"Personal Statement: My mother says…" by Chang Liu, UHS

My mother says that I began humming before I began talking, so music is my first language. Music also contains the same elements of structure and expression as any other language so I interpret English, Chinese, and Spanish through it. It is the only personal language I know.

The structures of English and music parallel each other perfectly because both are created through the arrangement of individual units into progressively larger ones. English begins with the unit of the word and music with the unit of the note, both having a rhythmic duration and a sound. These units combine to create a larger unit, the phrase. An English phrase expresses actions or images through its words' meanings and associations. Musical phrases express the same things, only the actions exist as harmonic units and the images exist as chord modulations, each with a unique association. The unit of the phrase, then, is able to show a portion of an idea and the value it holds. In order to further express that idea, the units assemble into sentences. The English sentence is the expression of a complete thought and is created through the joining of phrase units. The melody is the musical parallel to the English sentence. It consists of a harmonic progression, created through the linking of individual harmonic units supporting a line of notes to express a motif. The sentences and melodies assemble to construct paragraphs and musical sections, which then combine further to form a composition.

However, English and music do not only create ideas. They also create a dynamic movement of emotion. This is achieved through the syntactical combinations of balance, cacophony, tension, and ease. Syntactical devices of repetition show order, as inverted phrases show dissonance, climactic sentences show apprehension, and short, fluid sentences give ease. These devices thus create emotion. Music employs the same techniques, with order in repeating phrases, inversion in the clashes between concordant melodies and dissonant harmonies, and climactic sentences represented by the progression of a note to an octave, a chord, a sudden crescendo, a fortissimo—then a rest of anticipation. A consonant chord follows and ease washes over the listener. However, a difference exists. Music is not bound by region, nationality, or time for all of its ideas can be found exclusively within its structure. Because of this, music appeals directly to the senses, to the emotions. Despite their separation by geography and time, Rachmaninoff communicates his Russian romanticism as effectively as Mahler his vast Austrian symphonies and Ravel his intricate French impressionism. Music transcends language.

Music is universal throughout four dimensions and so, I interpret everything I see in its terms. Math is the balancing of different note values within an equation; chemistry is the way elements combine to produce interacting harmonies; history is the cyclical movement of musical motifs throughout a concerto. Music is my first language and the only personal language I know. It is the only language I need to know.

Lee Burke, "I was born…"

I was born with a disability. "You're a stutterer," I was told twelve years ago at my first speech therapy session. I have since discovered that I am not a stutterer—I only have a stutter. The difference lies in the choices I make every day: I could become an introvert, or I can take risks and grow, overcoming the vulnerability inherent in my struggle to be heard. In taking language risks, I find the courage that has become so integral to my character.

Thankfully, my voice is more than my speech – it is also thought. I research, and subsequently discuss with friends, the origins of space-time, Puccini's Madame Butterfly, and the reason cables in suspension bridges arch parabolically. I am free, though anxiety permeates the discourse as my disfluency interrupts my thoughts; I am free, despite my stutter, to learn and to enjoy the wonders of minds working together.

I am also free to challenge myself. Since that first therapy session, verbal interaction remains difficult, but I do not let the difficulty stand in my way. I have been a vocal student representative on my school's governing council for three years, serving on faculty hiring committees and in discussion about budget cuts and contentious decisions. I have also debated with the Model United Nations team at several conferences, earning awards for my performances as representative to the UN Economic and Social Council and to the African Union. If ever my stutter threatens to overwhelm me, I take a breath and dive back into the discussions, free again to interact.

This freedom came at a cost. At the conclusion of eighth grade, I played the part of Caliban in The Tempest. I stuttered through every line: "s-s-s-sometime am I all wound w-w-w-with adders, who, with c-c-c-cloven t-t-t-ongues, do hiss me into m-m-m-madness." My face flushed crimson; I struggled to stay in character. But by the time the curtain fell, I knew that if I could face an audience, I could attempt anything—confront each challenge, debate, or technological wonder to design. I will confront each challenge with a smile on my face because the hard part is over: I'm already talking to you.

Bea Nielsen, "I've Read a Book"

The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents, by William A. DeGregorio, is a 750-page tome chronicling the lives and administrations of each of the United States presidents. It is my favorite historical text. Since my childhood, I've read this book.

This book represents my grandfather—flannel shirts, rheumy blue rimless eyes, that smoker smell even after ten years without a cigarette. I sat on the floor of his study when family dinners went sour. I remember my perpetual orange plaid dress and grandpa's slippers, his impossibly narrow ankles folded into one another. I sat on the floor reading thick, hard covered books. The sound of golf announcers on the television almost drowned out the sound of my brain teaching itself how to stretch.

