

# THE PIANO TUNER

## 尋琴者

- \* 2021 Taipei Book Fair Award
- \* 2020 Openbook Award
- \* 2020 Taiwan Literature Award

*The literary sensation that swept every major literary award in Taiwan, The Piano Tuner is an elegiac and deceptively quiet novel about sound and music, love and death, broken dreams and desolate hearts. The cadence and precision bring to mind Thomas Mann's Death in Venice, Kazuo Ishiguro's Nocturnes, and Yasunari Kawabata's Snow Country.*

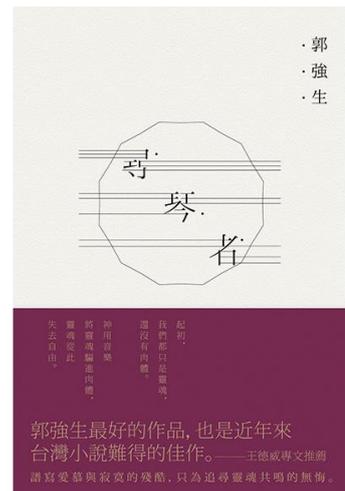
A widower grieving for his young wife. A piano tuner hiding a lifetime of secrets. An out-of-tune Steinway piano. A journey of self-discovery across time and continents, from a dark apartment in Taipei's red-light district to snow-clad New York.

At the heart of the story is the nameless narrator, the piano tuner. In his forties, he is balding and ugly, a loser by all standards. But he was once a music prodigy. What betrayal and what heartbreak made him walk away from greatness?

Long hailed as a "writer's writer", Kuo Chiang-Sheng delivers a stunningly compact and powerful novel in *The Piano Tuner*. It's a book of sounds: both of music and of the heart, from Rachmaninoff to Schubert, from Glenn Gould to Sviatoslav Richter; from untapped potential to unrequited love. This might be a portrait of the artist as a "failure", but it is also a pursuit of the ultimate beauty in music and in love.

## Kuo Chiang-Sheng 郭強生

One of the most exciting storytellers and prose stylists in Taiwanese literature today, Kuo Chiang-Sheng has already written a number of novels, essay collections, and dramatic scripts, for which he has won



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# THE PIANO TUNER

By Kuo Chiang-Sheng

Translated by Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Lichun Lin

## 1

In the beginning, we were souls without bodies. When God planned to give us souls a physical shape, we refused to enter into a concrete form that would fall ill and grow old, while obstructing our free passage through time and space. God came up with a solution, by having angels play enchanting music.

We souls were so spellbound by the music we wanted to hear it more clearly, which was possible only through one channel, the human ear. God's trick worked, and we souls gained a physical body.

What happened next ought to start with Rachmaninoff, heard through Lin *san's* ears.

The music came from the second-floor practice room.

Lin had not heard the story of souls losing their freedom over a pair of ears. He had, in fact, just experienced a different kind of loss.

Three months after his wife's death, he'd finally pulled himself together enough to deal with the studio she'd run.

She had poured her heart and soul into the studio, attracting an enthusiastic following in the neighborhood. Then why hadn't she left a word about it during her last days? Maybe she'd felt bad about burdening him with the task of keeping the place going, he reflected. She knew that an amateur music lover like him would likely close up shop unless she asked him not to.

That speculation assuaged his guilt feelings somewhat, for, after all, before meeting Emily, he hadn't been able to tell a violin from a viola.

Three months had gone by and classes were ending. The instructors and students had all been notified of the closure.

It was the first time he'd been to the studio since her death, and he had waited until after nine at night, when the last session was over, and he would not be subjected to reproachful looks from the newly jobless instructors. They would not say anything, but he would find their awkward attempts to avoid him unbearable.

His first marriage had lasted six years before ending in divorce. This one was over even sooner, a short four years, over before Emily had time to turn him into a true lover of classical music. The cancer had come out of the blue, and with a vengeance. She was gone in six months.

He was twenty years older than her. The thought of getting remarried had given him pause, fearing that one day he might be a burden to a young wife. He never imagined that it might end the way it did.

With the door to the practice room ajar, the lyrical notes of a piano came through crisply in the night air.

