



## 5. 2023 Winner of the WMTA Music Essay Award for High School Seniors



**Written by Claire Peng (student of Marjorie Lee)**



The beauty of science is reason. Follow one method, and we arrive at the same conclusion. A computer program follows the same logic each time to output a predictable answer. An experiment promises to reveal a simple explanation of an unknown process. While coding or studying biology textbooks, I loved watching the facts and logic build up websites and organisms.

However, is there only one answer in music? Having played piano for twelve years, I've learned there is not. Unlike biology, where the system is the sum of its parts, music is not just notes and dynamics. Instead, it requires spirit, a seemingly magical component that I chased through music theory and technical exercises, but could never catch. For years, I disliked piano because this "spirit" taunted my adherence to reason, like missing a puzzle piece required to make the image whole.

I evaded this challenge by choosing technically difficult pieces, such as Liszt's *Waldesrauschen* or Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. By imitating professionals, I could pretend to possess musical feeling. Nevertheless, Frederic Chopin, whose compositions are the epitome of musicality, rendered my imitation skills useless. In tenth grade, I tackled his *Ballade No. 1*. My piano teacher, Dr. Marjorie Lee, was constantly frustrated with my lack of this mysterious "musical feeling." "You need to let go!" she finally stated, "Express emotion!"

Could I? Emotion was the enemy of reason—it clouded the ability to arrive at the correct conclusion. I decided to at least try. During the piece's two climaxes and their dramatic, minor chords, I shared my



worries. During the melody, I thought about winter nights driving home, warmed by the car heater and my father’s CD playing Mozart.

Suddenly, Chopin’s Ballade was more than notes on a page. It was music, and it was uniquely mine. By adding my own stories and feelings to the music, I had found a path towards musicality.

Since then, my frustration with subjectivity has faded. I used to think that having multiple answers was chaos; now, I realize that not everything requires consensus. Instead, life is enhanced by listening to a variety of perspectives and opinions. Those disagreements, like the contradiction between liberty and equality that America is built on, create a better result than just one side or the other. Chopin exposed me to the wonderful world of nuances through emotion.

Nowadays, I enjoy listening to different interpretations of the same piano piece. How do their stories influence their playing? Bach is my favorite composer because the sparseness of musical notation produces a variety of contrasting playing styles that all are music. My experience with music has taught me to seek and cherish other people’s stories and perspectives. I’m excited to meet different people and learn what makes them unique, even if their opinions disagree with mine. In essence, I’ve realized that there is beauty in disharmony.



### **Who is Claire Peng?**

Claire Peng is currently a senior at TJHSST. She has studied piano under Dr. Marjorie Lee for six years. Before that, she studied under Miss Anne Madison in the Omaha Conservatory of Music. Claire has won first place at the NVMTA Concerto Competition, has performed at the Honors recital for the NVMTA Sonata Festival, and won Honors in VMTA and NVMTA judged recitals. Recently, she performed in the George Mason University Concert Hall for the Young Artist Musicales.

Her favorite composers to play are Ravel, Bach, and Chopin. Ravel’s impressionist pieces evoke the leaves rustling outside her window while she practices. Bach offers the freedom of interpretation and therefore a plethora of contrasting recordings (her favorites are by Glenn Gould). As for Chopin, well, Claire has spent countless hours toiling over Chopin’s pieces that she has grown to love the satisfaction of playing his pieces. Outside of the studio, she volunteers with the Tacy Foundation and performs in local senior homes. She’s currently the chief intern at Sunrise Hunter Mill and recommends everyone to try volunteering at least once.

