

Jenny He

Prof. Matthew Decker

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Preparing for a Sunday Night

A typical Sunday night is not what you would expect at a dance and music academy. Instead of prancing around in your pajamas and dancing shamelessly to your favorite soundtrack, men and women are donned in elegant, handsome attire ready to saunter across a golden lit stage. Instead of binge-watching trending funny animal videos on YouTube, hundreds of people prepare to attend a classical music performance, hoping for a little escape from another stressful week. Instead of suddenly having the work ethic to start a 900 hundred word essay due the next morning, the pencil is transformed into a wooden bow and words on the page become the music that students have spent countless hours preparing for an eager audience. This is my impression of a Sunday night. However, the night that made the most lasting impression has got to be the first time I performed at my old school—Fei Tian Academy of the Arts. Although playing violin in front of a few hundred of people can be daunting, it has taught me lessons in growth, commitment, and selflessness, which soon unraveled a positive paradigm shift in my mindset.

Despite having doubts about signing up for the Sunday Concert, I realized by participating in this event, I was creating a catalyst for my growth towards a higher level of musicianship. The Sunday Concert is something of legend at Fei Tian Academy of the Arts. It was an event where friends, musicians, dancers, faculty members, construction workers, and even the school's artistic director would watch individuals perform in the academy's most

prestigious concert hall. I still remember how I felt signing up for the first time: struggling to hold the pencil upright, I waited in vain for someone to walk up to me, pat me on the shoulder, and say "you don't have to perform if you don't want to." Frankly, embarrassing myself in front of the entire school was the last thing I wanted to do. Then one day, on the eve of an orchestral performance, our conductor shared an anecdote about the famous American boxer Muhammad Ali:

Muhammad never counted his sit-ups. It was only when his muscles cried out in agony, his vision started to blur, and sweat created a silhouette of his body on the damp floor, that he began his first chants of one, two, three...

The story left a deep impression on me—not for Muhammad's inspiring perseverance to attain higher level of self-mastery, but for the idea that improvement begins only when we take our first steps out of our comfort zones. As a musician, having the courage and self-confidence to express yourself in front of people is a way of life. And just like any other skill, it requires a lot of practice. As you grow older, sometimes you lose that bit of fearlessness that you had when you were very young. Therefore, for the sake of continuing to improve in my major, I decided to do the uncomfortable.

My first run through with piano accompaniment was discouraging, yet I decided to persevere and take things from a different perspective. Despite the pianist's strenuous efforts to play in time with me, we always managed to play a game of cat-and-mouse. I was so nervous during the session that the notes came sprawling out in incoherent fragments, much like a broken record at twice the speed. In the end, my pianist wrung her hands in the air and asked the most common question amongst all music teachers: "Did you practice?" I wanted to say "yes," but

held my tongue in effort to save myself from another list of painful inquiries. The incident made me question if I really had what it took to play in front of a wide audience. However, during one of my online classes, a quote from Einstein led me to a change in attitude: "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." I realized that although I had a good work ethic, I wasn't pinpointing the root reasons for my mistakes and working up an effective solution. Thus, I began to look within. I noticed that I wasn't used to playing under a high pressure environment. Even if I was nervous, if I truly knew the piece like the back of my hand, there should have been little leeway for errors. Then, I put my observations into action. Swallowing down my anxiety, I played my concert piece for the orchestra conductor and other intimidating violinist. I visualized every shift, sound, phrasing, articulation, bowing, and nuance I wanted to bring out in my playing. I mental-practiced when walking, sleeping, traveling, eating— every minute I could find. I was a fanatic trying to make the piece a part of me. However, I began to realize that despite having changed the ways I prepared for the concert, I still hadn't identified the main cause that hindered my playing

On the last day preparing for the concert, my orchestra manager finally helped me realize the missing ingredient that was hindering my playing. That day I had a final run-through with the accompanist. Just when the music was reaching its climax, my fingers slipped and I missed a high note. There was a long silence. I forced a smile and tried to pick up from the last section. I missed again. Maybe it was the gloomy ambience in the room, maybe it was the haunting image that thousands of eyes were going to stare at me the next day, but whatever the case, I couldn't keep playing. After another long pause, I said in a small voice, "I don't think I can do this. I will go and ask the orchestra manager to withdraw from tomorrow's program." The pianist gave a

cold nod and said, "Okay, if that's your decision. Maybe if you started rehearsing a little earlier, you would have felt more prepared." And just like that she walked out of the room. I walked over to my violin case, placed my violin inside, and cried like a three-year-old. Then with a face covered in hot tears and snot, I dragged my lifeless form to the company manager's office, found my orchestra manager and attempted to ask her for permission to pull out from tomorrow's performance. I will never forget what she told me: "The truth is, whether you play well or not at the end of the day, people really don't care." I understood what she meant. Everyone unconsciously thinks that there is a spotlight shining above them, but in the end no one really pays much attention to each other because everyone is too busy getting on with their own lives. Then, it suddenly occurred to me what my main problem was: I was playing for the appraisal of others. However, music is about uplifting others, not about promoting my self-worth. So when I walked up on that stage that night, the worries, fears and the wish to prove myself dispersed before me. It was all about being present in the special moment where several hundred pairs of eyes fixated to one petite figure for a mesmerizing ten minutes.

Sometimes when my friends refer back to the times I performed on the Sunday Concert, they described me as the kid with a lot of "flare." How this shy quiet girl they knew could bring out such a big personality on stage is still quite beyond them. They know little of the sacrifices I made behind the scenes, the moments I had to push myself out of my comfort zone, the days I forced myself to stay committed, and the times I had to give up my selfish intentions to achieve a higher standard of art. Nevertheless, even though I have sacrificed much, what I have gained in return were lessons worth sacrificing. I've realized what it means to be a person that aspires to improve themselves, attain a higher level of professionalism, and create art that truly inspires people—I learned all that from a Sunday Night.