Emily had dragged him to a good many concerts, including her own recitals, but there were few pieces he could recognize right off. Surprised by the piano strains emerging from upstairs, he paused in his conversation with the studio manager and instinctively looked up in the direction of the music.

It was Rachmaninoff's "Song Without Words".

He'd first heard the tune on Emily's violin on the eve of their first anniversary. He'd gotten her a surprise gift, neither jewelry nor an expensive purse, but a self-sponsored recital. Overjoyed, she began by making him an audience of one in their living room, where she played the whole program for him. Only the Rachmaninoff piece inspired a strong reaction and deep emotions. The string version sounded unusually sorrowful, which may have led to thoughts of his mother, who had passed away a few years earlier. Without much thought, he'd said, "Seems awfully sad."

Emily graciously replaced it with another selection for the recital. Yet the melody was etched on his mind. Like an audio allergen, an ear worm, he seemed to hear it all the time; from a soprano's plaintive rendition to a cello performance, from car commercials to movie background music, the piece popped up around him in ever-shifting forms.

But on this night, when he heard the piano version in the empty studio, not only was it missing that grave quality, it actually sounded weightless, expansive, somewhat hazy.

"Who's that playing so late at night?" he asked the studio director.

From the moment he arrived, the moon-faced woman had tried to force a sad look onto her naturally happy countenance, but now, with this question taking her mind off her expression, she could relax.

"Oh, that's our piano tuner."

"Hasn't he been told to stop coming?"

"Yes, but he said he was happy to provide free service before the pianos are taken away."

Lin frowned but said nothing.

(God, what am I going to do with all the pianos?)

"He plays beautifully, but said no when I asked if he'd like to offer lessons." She added, "Sometimes we let him use the room for free."

"How much do we pay him?"

"Fifteen hundred an hour."

Appallingly paltry pay compared to that of a teacher. A businessman at his core, Lin intuitively considered the difference in salary.

Having no piano of his own and refusing to teach, just happy to be a tuner. To Lin, that seemed irrational.

“He’s pretty good.”

He commented spontaneously. It was, after all, his music studio. If his judgment was off, so what?

“That’s what Instructor Chen said too.”

Emily had always been Instructor Chen. He, on the other hand, had been the man behind the woman, old enough to be her father. So the staff called him Mr. Lin, but called her Instructor Chen, as if unsure of their relationship.

He climbed the stairs slowly, drawn to the music.

It truly sounded different from the versions he’d heard, for there was a dreamy sweetness to it, like awakened memories of events long after they ended.

(Sooner or later these melodies too will disappear from my life.)

When he reached the top of the stairs, he looked into the only lighted practice room. A man in a baseball cap sat at the upright piano just beyond the partly opened door.

Lin recognized the piano, a Bosendorfer.

After a while, Emily, a student of the violin, had rarely sat at a piano. In the end, the Steinway at their house had been used only by her accompanist during practice.

She’d studied both the piano and violin as a child, and had double-majored in high school. Lin once asked her why she’d settled on the violin, to which she’d given a half-serious answer: she could never hope to be a concert pianist, but maybe she could audition her way into an orchestra and make a living with a violin.

He let it go at that, assuming she’d probably considered not returning when she was studying abroad. She might have had a Caucasian boyfriend at the time. At thirty-six, Emily should have known that her prospects would continue to diminish if she did not get married.

He’d bought the new Steinway Grand after they were married. The second-hand Bosendorfer she’d been playing up to that time was moved to the studio. Back then, visiting friends had been impressed by how he doted on his wife.

There was another reason for his extravagance. A self-made businessman, he had built an export empire selling plastic lounge chairs during the economic boom of the 1980s. Made in Taiwan. That was how small and medium sized businessmen of his generation made their fortunes. They traded in household implements and electronics, but none could make automobiles, or, for that matter, pianos, for export.

A piano does not age, not with meticulous care and tuning, and will always produce notes as perfect as the day it was made, even better if played by a pair of powerful, agile, magical hands.

He had to laugh as he listened to notes flow from the Bosendorfer’s keys, each as bright and clear as polished glass.

