

Collection of a Pianist: a multigenre project

SARAH CHANT

prelude

prel-ude

·noun

1. a. a preliminary to an action, event, condition, or work of broader scope and higher importance.

b. an independent piece, of moderate length, sometimes used as an introduction to a fugue.

Dear Reader,

Classical or pop, jazz or rhythm and blues: the piano is one of the most versatile instruments ever constructed. No other allows you the unique experience of being able to accompany yourself. One hand dances through the melody while the other solidly provides the steady backing of the base line. Playing the piano allows you to let go. The space between the musician and the keys becomes non-existent. The connection is seamless. As the notes pulsate through the countless vibrations, you forget that the pads of your fingers hit the keys that hit the hammers that hit the strings. . . . The music comes out of you, not the piano. Tell me how to match that awe, and I don't think you'll need to read the rest of this project. Otherwise, enjoy the ride.

Chances are, you're not a piano player, but I'm willing to wager you have played a piano. So hear me out. Take a moment to visualize. Take a moment to see yourself, to feel yourself perched on the end of a bench, your fingers delicately placed over the shiny keys. Now, and stay with me here, watch yourself play your favorite piece of music. Imagine the sheer, unaltered exhilaration of having your hands produce what your mind wants to hear. Hold this thought and you'll know why this matters to me. This is why I had to learn how to play, and this is why I had to do this project.

Happy reading,

Sarah Chant

fugue

fugue

·noun

1. a polyphonic composition based upon one, two, or more themes, which are enunciated by several voices or parts in turn, subjected to contrapuntal treatment, and gradually built up into a complex form having somewhat distinct divisions or stages of development and a marked climax at the end.

6. Five tiny fingers spread out over the worn plastic
Of an ancient eighties Casio
Baa, Baa, Black Sheep and other one-note-wonders
The electric shrill, a cacophony
Of synthesizers in Mary's Little Lamb

8. The stiff keys of an uncle's Baby Grand
Dip and tremble under pink painted fingernails
For the holidays and the visits
That stand out brightly.
The notes, that is, the fierce chromatics of
Do-Re-Mi

10. Spinning softly into the chords
And the *put your hand here's*
Of lessons
My heart and soul and Heart and Soul
Poured into each chance to play
Always searching out that perfect duet partner

11. and thus ended the games with
Fingers curved and wrists flat and
Don't bop so much, you're becoming distracting
the staffs muddled into late dreams of Fur Elise
(I still kicked out my feet, swung them
Until she noticed)
—this life without the pedal was so much simpler
I was those practice books. I owned those harmonies.

13. how quickly that became so long ago
The metronome ticks and I'm stuck in the
Discomfort of rigid allegros
My life now a crescendo of leftover
Pop relics and Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie

14. Treading in fingers and the inability
To play faster
Play faster
Accelerandos haunting the sore fingers
Of hands still too small to hit all those ninths
There's a reason the greats are all men

16. Sucked into the hallelujahs and doxologies
Of sixty off-key church goers
Stay together
Stay together
Stay together, I beg between verses
The backing, the background of others

17. The solid emergence of a soloist
Ballades that demand attention
In sleep, in over
And over
And over
Again.
A collection, a final of technicalities
A finale of youth

sonata

so·na·ta

·noun

1. a composition for one or two instruments, typically in three or four movements in contrasted forms and keys.

The Ivories

“Experience the Musical Tastes”

Appetizers

Mozart Scherzo in C Minor

A musical bit of light and airy flavors. This jovial dish is sure to boost your mood. This scherzo has been called a musical joke, a piece that goes down easy.

Arabesque in A by Debussy

Sure to bring you back for more, the Arabesque is truly a work of art. Cooked to perfection, its weightless texture is melt-in-your-mouth good. The sweet tonal quality is one you are not soon to forget

Desserts

Ashokan Farewell by Jay Ungar

Looking for the perfect ending? Look no further! Guaranteed to put you in awe, this beautiful dish is both succulent and pleasing. The rich base is topped with a light melody of small but defined proportions. While in the folk genre, this piece stands out among the others of its kind.

Theme from On Golden Pond by Dave Grusin

The equivalent of the after dinner cappuccino, the Theme is a comforting blend of chromatic scales and modern beats. Addicting, it keeps the lucky eater satisfied with the sounds of the New England lakes.

