

“The First Note and the Last”

By Tara Babal

I was in the fourth grade, the age of eligibility in my school for learning any sort of instrument, and the day had finally arrived. I heard my name and shoved my way through the group of excited students, grabbing the case from my teacher’s hands eagerly. Like a battering ram, I used the case to separate the crowd and headed back to the secluded corner in which my friends nested. Excitedly, I undid the latches and stared down at it—the shiny, smooth wood that shone in the light, the strings bright and clean, not a spot of rosin on it. I gingerly picked it up out of the case and held it up to my neck clumsily. And it felt right, despite my lack of technique. It felt as if it was simply just made for me to hold and play. I dragged the horse-haired bow across the strings for the first time, waiting for the very first note, and a loud screech jumped from the wood. I looked around in awe at the other students around me, all moving to do the same. It was rough, sounding as if there were nails being dragged across a chalkboard, but it was something we all created together for the first time. The sound of strings being scratched at erupted around the room, an orchestra in the making.

The violin held a special place in my heart—I watched my sister excel at it along with many of my extended family picking up different parts of the orchestra. Although it was in no way big with my aunts and uncles, my cousins opened the door for me. It was something I was so eager to get my hands on that once it fell into my arms, I never let go. I was thrown into this world of musicians, greeting each composer with a performance of their tunes. I set myself on the hard path to the first violin section where each stroke of the bow would have to be met with

perfection, our posture as straight as a ruler. It was a place where I thought I was meant to be, but when I made it, I wasn't as amazing as I thought.

Each minute I practiced was crucial, because there was an underlying pressure to stay in the first violin section that rested on my shoulders and on my bow as I played. First violin had their own practice together; it was the time we were able to make ourselves even more perfect than we were expected to be. The small music room held a group of students who had played since their hands were big enough to even hold the instrument and others, naturally gifted, when they started later on.

"Let's go over this section. Tara, keep up." Her voice echoed through my skull and I gulped, not used to the commentary towards me. My leg shook as I heard the sound of snickers from around the room. I was in a room of clean, sharp notes, each done with precision and played by unshaken hands. And now I was a weight pulling them down.

That's what hit me more than I thought it would. While I had this dream in mind of pursuing the violin, the shakiness in my hands, and continuous commentary from my teacher took me down a couple notches.

Nevertheless, I persisted. This was something I wanted so badly to continue, to keep going and learn as I grow, and it wasn't until second semester of eighth grade when I was knocked down to second violin. While we held the harmonies and rhythm to support the first violin, I was mad at myself. For so long I played the melody, and now I was simply a person in the background holding them up.

The story continues to ninth grade in Germantown Academy, a place where students excelled in their studies and dove deeper into their music. If it wasn't for the condescending tone of the conductor towards me, the judgement towards the shakiness of my hands, I would be back

up in the first section. At this point, my passion for the instrument had disintegrated. I was playing without a purpose, simply just getting to the next note. I used to feel a warm and fuzzy feeling when playing, a slight sway with each movement of my bow, but rather than feeling each crescendo, there was nothing there. In this school there were the favorites, what I liked to call the future stars, then there were the slackers. It was obvious I had fallen into the wrong category. One day during one of our private lessons, the conductor finally spoke up, making me face the truth.

“Just fake it instead,” he decided.

The shakiness of my hands worsening at the sound of his frustration, and I looked down, my mood deflated as quickly as a balloon. I pushed him over the edge, and the annoyance at the lack of perfection was obvious in his expression. “As long as you look like you’re playing, it’s fine.”

Just as Felsenfeld said, “music may be the universal language, but those of us who spend our lives with it are expected to know it in depth, from early on” (81). And I didn’t know it as much as I thought I did. It felt like I was back in elementary school again, the laughter from the students in my head again. I slumped in my seat, nodded, and left the lesson with less hope than ever. This set me up for the rest of my high school career.

Each orchestra lesson met with disapproval as I played the notes. I managed to survive the four years, but with pride? With pure joy in the fact that I achieved this? No. In fact, I was in pure dismay as I watched him place the freshman in the higher level each year with no question about it. The only reason I made it back to first violin wasn’t because of the work that was put in, but because I was a senior. All seniors had to be.

Here I am now, a freshman in college, leaving behind the memories of the instrument. It sits in the corner of my dad's office, collecting dust. The last note ever played on was from back in March, before the shutdowns. The stress from the past eight years of playing creeps up when I see it, the feeling turned to hatred and a sinking feeling in my chest. I do think sometimes that maybe my "late and clumsy start" compared to the others is the reason why my passion for it fell as quickly as it started (Felsenfeld 81). That maybe more hours spent practicing would've pushed me, but that opportunity is left in the past.

To move forward I treat each day with care. It is a new day, a fresh start. The road to building the trust between an instrument and a person starts with a simple note, one long stroke of the bow against the strings. The love for music is still inside of me, but for now? It's dulled down, and one day I hope to pick it up with the same amount of joy I had as a child and, of course, the note will be rough, but it will be mine, which is more than enough.

Work Cited

Felsenfeld, Daniel. "Rebel Music." *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*. 3rd edition, edited by Richard H. Bullock, Maureen Daly Goggin, and Francine Weinburg, W. W. Norton & Company, 2019, pp. 81-84.