The ideal climate for the Steinway at home was twenty degrees Celsius with forty-two percent humidity. But over the past six months, he’d been negligent in caring for the instrument.

The old piano, in de facto exile, had been diligently maintained here, while a layer of dust covered the Steinway, its keys out of tune, its strings out of shape. He mulled the irony in his aching heart until he tasted a rust-tinged sourness.

(I'm all alone again, a sixty-year-old man.)

He was reminded of the old Yamaha at home when he was a child.

His sister had been given piano lessons. In his father's circle of old-fashioned doctors, playing the piano was preparatory work for a daughter's future marriage. With a piano in her dowry, she would be recognized as well brought up. His parents never realized how poorly cut out she was for the piano. She'd failed the high school entrance exam three times before they sent her to Japan. At times, he recalled seeing his sister, a butterfly bow in her hair, sitting at the piano practicing a Schubert piece over and over. Why hadn't his parents sent him with her for piano lessons? They favored boys over girls and had expected him to get into Jianguo High School and then the Mechanical Engineering Department at National Taiwan University. He had not let them down.

He wondered if, at some level, he'd married Emily to make up for missing out on music. Though fully aware that the Bosendorfer was quite serviceable, he nonetheless believed that a musician ought to have a grand, not an upright, at home. When he thought back now, he had to concede that it might not have been entirely for her sake, that it had also been the result of a sense of vanity of which he himself was only dimly aware.

Rachmaninoff had led him into a momentary confusion of memories.

As the final notes lingered, the pianist's hands gently took flight, like riding on invisible clouds, made an arc in the air, and landed on his knees.

Lin stood outside the door, quietly watching the man's ending gesture.

That must have been when he became aware of my existence.

In the days to come, in the small pub we frequented, he once shared his view that some musical instruments are perfect matches for the female body, like the flute or a harp.

Lin *san* enjoyed seeing a slender, graceful woman play the violin, as opposed to a hulking man, who, with his head tilted to one side, could crush the instrument on his shoulder. He considered it inelegant for a woman to play the cello, her legs spread around the instrument. Privately, he thought a piano's form fit men better, especially a grand, which only large hands, long arms, and broad shoulders can fully control.

I jerked my head around when I sensed someone at the door.

"Oh, sorry—"

I'd been coming to the studio for over a year, and had run into him a few times when he dropped Emily off. But this was the first time we'd actually met.

The face behind the steering wheel, coupled with his silvery gray hair, had always looked off-putting and cold. I was surprised to see that, out of his Ferrari, he was actually half a head

taller than me. Face-to-face with a man who had just lost his wife, I took pains to not seem gratuitously sympathetic.

“I want to thank you. The director told me you’re the one who’s been taking care of these pianos.”

“I took on some of the former tuner’s clients when he retired.”

We fell silent, until I turned at the door, canvas bag over my shoulder,

“How’s the Steinway at home, Mr. Lin?”

## 2

The Greek mathematician Pythagoras was said to have walked by a blacksmith shop one day in 530 BCE, and was mesmerized by the forging sound, ugly and jarring at times and yet, to his surprise, elegantly harmonious at others. When he walked in for a closer look, he discovered that the weight of the hammer was the key, producing different sounds depending upon the force used by the blacksmith.

Lovely sounds emerged if the ratio of two hammers’ weights happened to be 2:1, 3:2, or 4:3, thus forming the basics for tuning a keyboard instrument.

Two harmonious notes produce the resonance of a perfect strike ratio.

What was it that ultimately moved the souls when they received the ears they coveted?

Was it similar only to the molecular vibrations from a pebble tossed into a placid lake? Or was it a frequency that has always existed in the universe, something one can experience even without a physical body?

Each piano string is under 160 pounds of pressure, which comes to approximately twenty tons of pressure for all 230 strings.

While creating a melodious timbre, the instrument itself must withstand immensely painful tension. The difference between a tuner and a pianist may very well lie in how they perceive the mechanics involved.

An expert tuner does not use a tuning fork, relying only on his ear, itself a rare talent. Using equal temperament, a tuning fork distributes the twelve semitones equally in an octave, and each note turns out to be a semitone that is one twelfth lower.