Main Courses

Chopin's Deuxieme Ballade in F

This plate is full of the most luscious of tastes. Beginning with a pleasant smooth side dish of moist melody, the Deuxieme is soon followed with the sharp tang of full rich chords. The wonderful medley of savory tastes will leave you with a feeling of great accomplishment.

Malaguena by Ernesto Leuceona

Looking for something a little different this evening? Why not tantalize your taste buds with this Spanish infused dish? For a small size this meal is surprisingly filling. Made up of various ethnic parts, the piece as a whole is both unique and exciting. It's the perfect match for the adventurous eater.

Handel's Largo

While heavy, this dish keep you on your toes. The harshness of the initial flavor may turn you away, but we recommend seeing this meal through; it is worth it. Delicious and with the most refined of tastes to top off your evening, you cannot go wrong with such combinations of flavor.

etude

e·tude

·noun

1. a musical composition, usually instrumental, intended mainly for the practice of some point of technique

“Music is about communication, creativity, and cooperation,” stated former President Bill Clinton, and while this sounds much like a principal’s overall mantra for learning, it is focused on only one field of study. Clinton’s remark on the abundant benefits of music education finds itself in an increasingly technological age. In a time when sciences and languages are heavily stressed, the popularity of the arts in school seems to be steadily decreasing. Arts have been inaccurately deemed a “luxury” in modern society. However, such a decision to dismiss music as a frivolity is not only unfounded, it is completely ridiculous. Not only has music proven to have countless tangible intellectual benefits to the children and adult who partake in it, it has proven to keep people happy (Estrella).

The underappreciated beauty of music is that it is indirect; however, this seems to hinder its educational popularity as well. When a parent asks why their son is being taught mathematics or reading, the teacher is able to justify its importance on the surface, “math and reading are the basics; one must know the basics.” The overall significance of these classes is never questioned. Ever. If the general public was able to delve just a bit deeper into what makes music education vital, its importance would not be challenged either.

Learning how to read and play music establishes the basis of many lifelong skills, but it does so while children and adults alike are engaged and amused. Studies show exposure to music actually decreases stress on the human genomic level. Genomic markers started in a person’s body when playing an instrument cause biological responses that have been proven to help with cancer, diabetes, and inflammatory disease. So imagine what it will do for someone whose body does not require such drastic help. You guessed it, *extra* endorphins, or the scientific explanation of happiness (Bittman). A Dr. Frederick Tims reported that when a group of elderly citizens were given keyboard lessons there were “significant decreases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness.” . . . These are factors that are critical in coping with stress, stimulating the immune system, and in improved health. (Lasko). For all ages, participation in music education proves beneficial.

How then does a child benefit intellectually? Music closely ties in with the skills necessary to learn in the early years of a person’s education. It lends itself to the modern essentials and thus, indirectly teaches them. A large group of second grade children who participated in a study using keyboards and a computer program scored twenty-seven percent higher on proportional and fractional math tests than students in the same class who used only the computer program. The neurological research company that undertook the study demonstrated the indisputable rise of success music students

had over non-music students. The division of notes is a simple way to communicate the function and mastery of fractions, and has proven to have a dramatic effect on those students who choose to learn how to do it (Lasko).

Improvement in math, through one of the most obvious benefits of music education, is not the only transfer of skills. The College Board, a nationally respected organization, counts the arts as one of the six basic academic subject areas, and duly so. Students with coursework/experience in music performance score, on average, forty-one points higher on the math and fifty-seven points higher on the verbal, and students in music appreciation score forty-four points higher on the math and sixty-three points higher on the verbal than students who take no music classes. The basis of secondary education is often closely correlated with the College Board's decisions. It would be hard to dispute the raw facts that music helps kids (Lasko).

Such concrete correlations with subjects are important, but exposure to music provides useful lifelong abilities as well. The development of a musician's brain is actually different from that of someone who does not regularly practice music. A study performed by Dr. Timo Krings asked pianists and non-pianists to complete complicated sequences of finger movements while attached to an MRI machine. The study showed that while both were able to perform the sequences at the same proficient level, the pianists were recorded to have much less brain activity. While seemingly obscure, this study shows that the brains of the pianists were more efficient at making "skilled movements," and so it follows that learning to play an instrument will help to amplify function of the brain (Lasko). John J. Ratey, M.D. in his novel *A User's Guide to the Brain* writes that as a musician, one is always changing tempo, tone, style and rhythm, the brain grows in order to better facilitate the multiple simultaneous decisions. This way the brain evolves into a more organized machine. Music improves spatial reasoning, memory and the general ability to perform multiple tasks at once. Its effect on the human system is almost unparalleled (Lasko).

