

ENGLISH: CREATIVE WRITING

The preparation room was filled to the brim with dozens of budding musicians, each grasping a bow, a pick or a reed. The dulcet tones of brass, woodwind and strings filled my ears as I avoided the tail ends of saxophones and double basses, quickly making my way through the percussion area towards the piano section on the far side of the room. It was impossible to steer clear of the countless faces deep in concentration, dainty fingers tuning instruments like professionals of the Juilliard Orchestra. It was then that the doubt started to sink in, “Had I practised enough? What if I had a sudden mental blank? I should have spent last night going over those scales instead of watching RockWiz...” I could feel the gazes of anxious parents hover over me, wondering if I was more talented than their little angel.

My eyes drank in the sight of these young pianists, each evidently developing his or her style of music. One young brunette girl, dressed in swathes of bright red and purple fabric caught my eye as her fingers swept across the piano she was practising on. Her eyes were closed and her shoulders were swaying slightly to the melodies she was creating. The way her fingers moved from chord to scale to chord was mesmerising, likened to the way Monet painted his *Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies*. She danced across the keys with purpose and precision, with poise and fluidity. I could only hope that I had the same effect on others when I performed.

A sharp voice woke me from my reverie, “Emily Wilkins, we are ready for you now.” I looked up and my eyes met those of a tall, black-haired woman with a stern face. My stomach flipped. She led me through a labyrinth of corridors which left me wondering if I would remember the way out. Except for our footsteps clicking on the blindingly shiny tiles, there was a deafening silence between the two of us. As I passed dozens of identical rooms, I could not help but glance quickly at the helpless victim inside. Violinists after pianists after trombonists – each being played with alacrity and grace. My heart raced, fingers clenched and my legs threatened to buckle right underneath me.

Finally, she halted in front of a white door, rapped on it and opened it to reveal a spacious room with an elegant, black grand piano sitting in the centre. A tiny gasp escaped my lips as I saw the signature *Steinway & Sons* logo stamped across the side. A small, squat man looked up from the corner with a pen in one hand and a clipboard in the other. “Come in and take a seat,” he instructed.

I gave my legs a break and took my place on the stool in front of the piano. It felt different; the stool was too low, the pedals pressed strangely, the keys were too shiny. But it had to work. The entire year of practising, weekly lessons, and never-ending scales was not going to amount to nothing in the next fifteen minutes.

“Let’s begin, shall we? Can you please play Chopin’s Ballade No.1?” I felt my stomach sink a notch – this one was the trickiest. The one I always slipped up in. But I shook the thoughts away and heard the tune ring in my head accompanied with the memory of my fingers gliding across the keys as they had done a thousand times before.

As I took a breath and placed my fingers into position, my pulse accelerated tenfold. I struck the first note and my fingers followed obediently up the length of the majestic instrument. Then in one tranquil moment, I felt all the frustration and apprehension flow out of me as fluidly as the sounds reverberated from the piano and I remembered why I had begun playing.

The presence of the examiner was quickly forgotten as my mind recalled the exact timing of every arpeggio, crescendo and diminuendo that had been etched into my mind, impossible to erase. I could feel the strain of my fingers stretching to reach each octave, but there was no stopping now. Suddenly, a deafening ‘clack’ sounded across the room and my head instinctively swung around to see the examiner reach to the floor to pick up the pen he had dropped. Panic started to engulf my

body, before I looked down to realise my fingers had not stopped dancing, the melodic timbre of the Ballade had not stopped. I regained my composure and fixed my attention back onto the piece – mentally congratulating myself for not letting the disturbance destroy my concentration.

As I struck the final note, I glanced up at the examiner. An unreadable expression clouded his disposition and immediately, all the possible scenarios of the results ran through my mind, each more terrifying than the last. But then a small smile emerged, a huge contrast from his usual indifferent facial expression.

“Thank you, Emily. That was delightful. I apologise profusely for dropping the pen, but you are to be commended for continuing without hesitation,” he told me.

“Thank you, sir” I replied before taking the envelope containing the examination results in my hand, eager to return to my parents. As I pushed the door open, it collided with a figure on the other side. Jumping back in surprise was a young man clutching the handles of his cleaning trolley, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Oh, I hope you don’t mind, but I heard you playing and couldn’t help myself. You played with such grace and honesty. I couldn’t tear my eyes away. It was amazing!”, he eagerly conversed, grinning widely.

Flustered at his kind comments, I could only smile and utter a tiny “Thank you!” before turning to conquer the labyrinth that was before me, knowing that I had accomplished what I had hoped and that the small strip of paper with its messy scrawl inside the pristine envelope would no longer define who I was.