That is why not a single piano in the world has perfect pitch, and why a pianist can only produce notes modified by a tuner.

Without a piano of my own, I play when I tune, and that has been pretty much how I’ve been able to practice over the years.

More than once, bewildered clients have been about to say something when they hear, to their surprise, the unexpected quality of music I produce on their instruments.

I could guess what they were thinking: how could he be content to be a mere piano tuner? Some have eagerly asked if I'd studied with a famous pianist.

What they do not understand is how difficult it is to be an expert tuner. A great many famed pianists employ the same tuner, for a top tuner is harder to come by than a first-rate pianist. A fact the world has overlooked.

More people want to give a concert than the proverbial carps in a river, and, with enough nerve, anyone can play on a stage. A tuner not only has to be a piano expert, but must be familiar with all the pieces a pianist performs at each concert. Needless to say, he must know by heart their individual styles as well as their interpretation of each piece of music.

Continuous practice is crucial if one wants to be a tuner like that.

Naturally, being in a class of one's own remains a dream.

I chose to give up the better paid job of piano teacher and become a tuner, a worker, not an artist, in people's eyes, simply because I had a hard time dealing with the parents. I could not bring myself to praise or encourage their talent-less children just so I could continue to earn a fee.

What concerned me more was the damage to my keen ear by their playing, more like banging, actually. I could even suffer irreparable mental and bodily injury.

In theory, as the owner of a Steinway, Emily could have a technician from the company provide reliable tuning service and repair, but she was dissatisfied with the instrument's tonal quality.

I heaved a heartfelt sigh when I opened the lid to study the hammers the first time I'd touched the Steinway after its owner fell ill.

"Too humid."

The company technicians had not known what Emily wanted, failing to understand what she meant by the action being too noisy, by the high notes being too thin or the low notes lacking the full-bodied resonance she sought. It was beyond them to know the causes of these issues or to comprehend the buttery notes she was after.

In the end, their only response would be, Our brand is the finest in the world. Or, Didn't you notice these issues when you bought it?

In the end, Emily decided to give the newbie, the tuner at her music studio, a shot at her Steinway.

"Did you find the problem for her?"

Lin san watched and listened as I opened my tool kit, a dubious look on his face, as if straining to imagine how Emily had suffered feelings of helplessness, was crestfallen, even angry, because of the piano.

"It's probably more appropriate to say adjusting the tune than tuning."

I went on to explain why it wasn't enough for the technician to tune only by equal temperament or just intonations. Sometimes it is important to also hear the overtones, since we play chords on a piano. A few notes, because of the frequency of vibration in individual pitches, will eventually be in conflict.

Lin *san* tried to focus on what I was saying, but the technical terms were too complex for him to grasp. Besides, he hadn't been sleeping well for weeks. He looked more haggard than when I'd run into him at the studio that time.

He knew his wife was the tense, anxious type, even though she'd always presented a charming, graceful smile to the outside world. Yet he'd never heard her complain about the piano, a detail hidden from him until this day.

What was buried deep in daily life had yet to be unveiled when the marriage ended. He could not have imagined how flawed that Steinway was to her, how utterly lacking in the tones she'd wanted.

"But Emi—, my wife, she, why didn't she know all this?"

I saw him secretly stifle a yawn.

"Most people who play an instrument know little about it."

"The perfection a musician pursues is both abstract and idiosyncratic, which in the end is realized in a mechanical installation created purely based on physics. It is a fact that musicians often overlook," I said.

He did not ask any more questions.

Maybe my answer gave him the impression that a piano wasn't our real topic, only a hint that related to the rest of his life.

Seeing his downcast, wretched look, I could almost hear him mutter to himself, How could I let a total stranger see the ignorance that kept popping up in my life? How is that possible?

He was seeing other women when he first went out with Emily.

One of them was the owner of a Japanese Izakaya on Anhe Road. They had known each other for more than a decade since the night he happened to walk in shortly after his divorce. When they were feeling down or lonely, they served one another as a convenient "fire extinguisher." Another was a PR consultant at a major banking group. He was quite aware that she may have had an ulterior motive in being with him.

