

I'll Never Be Rachmaninoff



GUIDO MIETH/MOMENT, VIA GETTY IMAGES

TRUE story: One summer, years ago, I went tubing with my family and a boyfriend. The sun was blazing, and the water was cool. It was a perfect day to close your eyes and let the current carry you.

I was enjoying myself, until we rounded the final bend and saw the parking lot. I leaned back to get my arms in the water and I started to kick and paddle. In a froth of churning water, I passed my mom, my sister, my boyfriend and my brothers, and as I reached the dock, I shouted out, "I won!"

That's me. All my life, I've made lists and set deadlines, never content, or even able, to just glide.

That kind of drive has served me well when aimed at challenges within my control, like writing a novel. It was less helpful in dictating things like how the novel was received. I learned that lesson with the publication of each new title. In retrospect, though, it never quite sank in. I never stopped hoping that if I worked hard enough, wanted it badly enough, I'd finally get the acclaim that I craved.

In 2016, after a dozen novels, I published a collection of essays. I had high hopes. This book would not have a pink cover, and it would tackle serious subjects, and in a froth of water and triumph, I

would paddle my way, belatedly, to literary respectability.

That did not happen. And my brain, which had propelled me toward so many successes, could not push me past disappointment. Instead of focusing on everything that had gone right, including how lucky I was to make a living as a writer, it got stuck on what had gone wrong. *Let's think about it!* my brain suggested, like a Roomba endlessly butting itself into a corner. *Let's think about it a lot. Especially at 3 in the morning. Let's go over every single choice. Let's dwell.*

I tried yoga. I attempted meditation. Nothing helped. Instead, each spiritual setting and inner-growth-focused class presented new opportunities to compete: *I held that pose for longer than anyone in the class. I'm way more Zen than she is.* Finally, I remembered reading about how learning something new — creating new neural pathways — was a way to send your thoughts in different directions.

And so, after a 35-year hiatus, I started taking piano lessons again.

I had been an indifferent piano student as a kid. When I began, music came easily to me. By junior high, I'd gotten good enough to play things like Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." Then it got harder. By high school, I had bumped up against the

limits of my natural abilities. So I quit. I turned my attention toward activities at which I could excel and immediately forgot every single piece except "Heart and Soul."

"Took lessons for six years. Can't remember anything" was what I told the local branch of the Settlement Music School. Then, armed with a \$50 keyboard that had only 66 of the standard 88 keys, I set off for my first lesson.

My teacher was a genial man with white hair and an encyclopedic knowledge of all things musical, from the lives of composers to exactly how many versions of a Chopin nocturne were found in his desk after he died.

"Here," he said, setting a piece of sheet music on the stand. "Play just the right hand's part." I peered at the page, touching the keys of the grand piano hesitantly. My fingers felt twice as thick as usual; my hands, half as flexible. Even though I'd spent hundreds of hours in exactly that position — eyes on the page, hands on the keys, right foot on the pedal, left foot on the floor — it felt brand new. The piece was a Burgmuller étude in 4/4 time. I settled my hand on an A, then a G, then an F, then ... "Is that an E?"

"It is indeed!" my teacher said, sounding as proud as if I'd recognized an obscure mathematical formula, instead of just a note.

Slowly, haltingly, I played the song through: right hand, then left hand, then both hands together. "See, that wasn't so bad!" my teacher said.

I began playing half an hour a day: working through Mozart's sonatas, sampling Tchaikovsky's "Seasons" and gloomy Norwegian folk songs by Grieg. As a kid, I hated to practice. As an adult, the time flies. I peer myopically at the sheet music, wincing as I hit an A instead of an A sharp six times in a row. A hundred responsibilities beckon. *I should be working. Folding laundry. Starting dinner.* I ignore them, and lose myself in the task of puzzling out the notes.

After six months, I purchased a keyboard with all 88 keys. After nine months, I found a free piano on Craigslist. Now, a year into my second stint as a piano student, I can proudly announce that I am ... still pretty terrible. Except playing the piano has accomplished what all that yoga and meditation never could. I can quiet my mind and focus entirely on something: not my breath, but the music.

Right now I'm working on a Chopin

waltz in C sharp minor. It's part of the ballet "Les Sylphides." You'd know it if you ever took ballet class. The first section is slow, with a few trilly flourishes. In the second part, the right hand plays rapid-fire eighth notes, going faster and faster and faster, getting softer and softer and softer.

"Rachmaninoff was said to have played this as if all the hounds of hell were chasing him," my teacher said. Right now, I play it as if all the hounds of hell are dozing in the sun as I stroll toward an idling bus that's going to take me to get a root canal. Instead of a delicate, rippling flow of notes, I produce a muddy tumble, a kicked sack of potatoes thudding discordantly down the stairs.

I go note by note, bar by bar. Five times, 10 times, 15, 20, playing the piece a little faster and more cleanly each time. Still not perfect, still missing that G sharp nine out of 10 times. I screw up, go back, start the measure again.

I don't know if it's that I'm creating new neural pathways, or if engrossing myself in something new and difficult just makes it hard to think of anything else. But I have come to believe in the value of doing something where I know I will never be better than O.K.

So I will persist. In the new year, I will embrace the joy of making music (loosely defined) only for myself. I will invite failure into my life and play without the ex-

The surprising gift of being truly mediocre at playing the piano.

pectation of being the best, or even mediocre, until failing isn't a terrifying unknown but just another possibility, and one I can survive.

I open my book to Chopin's waltz in D flat major, the "Minute Waltz," so called because you're meant to play it in under a minute. Right now, I'm averaging around five. As I start the first trill my 15-year-old daughter, who these days speaks mostly in sarcasm, strolls by. Sometimes she'll do a mocking balletic leap as I play, or just emphatically shut her bedroom door. Tonight, she does neither. "Hey, Mom," she says, "that was really good!"

It wasn't. It was just O.K. But that is good enough.

OPINION

BY JENNIFER WEINER

The author, most recently, of the memoir "Hungry Heart" and a contributing opinion writer.