The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents was often entrusted to me for a few days, and I'd walk away from Grandpa's office hugging this vessel of our nation's executive history to my chest. I read each biography of the Presidents, savored them, learning more than most people ever would care to know about John Adams's personal life, criticisms of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, or who was in Andrew Jackson's kitchen Cabinet.

What I knew about Grandpa were the facts, the words that would describe him in a biography—He was a World War II veteran, he worked as an ad man on Madison Avenue in the 1950s. He listened to my strained piano-playing without much patience; he fed me brownies with walnuts; he watched me read his books with fondness but never said "I love you." I desired to make him aware of my quiet ambition: I wished to take the gray and white matter of my brain and twist it until I moved beyond what is visceral and innate to humanity—toward a life in which ideas are always questioned, a life in which questions never cease.

Few people actually know and understand political figures; my grandpa's attitude fit that of a President. He was president of a family; a patriarch at the center of a web of independent minds, weaving his opinions into ours. Through the Presidents book, I learned more about my grandfather than I ever learned from knowing him. The marginalia on the pages of the *Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* literally shows me what my grandfather thought, but not the crux of his character. I read him in the context of my life as one watches the speeches of presidents on television: with a removed connection and respectful criticism.

My grandfather was a question—an unanswerable query that I would never understand, but one who served as an unswerving guide. I have grown to love the things that I do not

understand, because they provide questions. I have decided that the best way to learn is to question what I think I know. Ideas moving through our minds unchallenged are simply ideas; there is nothing concrete about an idea that is not fortified by argument.

I enjoy learning about most things that are applicable or related to life—life itself, humans, our brains, our ideas, our faces. I am curious about the recesses and crevices of our minds, and what exists in places that I will never be able to access.

The human mind fascinates me more than statistics and staid facts. I want to know when we know ourselves, or the point at which we become caricatures of ourselves. I am fascinated by variables of individuals, and our personal intellectual stimulus; our ability to be simultaneously compelled and compelling.

My grandfather gave me the tools to become knowledgeable, and watched me learn to love what he did, yet he never took credit for these accomplishments. He sat and observed. The stoic figure at the head of the table taught me to think with his first book suggestion.

Years after my childhood, I was still entangled in facts contained within the Presidents book. The book stayed on the same shelf. Grandpa didn't sit in his Eames recliner in the office with brown carpet any longer; his children instead filtered into a dark back bedroom—his new office, one filled with synthetic white sheets and obscurity instead of books and brandy glasses—where he lay waiting for us in quiet regality. He was a sagacious mind sequestered within the confines of his aging body.

When he died, he left the book of Presidents to me. I was left to continue his legacy of obsession with the intellect and the literary products of unappeased minds.

Today, I know what I like—the sound that drinking glasses make when they hit each other and do not break, the smell of books, biting into pears, Israeli folklore, insect collections. In most chairs, my feet don't touch the floor unless I slouch low in the seat. I am five foot two, standing straight on a good day. These facts sketch me; they add to my biography. As a supplement to these biographical facts, I am learning to read the penciled-in margins of my own life. I am learning to fill my mind with thoughts and perceptions, to sweat ideas and words, to stretch my brain's limits past the lines of my existence.

Ezra Spiro, "Flute"

Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a jumping off point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation at the beginning of your essay.

How can one describe what it is like to play with three of the best musicians in the world? Every time I read this quote from Mozart's Flute Quartet in D Major, I relive the time I played it with my aunt and uncles Marijn, Henk, and Floris when I visited them in the Netherlands last summer. The thirty minutes were not only the highlight of my trip, but also the best thirty minutes of my twelve years playing flute. Most importantly, the experience and the piece showed me the benefits of working with the best.

Henk and Marijn are the first and second violinists in the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, and Floris is the Principal Cellist for the Rotterdam Symphony Orchestra. I had thought that my best experience playing flute was when I had the opportunity to join my school's symphonic band in Carnegie Hall, but my short experience with my talented aunt and uncles was more remarkable than I could have imagined.

So what made their playing so special? Their tone and interpretation of the music was extraordinary. The best recording in the world on the most expensive speakers would have sounded amateur in comparison. When I played along, it felt like the greatest piece of music I had ever played. Simply by making music with them I felt that my ability went far beyond what I had previously thought possible. To sit back, and hear their melodies and countermelodies felt like heaven—to play along was otherworldly.