Then there was the interior designer, a woman who had gained a bit of fame.

After his mother's death, his impulsive nature led to the abrupt decision to move back to his childhood home, an old, single-story house, part of which had held his father's clinic. He hired the interior designer, Beatrice Huang, (Don't ask me why these women all have English names), to renovate the house from top to bottom. The end result, a stylish house replete with post-modern nostalgia, even made the cover of an architectural magazine. He hosted a party for Beatrice in his newly remodeled house. Maybe it was his way of showing that love was not essential, but what really counted was his initial declaration that he would never remarry. He may not have admitted it to himself, but it was possible that he married Emily barely six months after they'd met largely because he did not know how to end his relationship with Beatrice.

Musicians don't always know their pianos. They often project too much of their emotions onto it, forgetting that it's just a machine controlled by a series of hammers, devoid of arcane principles.

In that vein, a common mistake by ordinary people is failing to see how complex and unpredictable the human heart is; they seem to believe in the existence of music scores that will teach them how to deal with one another.

What Lin *san* never quite grasped was, every time he got involved with a woman, a group of strangers would force their way into his life, and he would be dragged into their social circle. He was surrounded by designers and architects when he was dating Beatrice. After marrying Emily, he learned that musicians are not the hermetic type; in fact, they have seemingly endless social engagements, constant recitals, and premiere receptions.

He actually had few friends of his own.

In light of the economic tsunami that hit shortly after his remarriage, he decided to shutter his thirty-year-old company. He'd thought he would live the life of an urbane retiree and be the driving force behind a successful violinist. In the end, however, he was mired in loneliness he did not understand.

He had been entertaining clients at a Michelin class French restaurant the night he met Emily. After the meal came a wine-tasting the owner had arranged. In addition to a limited-edition cellared whisky that had been flown in from Scotland, he had also invited a string quartet for background music.

Emily, the only female musician, was wearing a full-length, demurely sleeveless black dress. With her long hair braided and pinned back in the princess style, she effected a look of elegance. One of his clients exclaimed,

"What a pretty girl. Why not ask her to join us?"

That troubled Lin *san*, who found the man's attitude odious. What did he think she was? Though he'd been a businessman for decades, he'd never completely freed himself from the constraints of his doctor-father's strict upbringing. Granted, he'd been imperceptibly influenced by his father's brand of male Chauvinism, but he was contemptuous of men who harassed women or frequented brothels.

He may have owed his self-assurance to his appearance: Over six feet tall, he had thick brows and a high nose bridge. Nature had been kind to let him keep his full head of silvery, wavy hair even late into his fifties. He drew looks wherever he went.

Glancing at Emily, who was engrossed in her music, playing with her eyes, he was momentarily reminded of his young sister in Japan, whom he hadn't seen for a long time. His father might well have hoped for his sister to be like the woman in front of him. The client was too important to offend, and Lin *san* struggled internally before quietly bringing up the shameful request with the restaurant manager. "Just that, nothing more. We think she's very talented...." He was digging himself into a deeper and deeper hole as he went on.

Likely a common occurrence in such a place. The manager smiled and eased him out of his distress. "Inviting only her would not look good, Chairman Lin. Why don't I set up a table next to yours and invite all four of them? I can bring you a bottle of Chivas Regal or perhaps....?"

Moments later, Emily and her fellow musicians came up to offer a toast. Her eyes met his, and she seemed to know instinctively that he was not someone who would be difficult. Ignoring his clients, he let his Chauvinist side take over as he dragged a chair up for her to sit near him.

We can agree that frequency vibrations do indeed occur between two souls. Emily's well-trained ears as a musician must have heard them.

Unable to hear what she was playing, she could not know what was wrong with the piano's pitch.

She'd thought she'd finally realize her dream of becoming a performing musician, with *Lin san* as her sanctuary. At a very young age she had been in classes for musical prodigies, and had later earned a music MFA overseas. Yet all she could get were part-time instructorships in college music departments and invitations to join colleagues' string quartets.

*Lin san* would have heard what I heard if he'd been favored with more advanced musical appreciation.

