

2017 Music Essay Award Winner

Ellie Trainor, Student of Barbara Wing

When I was a freshman in high school, I was afraid of everything.

I later learned that I was struggling with undiagnosed social anxiety, depression, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. But at the time, it simply felt like I was being swallowed whole by the vast expanse of my new high school. As I moved through the halls, I was overwhelmed with the sensory stimulation of two thousand overlapping voices, scents, and auras; all I wanted was a quiet place to be alone.

Ironically, the place that changed everything for me was not quiet, and I was certainly not alone. It was decidedly noisy, and densely populated with an array of uncomfortable teenagers. It was Freshman Chorus.

When I entered the chorus room, with its high white walls and cerulean floors, I felt cleaner than I had anywhere else in the school. The baby grand and upright pianos that stood back-to-back in the center of the room awed me with their confidence; the evenly stacked risers and their neat rows of chairs relaxed my neurotic brain. This was music like I had never seen it before.

The first week of school, my director called for student accompanists. I hesitantly responded, unsure whether my ten years of piano experience qualified me for such a position. When no one else volunteered, I became by default the official accompanist for Freshman Chorus.

Suddenly, music took on a new role in my life. I was not only accountable for myself as a performer, but for an entire choir. I was forced to learn my part at the pace of the singers, which occasionally resulted in the need for creative improvisation. Singled out at the piano, I was a commodity; I found it strange that my peers were impressed with a skill that felt so natural to me, but I never complained. I was improving musically, making friends, and learning the most important lesson of accompaniment: the art of pushing through.

My next few years were not easy. Health problems, both mental and physical, were omnipresent; academic pressure and social drama engulfed me. When I entered the chorus room every day, none of those concerns disappeared, nor did I experience a 45-minute escape. When I entered the chorus room, I was more prepared, assured, and optimistic. For each period I spent making music in that place, *I* got better. I pushed through.

Four years later, I am one of the only choral students applying to undergraduate music programs, having largely conquered the most debilitating veins of my anxiety. My GPA is high, my family is supportive, and my friends are extraordinary. My freshman self would be proud.

During my lunch period, I accompany this year's Freshman Chorus. I do it not only because I love the piano, or because I would go to war for my director. I do it because the chorus room is still my sanctuary, and I can never give enough to equal what it has given me.

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Ellie Trainor, a senior at Walt Whitman High School, has been playing the piano since she was four years old. Since then, music has taken on many roles in her life: she is a songwriter, performer, composer, teacher, and accompanist. She was a semifinalist for the Bernard Ebb Songwriting Awards in 2015, and has participated in such exclusive summer programs as Grammy Camp Los Angeles and the New York University Summer Songwriting Workshop. She plans to pursue a degree and career in songwriting, but hopes to continue integrating music into her life in as many ways possible.

