



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

Rachel Mirin

One Measure at a Time

Honorable Mention

Every Tuesday after school, I would drive to my piano teacher's house, clutching the colorful stapled sheet music between my hands. I would sing along to the melodic chiming of the doorbell in my head as I waited for the response - the loud barking of his two giant great danes - Scarlett and Rugby. I would listen to his familiar footsteps that I recognized almost more than my own family's. After he greeted me with a different piano-themed tie each week, I would slip off my laced shoes, wash my hands with the Bath and Body Works cherry-and-almond soap. I would plop down on the fading gray reclining sofa before my lessons began. At 7:30, I would always step up to the glossy wooden bench, and begin playing. Even though I would often hit the wrong note, or mess up the rhythm, Dr. Steinberg continued to encourage me to continue playing. *Work smarter, not harder. Practice makes permanent- make sure you go slow. Start off with separate hands.* And my favorite- *one measure at a time.* His lessons always seemed to transcend just the piano. Anytime I started to grow frustrated with the endless flashcards scattered across my desk, or another missed shot in tennis, I would imagine his voice repeating his phrases of encouragement.

As my fingers began to grow and my legs got long enough to reach the pedals without needing to stack boxes and faded newspapers under the piano, I began to finish pieces faster, and with fewer mistakes. I had finally started working on Für Elise (the hard part, not just the main melody) when Covid-19 hit. Lessons transitioned to Zoom. I tried to preserve the magic of Tuesday evenings, but something about the glitching internet and frozen screens seemed to break the magic. But by the time in-person lessons became available again, sports practice and homework had made it nearly impossible to travel nearly an hour away to his house. Practicing the piano gradually became more difficult. I grew frustrated as I messed up note after note. I lost motivation, but continued to try to convince myself to *just try*

to play a measure, or to just improv for five minutes, and then actually practice to get myself back to the piano. I would practice the new pieces Dr. Steinberg gave to me for a few weeks before slowly abandoning them. After a few pieces he suggested that I try something a bit different. What about this one? He played a few notes of a piece I had never heard before. *You might like Debussy's Arabesque no 1.* He was right. I instantly felt a deep nostalgic connection with the rippling sound. I continued to listen for a few more seconds as the piece blossomed into a prismatic refraction of the initial melody. I eagerly raced through the first few lines, motivated to actually finish a piece for once. For the first time in years, I was finally making progress.

However, I never finished the piece. I learned of his sickness as I was making the honey cake for Rosh Hashana. *We don't know how to tell you this... Dr. Steinberg is sick. He has cancer.* I had never sobbed so much in my life. *But he'll get better, won't he?* I asked, panicked. *Honey, we don't know...*

I had only one other lesson over zoom before I saw him in-person one last time. When I came up to his house, I noticed the old 'Happy Fall' flag waving over the front door, faded from the years. The house felt smaller, but no less magical to me. When he answered the door, he was wearing his iconic piano key tie and a purple dress suit as usual, but he seemed slightly different. He wore a blue medical mask and an eye shield. Although I didn't know it at the time, it was the last time I would ever see him.

I attended his celebration of life soon after at his house. Despite my parents explaining that the ceremony was to celebrate his life, I couldn't help but focus on the flame extinguished. The day passed in a blur. I tried not to sob the entire time. I filled up an entire page in the funeral book, trying to squeeze years of memories and meaning into the tiny book. I played a song I had made based on the zoom audio test in front of his other students, even though I had not played in front of others for years. After his death, I struggled to play again for a while. My piano slowly began gathering dust for the following years.

For a long time, perfectionism held me back from moving forward. After losing Dr. Steinberg, the magic of Tuesdays faded. Slowly, I lost my musical expression and identity. I lost the essence of his lessons.

Work smarter, not harder. One measure at a time.

Nearly a year later, I decided to pick up piano again. I began playing at a conservatory near my school. Still, I struggled to actually finish a piece, paralyzed by my perfectionism and frustration. I slowly unfroze, finishing a short piece by Bartók. I tried a few other pieces, but they still didn't speak to me in the same way that Debussy's did. After a year forcing my fingers through scales and other exercises, I finally decided I wanted to play Arabesque no 1 again. This time, I wanted to finish it. Even though my hands feel displaced by the memory of where they belong, they struggle to find the right keys. However, I have gotten further than ever, and I am continuing to work on the piece. I am determined to finish Arabesque No 1, even with wrong notes and imperfections. Ever since I restarted the piece, I found myself getting less caught up in my own perfectionism. I began finishing essays quicker and found that my work was more efficient. My tennis has improved, and I re-found my love for piano and imperfection once again. Even still, my heart aches every time I press a key, and he's not there to guide my fingers.