went on, I forgot about my hopes of learning the drums. Suddenly, I was more intrigued by the individual melodies and musical patterns of the piano. My focus had shifted from wanting to be loud with some drumsticks to a passion for playing and creating piano music. I strived to learn new pieces of piano music over the course of nine years and six different teachers. With my third teacher, Karissa, I was introduced to the Certificate of Achievement program, where one could win awards based on their level of piano skills. I was very nervous about starting this program. I felt that everyone would be more prepared or better than me. It turns out that I was just as prepared as anyone else, and every year following that introduction, I earned my certificate in Level 3, Level 5, Level 7, Level 8, and Level 9. At sixteen years old, I had one final certificate left, Level 10. By this time, I felt that I was doing so well that I could easily finish it. This was something that I had been a part of working towards for six years, and it had become much easier for me to do since I was so familiar with it. Under the guidance of my current teacher Kris coupled with hours of hard work and practice, I was able to perform five pieces of music for the judge to review. The moment I finished performing, I felt relieved and nervous. I thought I had done well, but nervous thoughts made me focus on very few minor mistakes. What if it wasn’t good enough? Did I remember to play quietly on the second piece? These doubtful feelings quickly disappeared as a week later I received a 100% score and earned my Certificate of Achievement Level 10. I felt unstoppable and invincible. Earning this meant I could play anything of any difficulty. I had completed my childhood goal. It was as if I had beaten a final boss in a video game. But now what?

My teacher Kris had introduced me to another program called Festival. Being that I had just finished with Certificate of Achievement, I could easily finish up Festival. Festival tests were judged on a 1-5 scale, with five being a near perfect score and one being a failure. Festival also only required two pieces instead of five. This felt easy to me, as I had worked so hard on five pieces that I could just reuse. I could beat another final boss just as I had done before. Well, I was wrong. Festival was divided into more categories based on age and technical ability. The highest category was Musically Advanced II, and would be much harder than Certificate of Achievement Level 10. Still, I felt as though nothing could slow me down or stop me and that I could do anything. Kris and I picked Liebermann’s “Gargoyles Mvmt III” and Beethoven’s “Sonata Pathetique Mvmt I”. I felt excited and confident with how the learning process would turn out. Little did I know how tough these pieces would prove to be.

Gargoyles and the Pathetique took easily about two or three months to commit to memory. The process following the memorization process is the perfection of the piece. This usually meant getting it up to speed, playing with the proper sound dynamics, and adding certain elements of style into the performance. The perfection of the Pathetique was somewhat simple: be loud here, quiet down here, slow down here, etc. Gargoyles, however, was very stylistic and speedy. The piece paints a picture of a stone gargoyle in the rain, with water flowing through its mouth and all over itself. Wikipedia describes it perfectly, saying, “Crystalline sonorities mark the third Gargoyle which floats a songful theme over luminous liquid swirls.” When I first heard it in my teacher’s studio, I was amazed at how complex it was. A simple melody told a story, with hundreds of complex ripples of water dripping, splashing, and flowing through the entirety of the piece. Immediately I wanted to learn it, and I didn’t even bother listening to other potential music pieces. This Gargoyles Mvmt III needed to sound effortlessly fluid and watery. This was something that would take lots of control, strength, and dexterity. I was very eager to begin.

So there I was, sitting at the piano as I had nearly everyday for ten years. I was 17 now, around January of 2021, and had been working on perfecting Gargoyles for Festival that April. I had to play it softly and smoothly, which required tightness in my hands to delegate preciseness into my fingers. I had finally gotten it up to the desired speed–about 126 beats per minute. Each beat was further subdivided into four notes, which meant I was playing around 500 unique notes per minute–not counting chords! This piece was a challenge that I felt confident in being able to accomplish. I could hear my family in the other room, minding their own business as I had played similarly every other day. I could hear the squeakiness of the pedal beneath my foot, tied in with the music spewing from my fingers. My thoughts focused heavily on speed, control, and making it sound fluid. I still felt confident and unstoppable, given that I had already earned my Certificate of Achievement Level 10. There was one small issue, though. My left pinky and ring finger were in pain and losing sensation. In my head, I told myself to keep going. The more I played it, the easier it would get. Nothing could slow me down; I could just work through anything.

As Festival became nearer, my two fingers became worse. I would wake up every morning with those fingers tingling like crazy. Everytime I would play Gargoyles, the pain and tingling would show up. It even started affecting my other song, the Sonata Pathetique. My overconfidence in myself began to prove that I was not invincible in regards to my piano skills. I knew that I had to do something and see a doctor before I permanently injured myself. If I lost the ability to play piano, all my hard work for ten years would have gone to waste. I was scared. My only hope was that it wasn’t too late.

I saw a neurologist later that year before Festival. He zapped and poked my arm to try to determine the cause of my nerve issues. He determined that my ulnar nerve in my left hand had been constricted and therefore weakened. This nerve goes from the neck to the elbow and then to the outer two fingers–right where I had been having my issues! This was cubital tunnel syndrome, where the cubital tunnel in my elbow had somehow managed to tighten and constrict my ulnar nerve. The solution was surgery to widen the cubital tunnel and remove vestigial bands in the elbow. I couldn’t stop now right before my greatest piano achievement! There had to be something else I could do.

It turned out that a physical therapist said he could lighten my symptoms and treat my arm to keep me playing in Festival. The following month up to Festival was a blur. I had weekly physical therapy appointments where I was prescribed stretches, arm braces, and nerve glides. I practiced piano like crazy in a safe way in order to not aggravate my nerves. The day of Festival finally came, and I played beautifully on both pieces. My ulnar nerve had become manageable, allowing me to score a 5 on both pieces. I had done it! I scored the highest ranking in the most advanced category in Festival.

Since then I have realized that I am not unstoppable. I have been humbled in knowing that I cannot push my body to the max and that I need to know when to stop myself. To this day I have not gotten the surgery, and I still rely on those stretches and braces to keep my hands safe. I still have issues using my triceps and outer fingers when working out and playing piano, and I know that I may need surgery one day. Until then, I must take care of myself and know my limits.