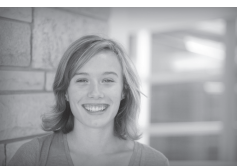


For Herself

Senior plays piano for the simple joy of music



an opinion of **TONI AGUIAR**

I always feel like a fifth-grader when I say it: “Sorry, I can’t. I have a piano lesson.” The response is always the same: “You still take piano lessons?”

Yeah, I still take piano lessons. No, my mom doesn’t make me. No, I don’t have grand aspirations

of majoring in piano performance and making a living off piano. No, I don’t do it for my resume.

I play the piano because, however embarrassing it is to sit on my teacher’s floral-patterned couch while a first-grader finishes up her lesson, however annoying it is to have to practice piano at midnight after I’ve been copy editing for hours, however seemingly useless in my future life piano may be, I like it.

So every Thursday, I wake up groggy from my afternoon nap at 4:40 p.m. and make the 20-minute trek from my Leawood home to my piano teacher’s peach-colored bungalow in Brookside — this is when my love for piano is really tested. In the car, I’ll blast electronic, new-age punk or guitar-heavy, retro Black Keys in an attempt to wake up. I swear at drivers that insist on going the speed limit on Ward Parkway. Most of all, I curse the existence of piano and its malicious intentions, namely to interrupt my naps.

But even though my route is the same coming and going, the ride home couldn’t be more different.

When I get into my sloppily parked car after my lesson (usually after having my lesson run over by a quarter of an hour), I’m quieter. As I continue to hum a portion of a

Scarlatti sonata or a Chopin prelude, the voice in my head is whispering, “You’re a nerd. What if people saw you humming classical music like an 80-year-old cat lady?” — but it’s much quieter than usual. And so I’ll drive quietly, happily back to my house with my Pandora set to the “Piano, Romantic” station. It’s almost like I’m sedated.

And I think that’s because playing the piano allows — no, encourages me to pour out all my emotions — stress from the newspaper, frustration at my last, useless semester of high school, anxiety for the upcoming track season because of the standard I set for myself last year. That’s what piano’s there for. When I play, I can feel myself swaying back and forth on the bench like some kind of old Russian pianist, but I don’t stop. There’s a strange kind of satisfaction when my forearms burn after playing the first movement of Beethoven’s Pathetique Sonata and all of its huge, hand-stretching rumbling chords all the way through. It’s gratifying to hear each melody resolve itself.

What makes it more gratifying is that piano is mine in a way that nothing else is. I don’t do it for a class. I don’t do it as a part of a band. My brief stint with the Blue Knights jazz band showed me that I don’t like depending on other people for music. I got flustered, I got bored playing the same chords over again. I mindlessly chatted to my fellow rhythm section, causing a red-faced director Mr. Harrison to splutter in our direction. I would much rather go home, hoist up the top of our baby grand piano and pound out chords by myself.

I almost quit playing piano in middle school, and later again during freshman year. As I see it, my emotions to-

wards playing the piano are a good sign of my comfort with myself. When I was blissfully ignorant of social norms in elementary school, I was open about my piano — I played the theme song from “Lord of the Rings” in our fifth-grade talent show proudly for the school to hear.

As I grew more aware of the fact that I couldn’t wear running shoes and skinny jeans, and that I couldn’t play basketball at recess while wearing a V-neck cableknit sweater, I realized this: piano isn’t cool. So I didn’t tell anyone I played. For my mom to innocently suggest that I practice while a friend was over was the emotional equivalent of having someone reveal, for example, a fierce love of Nickelback or a collection of American Eagle polos. It was as if a horrible secret had been uncovered.

I never quit because it never really seemed like an option. As a self-proclaimed people-pleaser, I was too afraid to go to my teacher and my mom and quit. Never in my life have I been more happy that I chickened out. I grew to love piano, to not care about what people think. And, maybe, piano was what made me learn to disregard their opinions.

But piano playing has never been something that I’ve made publicly known. I like having it to myself. After years of over-committing myself to things that I want to do, things that I have to do, things that my friends want me to do, I’ve finally figured it out. You need something to geek out about, something that has no other purpose than making you happy, even if it makes you feel like a fifth-grader most of the time.

Toni’s Timeline

A look at her piano career

Began lessons over the winter of first grade

Switched teachers and began taking hour-long lessons

Performed in the Multipiano Festival in Lawrence with dozens of other pianists

Joined East’s jazz band and Village Church’s youth band

