Why I Perform

One of my few memories from elementary school is the buildup to an audition for the school musical. A requirement was to sing, something that came with many personal struggles.

In my memory I see myself standing in the living room, eyes locked through the window onto the fence across the street, vision tunneling as I focus wholly on the sound of my voice to drown out the anxiety. I had horrible stage fright, worsened by my speech impediment motivating self-consciousness about my voice. The fear was overwhelming at times, and my auditions the first couple years all ended in me frozen and unable to speak. But despite that fear, I still wanted to perform. My drive to improve myself brought me back to the auditions year after year, until I finally managed to sing without freezing up.

By the end of 5th grade, I had spent a year learning to play violin. I found myself catching on to the technique without much struggle and enjoying the satisfaction of getting the instrument to sound the way I wanted. My confidence grew with my skill, the new facet of music helping to build my self-esteem in an environment isolated from the stress of singing. It wasn't my voice making the sound, so it couldn't waver with my anxiety in the same way. I auditioned and got into the intermediate orchestra for 6th grade, but COVID-19 hitting meant the rest of my 5th grade year and the entirety of my 6th grade education was online.

The next year and a half of school was blurry. Days melded together as I barely moved from my room, only seeing my friends a couple times a week through Zoom calls. It was hard to make connections through a computer screen, and I felt I barely existed within the isolated bubble of my house. School started again and the shift left me stumbling through my new environment, physically on campus, but mentally still stuck in the COVID lockdown. I struggled to find purpose in my actions and lacked motivation, leading to missing assignments and fear of dropping grades.

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Out of all my classes, I dreaded English the most. History as well—anything that made me do writing assignments, really. I was unconsciously fixated on a need to get things correct right away, leaving me too paralyzed within my thoughts to write anything down. I didn't want to see that first draft, I didn't want it to *be seen*---I needed something that was good. That made sense. Was well organized. It had to be correct, so I could do well in the class. I had to do well in the class, because I *had* to do well in school, because that's all I existed for 5/7 days of every week, of every month, for the majority of my life.

I didn't want to do it wrong, so I didn't start. I didn't want to see those badly connected ideas before they could be revised, so I didn't write anything down. I didn't want to hear that out-of-tune note, so I played my violin as quietly as I could. My mind was so focused on the stress associated with learning, it became difficult to enjoy Orchestra the way I used to.

Sight reading was always horrible. I would fall behind the rest of the orchestra so quickly, left sitting there panicking as I tried to find a spot to jump back in. The sound of everyone else continuing on gave the impression that they knew what they were doing, and I was the only one falling behind: out of tune, wrong rhythm, shaky bow hand, too quiet—bad, bad, bad. Consciously or not, I was often bracing to be called out, to be noticed for doing things wrong, for something bad to happen to me.

As middle school progressed, deadlines and fear of failing forced me into finishing those writing assignments, and constant orchestra class forced me into playing badly around other people as I learned. The assignments got done and the grades were fine, I made mistakes in orchestra and nothing too bad happened—really, it wasn't that big of a deal—but my perfectionist, stress-inducing mental habits related to learning would take a couple more years (and a therapist) to really dismantle. Going into high school, the future seemed daunting and terrifying. If I was struggling so much right now, how was I supposed to look forward to the rest of my education? And how would I navigate the world in adulthood?

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Sophomore year of high school arrived, and a full schedule meant I couldn't continue with orchestra as I did in 9th grade. My sister suggested I play marimba, so I signed up to join the front ensemble in MVHS's Marching Band. As it turns out, marimba was actually held for the highest level players, so I started learning mallet percussion on xylophone instead. Missing the first week of practices due to a family trip led to a rough start, but my previous musical experience helped me catch on quicker than expected.

Learning in marching band functioned a lot differently than orchestra: across the roughly 15 people on various instruments in the front ensemble, we had 2 techs (teachers) who would guide all of us, explaining technique and walking around to give individual feedback after each warm up or show music chunk we played. Being constantly seen and having my mistakes pointed out was my middle school self's nightmare, and on that first day I constantly felt like a deer in the headlights, a fear-inducing spotlight on everything I was doing.

After learning warm ups and starting to get into show music, the techs split us off into sub sections; I was considered part of the woods section, along with the 2 marimba players. I had joined after everyone else had a full week of learning the music and getting to know each other, so I was fully expecting to struggle to catch up and fit in. But the following chunk of time was filled with these two older high schoolers getting to know me, patiently teaching me the show music, and celebrating my successes whenever I figured out how it worked. I felt seen, in a good way, and marching band quickly became the place I felt most socially comfortable. Many students there became good friends of mine, and having that learning space where everyone's familiar with each other was a happy shift from the feelings of isolation in my other classes; the constant misgendering, having to remind teachers to use the right name for me... front ensemble felt like a safe haven in comparison.

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Every day I went to marching band practice I put myself out there to be seen and critiqued. Each time, I grew used to the process of having a mistake being pointed out and being given advice, and started trying to shift my thought patterns more toward how I can *improve* myself in face of failure, instead of getting stuck spiraling over what went wrong. There were multiple moments along the way where something would happen and I would slip back into old thoughts, but I slowly got better at getting back on track and just focusing on improving my skills as a musician.

The rest of school eventually became easier to handle. I learned to reframe my expectations, to get used to doing things badly so I could redo them better each time. Never perfect, but always learning.

I travelled with MVHS's marching band to perform at competitions, sunlight blinding my eyes and only one chance to get things right for a final score of my school. No run was perfect, but we all steadily improved week after week, and that feeling of performing alongside everyone else brought a unique sense of joy and belonging. Marching band was a setting where if something went well, everyone was happy about it, and if something went bad, we all laughed about it together. I grew a lot happier and confident over the years. I won't always know how to do things correctly, but I will improve with time. I learned that there's always hope for a better, happier future, if you just keep moving toward it.

In a life void of stress, I might have simply taken that mandated music class in 5th grade and moved on from the subject a couple years later, my interest never quite digging its claws in to fuse itself with my fears and self image. But as it stands today, I am imperfect, searching for my place in the world, and strongly driven to learn and improve. Music gives the setting to grow in my confidence and establish healthy relationships with failure and learning, something invaluable for managing stress, especially with being a student. I truly love performing music, and the lessons I've learned while doing so have instilled hope

for the future and belief that I'll be able to manage whatever comes my way.