There was an internal dissonance, out of tune with her soul's frequency.

When I was done I put my tools away.

An autumnal afternoon sun slanted in through the French doors. Beyond them stood an old, energetic looking plane tree. Few people could afford a house with such a large yard in the downtown area. I was sweating a bit, either because of my intense focus on the job or from the heat of the sun's rays. I removed my cap to cool off.

"Oh, I thought—"

He looked too embarrassed to finish.

"What's that?"

He said the cap had him mistaking me for a twenty-something.

"No, I'm in my forties," I said.

My balding head does not lie. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a full head of silvery hair in his late-fifties. Mine had begun to fall out, in handfuls, when I turned thirty. I tried to envision how I must have looked in his eyes. Besides my baldness, I was graced by a pair of jug ears and a pitted face from the assault of acne in puberty.

I knew that, if not for my homely appearance, his male instinct would have caused him to be suspicious of me when he learned, for the first time, of the many trips his wife's piano tuner had made to his house.

He took out his wallet, but I said no. It's free. I was grateful for Instructor Chen's trust in me, and this is the least I could do to repay her.

### 3

I think most readers will be more interested in someone like *Lin san* than in me when they reach this point of the story. Am I right?

I have enough self-awareness to know that I'm not the protagonist. Without at least a speck of such wisdom, my life would likely be worth less than it is now.

That said, as the narrator, I do see that what I'm doing now isn't all that different from the job of a piano tuner.

With a piece of music that has touched the souls over the centuries, everyone remembers the composer's extraordinary talent and the performer's outstanding skill. No one ever thinks of the role played by a tuner. As a matter of fact, knowing their status, the tuners themselves are used to remaining behind the scene.

A successful performance requires precise temperament and harmonious timbre. Likewise, a captivating story needs a narrator who knows moderation, who is able to trim off unrelated, trivial details, and who can find the right focus and pace, but refrains from embellishment or willful attempts to give the tale a self-proclaimed happy ending.

I've been accustomed to staying hidden from sight all these years, but I know that everything has its own basic, professional demands. If a musician is unhappy with a particular performance, the tuner must share the blame. If a story fails to please or earn the reader's trust, the narrator is to be held partly responsible.

Hence, a responsible narrator probably should not shun the first-person narrative perspective or reject all questions or criticism. Therefore, I think it's only right that I tell you a bit about myself.

I was, in fact, a music prodigy.

I've tried hard to keep it a secret, but now it has to come out.

It's a secret not because I never wanted anyone to know. The truth is, after a while, no one cared or mentioned it, so it evolved into a fragment from the past that only I remember, but don't feel like talking about.

There was a time when my talent was not a secret, for word of it circulated widely in my elementary school. It's been so long now that everyone has forgotten about it.

Once, in second grade, I walked up to the piano and played the song the music teacher had just taught us to sing, while all the other kids ran off as soon as the session was over.

The teacher, who walked in to prepare for her next class, was stunned by the music that flowed from the little boy's hands, not just single notes, but chords.

Soon they discovered that I had rare, ultra-sensitive ears, and that my ability to remember notes far exceeded that of other kids of my age.

And there was more. I had powerful hands that were wider, with longer fingers, than other children. I was born with all the requirements to be a musical prodigy, all except for family.

My parents snorted at the teacher who came to see them. What could I get out of playing the piano? Could I run faster than bullets when war broke out?

Father lost the sight in one eye during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis of August 23, 1958. When he was discharged, he brought his local Kinmen bride to Taipei and settled down in a shantytown that was later razed. He opened a dumpling shop to support a family of seven. In his view, the three boys should all attend military academies, while letting fate decide for the girls,

who would go to a public, tuition-free teacher's college, if their scores were good, or get married at seventeen if not.

My musical talent did not bring him a shred of pride. On the contrary, it was more like a ticking time bomb, a threat that one day his prodigal son would abandon him, and that gave birth to latent violence and real tension between us that could erupt at the slightest provocation.

I did not take music lessons in school.

Along the way, there were always kind teachers who saw my situation and offered free lessons. Even now I can imagine the white and black piano keys and, recalling the notes in my head, play any music I want on a desktop. For me that's easy.