Finally, music education rounds out its validity with the life dependent skills of cooperation and communication. In the Ballymum Wind Band Project, an effort to expose children into an orchestral setting, participants had to successfully work together to reach an ultimate goal. It was noted that students were required to take responsibility for their own mistakes and inadequacies, while noticeably gaining self-esteem. Music offers the globally unique chance for an atmosphere void of competition where people must communicate through a universal language without words. There is truly nothing like it.

The positive effects of learning and playing music are indisputable and beneficial to millions of people both young and old. Thus, the importance of keeping music pro-

grams in school, of emphasizing its validity outside of school, and for keeping it among the core subjects is unquestionable. Music offers a different approach to the basics of education, and creates bonds that keep children and adults alike in a productive and advantageous environment. It is absolutely essential for it to be available to everyone as it has long proven its worth.

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intermezzo

in·ter·mez·zo

·noun,

1. a short, independent musical composition.

SNAPSHOT OF A SUNDAY MORNING

Sitting with my knees curled over the edge of the wooden bench, I watch as my breath forms clouds of warmth in front of me. The room, seemingly stuck in the corner of our house lacks the heat that made functioning on such December mornings nearly impossible. A mug of sugared coffee brushes up against the robe haphazardly pulled over my Sunday best, anything to keep from freezing.

The opening notes of Chopin's *Deuxieme Ballade* break the air around my hands. Not quite right, not quite *there*. I stop and rub my hands together, creating a friction among the pads of my fingers, and start over. Better, closer. Still not ready. I sigh and sip from the mug, cupping the worn porcelain. Unfocused and unresolved, I tip the bench up on its back legs for a minute or two. Visualize, picture hitting every note in my mind, knowing well I am fighting a losing battle, and yet determined to prevail. Four measures and I am already lost. Sunday mornings tend to do that to you—tend to make you more tired than when you first rolled out of the covers.

I abandon poor Chopin and run through the hymns smiling at the altered words of my crazy Unitarians, their music so “funky” as the minister calls it, so unlike that of any other church around. Pulling the harmonies from each finger I feel the solid vibrations of the polished Yamaha in the floor beneath my sock-covered feet, and anticipate the rustle of my brother's slippers darting through the living room and throwing himself on the couch for cartoons. I play a few more minutes loving the warmth that had collected in my fingers, loving the feeling of having those few extra minutes.

My brother bounds down the stairs, and I rise from the bench.

scherzo

schér-zo

·noun

1. a movement or passage of light or playful character, esp. as the second or third movement of a sonata or a symphony.

HOW TO BE A PIANIST*

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STEP 1. BUY A PIANO.

Honestly, how do you expect to become talented without even owning the instrument? This seems, to us, a no-brainer but reality has proven otherwise. Thus, for insurance purposes we must insist you purchase a full-size piano or keyboard, electronic or otherwise, in order for this program to be at all effective. Pianos often run expensive, but for strictly beginner work the actual brand or quality of the instrument is unimportant. **Do not** listen to the salespeople. They *will* tell you otherwise. They are just looking for an easy sell. **Do not** be the gullible one who buys the Steinway Baby Grand for your first lesson. They *will* laugh at you as soon as you leave, and that will be a quarter million down the tubes.

STEP 2. FIND AN INSTRUCTOR.

Sure, you might think you're a protégé, the next Mozart or Goetz, but who are you kidding? Really, if you were already skilled, you would not have purchased this book (albeit for the lovely price of just \$39.99! \$29.99 in Canada! Seriously, no one is criticizing your fine purchasing talents. You have taken the first step to total musical satisfaction. We congratulate you; give yourself a pat on the back!). Thus, this is, indisputably, the logical next step. We highly recommend finding someone who has had experience in the piano-teaching field. Generally, accomplished musicians who do not teach are often finicky and picky and do not sympathize with us lesser beings. Find an individual who is not only good, but also a good teacher. This is crucial to your success as a piano student. Encouragement and criticisms must be evenly dispensed by said instructor. (We are going to stop you here. Heartfelt encouragement cannot be bought. Don't even try. You must prove yourself to said instructor to ensure he/she will genuinely be of help to you.) You cannot learn on your own. Not even this book will stoop so low as to ignore the merits of a fine musical mentor of Step Two.