Flying home, I reflected on why that half hour of Mozart had meant so much to me. I gleaned more musical insights concerning the phrasing and the jocular tone of Mozart from my debut performance with my Dutch relatives than I could possibly have learned from weeks of study in Tucson. Why? Because some of the best musicians in the world allowed me to experience their brilliance. As I thought about it more, I realized something important: it is an extraordinary privilege to study with the best in the world, and that is why Princeton is my first choice. I can think of nothing better than to be able to study and discuss economics with Paul Krugman (my father tells me that I had dinner with him once when I was a baby, but now that I've studied his macroeconomic theories, I'd like a second chance). Similarly, to study politics with Robert Keohane or Andrew Moravcsik, whom I also met in diapers (I was the one wearing them), would be unlike any other experience that I could aspire to.

When I ask my dad about the time he spent getting his undergraduate and doctoral degrees at Princeton, and he tells stories about the professors he befriended, the unbelievably accomplished scholars who taught him, and what he often describes as the most incredibly fun yet intellectually stimulating time of his life. Indeed, Princeton is the only university in the world in which these "Henks and Marijns" can be found in every field, and is the only university where these top professors take the time to "play Mozart" with their undergraduate students, as if they were all their nephews. I'll bring my flute.

Ezra Spiro, UHS 2009

Emily Tran, "Bearing the Pizza"

We are interested in learning more about you and the context in which you have grown up, formed your aspirations and accomplished your academic successes. Please describe the factors and challenges that have most shaped your personal life and aspirations. How have these factors caused you to grow? (800 word limit) *

Since I was tall enough to peer over the counter at Little Caesar's, I was the pizza bearer of my family. I had the "honor" of exchanging five dollars and forty cents for one pepperoni pizza and carrying it back to my family's mid-sized sedan every pizza night. It was a task I once disliked – hated, even. It's not as if my parents forced me to pay out of my back pocket; it was my father's money I carried. I was simply embarrassed to be the only person in the establishment under four feet tall. The inquisitive gazes bore into me. A bell chime signaling my exit was my only relief. As we drove back home, the greasy pizza warming my lap, I asked my parents, "Why do I have to buy the pizza? I'm not a grown-up." Their only answer was: "You will be."

For the first four years of my life, I was a carefree child. I toddled around at home with my maternal grandparents while my parents, a waitress and an electronics technician, worked full-time. My grandparents babied me and my brother, telling us folktales of tigers, feeding us Halls lozenges as candy, and letting us drink evaporated cream (which was much sweeter than milk).

This halcyon time came to a halt when I was told I had to learn English for school. I realized then, for the first time, that the people outside of my grandparents' home did not speak Vietnamese. I quickly learned how to read and write English from flashcards prepared by my mother and my grandmother; to me, it was just another game. Soon after, my parents bought a house of their own on the other side of town. I no longer saw my grandparents every day and grew worried that I would not be able to play anymore. At my new home, I was told to start doing chores like watering the garden or folding the laundry or washing the dishes (just the round, plastic ones). I was also assigned the task of teaching my 3-year-old brother how to count and read. I was relieved that I was still allowed to play, but it just wasn't the same.

As I grew up in that house, I was given more and more assignments: from filling out school registration forms to filling out income tax returns, from preparing my brother's meals every weekend to changing my new baby sister's diapers every hour. In third grade, my parents specifically requested that I be given sixth grade math. In fourth, they strictly enforced my violin practicing (though we could never afford a tutor). I had personal objectives to accomplish, too – like learning to negotiate and build a bridge between the two clashing cultures I lived in; like learning to cope with loss when my uncle, my grandfather and my great grandmother died in two consecutive years. It was a task I learned like any other: by doing it. I learned how to comfort others. I learned that even adults cried.

Sometimes, I envied my peers who watched football games while I watched my siblings. Eventually though, I accepted my tasks like a bird accepts the sky – they were just facts of life. I started to enjoy them and even assigned myself more missions. I picked up the viola, hog-hair paintbrushes and a job at a yogurt shop. I waltzed my way into ballroom dancing. I joined a plethora of after-school clubs even though my parents believed it would be better to focus on my studies and my grades. (I maintained them, anyway.) I felt prepared to take on the world.

In the midst of my tango with independence, I realized why it was crucial – not just for myself, but for my family – to be independent. I realized that my parents had suffered enough hardships, growing up during the Vietnam War, being unable to escape to America until their early twenties and having difficulty learning English and adjusting to American life. I swore that I wouldn't be another one. I will alleviate my family's troubles as much as I can. Today, I accept my responsibilities as the eldest child not as obligations or chores but as duties and missions. Today, I gladly bear the pizza.