

I rummage through my grandma Nai Nai's old sheet music, finding Chopin's Nocturne in C sharp minor Opus Posthumous — my next repertoire piece. My eyes light up as I run my fingers along the folio's cobalt blue cover that she signed in elegant cursive. I gently open to the first page and place the music on her old but joyful Mason & Hamlin grand piano, another manifestation of her desire to teach and appreciate the beauty of music. Stories and images of Nai Nai appear in my mind although she passed away before I was born.

I read through the music as my hands mold to the same shapes and positions that hers did — producing the same sweet but melancholy cadences. Her dense notations cover the page, and I realize that the same mistakes she marked out are ones I had been working on and that reveal similar tendencies we share as pianists. Even our ability to make mistakes seems connected by some metaphysical means.

Music is an important medium of exploration in my life. It inspires me to learn about my family heritage by serving as a golden thread through time that connects me to those I've never met. Music has also introduced me to past composers and revealed their character and struggles, showing that compositions of a given time reflect aspects of human psychology that are impossible to convey otherwise. For example, Chopin's Etude Opus 10 no. 12 evokes his feelings about the Russian conquest of Warsaw in 1831. Chopin captured the tragedy of this event in musical sound and in a way that can still be experienced by the modern listener.

Music enables me to make many connections. Exploring these has translated into my passion for exchanging ideas and asking broader questions about the world, such as how the brain is able to perceive musical beauty and emotion. I have also learned to make a deep connection between my journey in music and my exploration of Vipassana meditation, a practice of presence — not looking back and not looking forward — that lies at the heart of how I now approach the world. Music informs my meditation because playing a piece involves being grounded in the present and gives me a similar sense of clarity as sitting and breathing. It has been said that "Music is essentially playful." Pianos are meant to be played not worked, and a piece is to be savored not rushed through. So I try to treat life as if it were a large musical experience by enjoying each moment in passing.

Music has challenged me and also provided opportunities for struggle and growth. Choosing to take the Royal Conservatory of Music exam was difficult but worth it. I took a leap of faith to invest the effort amid the pressures of school exams. It was an opportunity I thought was so out of my comfort zone that I couldn't pass it up. I was nervous but proud of the outcome, and learned a great deal about practice and discipline that have applied in ways not limited to music.

After almost fourteen years of studying music, my eyes still gaze with childlike wonder upon the piano's eighty-eight keys. I daydream about Nai Nai's travels, Chopin's love affairs, and all the other worlds that music has guided me to. A pile of faded music and an aging piano have shaped me in unexpected ways and filled me with a perpetual sense of appreciation.

I caress the final resolution of Chopin's Nocturne with my fingers and lift my hands from the instrument, ready to embark on my own journey into the world, guided by the sense of curiosity and exploration that music has awakened in me.