STEP 3. PRACTICE. PRACTICE. PRACTICE. AND PRACTICE SOME MORE.

(We know at this point there are some of you who just threw down this fine educational resource in fury. “Step three has four steps! That’s three extra steps,” you will yell, but we must object to this immature outburst. Note that the aforementioned three steps are all the same thing. We are just emphasizing its importance. Take a deep breath, relax and continue reading, you are almost there!) Your new instructor will undoubtedly have told you about the coveted Step Three, but we must reiterate its vital importance. You will not become great until you truly commit to mastering this instrument. We endorse at least an hour a day, everyday, or until you are comfortable with your level of mastery. Your hands will hurt, you will complain, but you *will* be getting better. And we must point out, that is what you signed up for. It’s worth it.

postlude

post·lude

·noun (Music).

1. a concluding piece or movement.

END NOTES

PIECE ONE: FUGUE (FUGUE)

This is my favorite piece of my entire project. It came to me fast and first; I didn't think about why I was writing anything. I just wrote what I needed to get down. It was an excellent jumpstart because I really loved every word and every rhythm I wrote. I needed a sort of summation piece, and I felt I would bog the reader down with my life story. Thus, I tried to do it creatively by putting only the bare bone pictures of my childhood and recent years in a freeform poem. It doesn't rhyme but it flows in a musical way with changes in tempo and voice. I thought it was just as effective and much more pleasant to read. It added a little more than just the facts of how I evolved as a pianist.

PIECE TWO: SONATA (THE IVORIES)

I wanted to try to create a piece that demonstrated the different kinds of piano music while (again) keeping the reader engaged. So I worked on something a little different from the general genres everyone seems to do. I did a menu of a variety of musical genres so that the reader could understand the variety and choice of a pianist's music. I compared the pieces to food as that is something a non-musician would probably understand. It makes the music real to someone who might not generally grasp the differences.

PIECE THREE: ETUDE (BENEFITS OF MUSIC EDUCATION)

I'm not really a research person. I didn't have any energy going into this piece, and regrettably I think that shows. I needed something to show factually the tangible benefits of learning to play an instrument, as this would show why it's important to others as opposed to my connection with it. If I had had more time I would have liked to do something obscure and creative within the research genre. Something along the lines of researching the history of piano playing would have been a lot more interesting, though I wanted to focus on the playing of the instrument and not the instrument itself. It is simply an essay on the importance of music education, and not much of a writing gem.

PIECE FOUR: INTERMEZZO (SNAPSHOT OF A SUNDAY MORNING)

This snapshot narrative was fun to write as it literally followed my Sunday morning routine. I wanted a piece to really demonstrate how playing the piano makes me feel. I tried to get across the warmth that really occurs. There is probably some scientific explanation for why this happens, but I really go through something that is hard to explain without showing it. This snapshot is to help the reader feel what I feel.

PIECE FIVE: SCHERZO (HOW TO BE A PIANIST)

A scherzo, while not in the provided definition, is commonly known as a “musical joke,” and this is what I tried to do here. With this piece, I attempted to use sarcasm to demonstrate how much work is involved in becoming an accomplished pianist. Though this piece has a completely different tone from the others, I think it serves well as a last piece. The How-To instructions are amusing, but beneath the surface, the main point “it’s by no means easy” to “get good.” It is a strenuous but rewarding process, and this piece was to show that.

COVER ART

The photo on the front of this project is a picture of Hoagie Carmichael in a performance. Hoagie is the composer of the famous piano piece “Heart and Soul.” This was not the first piece I learned to play, but I think it was the most important. I loved that music, played it in a duet with everyone I could find who knew the chord part. That piece made me want to play more, but I thought it appropriate to have him on the cover as his music was a huge influence on my life.

CONNECTING DEFINITIONS

I wanted a creative way to connect my pieces and I realized after naming my poem “Fugue” that no one really knew any of the musical language. I thought I could try to teach some words by putting a definition of a musical term before each piece of the project. I chose a term that would work as a title for the upcoming piece, that way the reader would understand the meaning of the word in its context with the writing, and thus, its meaning/purpose in music.