During my indifferent childhood, I did not think much about my inexplicable talent, since for me it was like riding a bike or whistling. In the beginning, I even believed every kid could learn to do it.

At home, Father did not know how to deal with his oddball son, so he flew into a rage whenever he saw me hanging out at the dumpling shop, fingers thrashing in the air as if wracked by spasmodic epilepsy.

At school, I stood out because my teacher offered me free piano lessons when she had the time. Did that mean the other kids had to pay for theirs? I was so dense.

They were taken by their parents to study with this or that teacher, in the hope that they would pass an entrance exam to the highly competitive music program in middle school. It, too, was a mystery to me at first, for I thought playing the piano was for nothing but my own private enjoyment. It was wondrous and joyful to be one with the music, so why must it become a battle over grades?

I grew increasingly taciturn.

Shortly before I graduated from elementary school, the music teacher took me to a piano recital. In his early twenties, the pianist, the first-place winner in an International Chopin Competition, was a young man with the same skin tone and hair color as me.

He'd been born in Hanoi, Vietnam, also into an impoverished family, my teacher told me. Later, he'd met a renowned music teacher, who had helped get him into the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, from which he had emerged a few years later with promised renown of his own.

It was a fantastic story, but it failed to make me envious or aspirational. Hanoi or Moscow, both were too abstract, too unreal for me. What I never forgot were the sparkles that seemed to shoot from his fingertips. It was my first concert, and the performance brought me to tears.

After the recital, my teacher, Ms. Chiu, treated me to an ice cream sundae at Fule on Dunhua North Road. It was an unforgettable afternoon. Her long hair shone softly under the sun, reminding me of the glossy black piano on the stage.

I ate with gusto, smearing the corners of my mouth with whipped cream, which she then wiped off with a handkerchief. I heard her mutter something I remember even now.

"Ai, just a little boy."

I could play Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata by then.

After the ice cream treat, we strolled down the wide sidewalk on Dunhua Road. I ran off after a dragonfly, but she called me back.

“Promise me to never give up the piano, will you? Hook our pinkies?” she said.

I had no idea what a weighty promise I’d made that day. Her endearing sigh, when I think about it now, years later, decided the next step in my life.

She paid her college teacher out of her own pocket to take me on as a pupil. Obviously, she could not have imagined the kind of life I would have in the section for students considered unteachable, given my below average performance in every subject but music.

I became the unlucky target of class bullies who had too much energy. The bell that rang after each class made me fret over where to hide for the next ten minutes. Skinny as a bamboo pole, I was also badly disfigured by acne during those years. One of my worst fears was that they’d find out I was pompous enough to play the sissy piano after school.

At fourteen, I was already exhausted from evading their harassment. Added to that were the never-ending sounds of chopping pork in the kitchen, the clamor from diners placing their orders and getting their checks, pranks played by classmates with raging hormones, and loud engines and honking motor vehicles out on the street. I was so drained I just wanted a quiet place where I could put on my headphones and push the unbearable boredom away, farther and farther away, as far as possible.

The dashing professor often charged his students additional fees to hold flashy recitals at his house on Yangmingshan. Those who ponied up a fee took center stage and played a few solo pieces for the audience.

Why did the parents look more tense than their performing children? It took me a while to figure out that the professor had been hinting that they must start making connections for their children, and that these recitals were a vital investment, for he invited important figures to offer “valuable advice”.

I did not know who those “important figures” were, but I can still recall how they praised all the students to high heaven, claiming that every one of them would be the next classical music superstar. As the only one who was out of step, sometimes I let slip a yawn over an insipid performance or sniggered when I overheard the excessive praise.

My inability to pay the fees and my terrible attitude turned me into an object of scorn among the students. I couldn’t even tell Ms. Chiu about all the ridiculous things I discovered.

Had she gone through a similar initiation rite? If I were to reveal my contempt for these people, would I be mocking and hurting her feelings? I wondered if she too had dreamed of international fame or of participating in a Chopin competition.

I, however, was relieved at the same time.

It was clear to me that I did not belong there.