

Hearing Music Through Deeper Senses

BY ABIGEL SZILAGYI

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My ears perked up and tuned into the strange noises all around me. Daddy was slowly driving us home, down the back roads north of Pittsburgh. It was a sunny fall morning, and I'd just gotten my first pair of hearing aids. They felt very foreign to me. They were something that I knew my body needed, but they'd yet to own their place in my ears.

What—what was that? That noise—no, wait. It's a sound, a beautiful singing sound. It's like a trill, and it's so lovely to hear.

"Daddy, what is that?" I asked. I desperately wanted to know. I'd always been a curious girl. "Those are the birds chirping," Daddy replied, smiling up at me through the rearview mirror. I think I saw tears in his eyes. I didn't look long enough though, because I quickly tried to search for the source of those chirps.

My eyes were peering through the window next to me, looking closely at the trees for any sign of the birds. There were so many yellow leaves hanging on the branches and lying all over the ground. Maybe that's what that crunching noise was under the tires.

There! There they are! They fly around, they perch on branches, and they huddle around closely, fluttering their wings as they sing their morning songs. It feels like they sing for me. It's as if they're celebrating my first time hearing everything so clearly. What vibrant sounds they make! It feels so comforting to my ears. I wonder what else I'll hear with my new hearing aids.

Looking Back, More Than a Decade Later

When I was 4 years old, doctors discovered that I was born with a 50% sensorineural hearing loss in both ears. A couple of months later, I got my first set of hearing aids. My family was living in Pittsburgh at the time, which is where I was born. We later moved to Germany, where I started studying the violin at the age of 8.

Looking back at my early years of music making, I never once considered my hearing loss to be an obstacle in my life. The possibility of hardship didn't cross my mind when I told my mom I wanted to learn to play the

violin after coming home from school in third grade. As a preteen, I had no hearing aids for two years for financial reasons, and I still never considered that my hearing loss negatively affected my violin career. Yes, socializing was a challenge, and understanding what was going on around me was incredibly frustrating. Regardless, I believe that those were the years when I really learned to tap into my other senses more, to make up for what was lacking. Without even realizing it at first, I was implementing this skill in my violin studies as well.

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Throughout the early stages of my career, I was fortunate to study at the Colburn School, which is known as the "Julliard School of the West," and is located in downtown Los Angeles. I've received several scholarships and have attended summer music programs all over the U.S. for many years. I've also participated and received awards in national and international competitions, including the VSA International Young Soloist Award, through which I had the stunning experience of performing at the Millennium Stage at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. I've been actively involved in my community in the music program at the Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena, California, where I've performed solo, chamber and orchestra music at the Sunday services, which are attended by thousands of people.

Being a child of immigrant Hungarian parents and a sister to four siblings, I've been blessed to be able to take advantage of all that Los Angeles has to give in order to pursue my dream as a musician. It's how I found my current private music teacher, Danielle Belen, who's a professor at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, where I'm pursuing my Bachelor of

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Music in violin performance. Ms. Belen has played an essential role in my development as a musician, a student and a person. She's someone who believes in my potential and understands that my hearing loss is as much a part of me as being a musician is—because I've always been passionate about connecting those two parts of myself.

As a violinist with hearing loss, I've learned over the years how to adapt. But the challenges of my life didn't stop there. They increased. During my freshman year of college, I had ear infections for six months, and developed chronic ear pain and migraines. I was in and out of the emergency room due to complications from infections, and severe side effects from antibiotics and other medications. I've been working with doctors in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and in Los Angeles, and they're still searching for a solution for my pain. As my condition exacerbated, I couldn't wear hearing aids for a year. They were outdated, worn out, and made the chronic pain and infections worse. I wasn't able to purchase new aids, which cost \$9,000, until the summer of 2018, through a fundraising event at my church, where I performed a selection of pieces and gave a speech.

Since my health has declined, I've had to make a lot of changes in how I create music on my violin. I trained myself to learn how to practice and perform with ear plugs, as I'm no longer able to use my hearing aids when making music due to the sensitivity and pain in my ears. It's hard to face that kind of vulnerability and expose myself like that, especially on stage during a live performance, where there already are so many emotions and variables. I can't rely on my ears as much as I want to, so I'm learning how to use my other senses more—muscle memory, sight, instinct, vibrations, passion and audiation, which is essentially internal hearing that takes place in the absence of physical sound. I'm also learning to practice with a tuner, a device that helps me play with precisely the correct pitch.

Developing these skills as a violinist is certainly a different and perhaps unconventional way of playing in

the music world. But that doesn't mean it's not possible. The whole concept of using my other senses while making music relies on mental strength. It takes a conscious effort and a certain frame of mind to accomplish this. I have to expand my awareness of my surroundings and work twice as hard to be more observant of every detail in every moment.

Though my life as a musician and human being has changed because of these difficulties, my desire to pursue my dreams remains the same. If anything, my determination is even stronger than before. As with every challenge that comes in life, one learns to be patient, open-minded, resourceful, hardworking, compassionate, passionate and resilient. I know in my heart that it's always worth it to try rather than to give up and wonder. In times of despair and sadness, I think about all those people out there who suffer terrible illnesses, loss and other adversities—and still, they make the choice to be happy, to live selflessly, and to be grateful for the big and little things, because they're reminded of how fragile and precious life is.

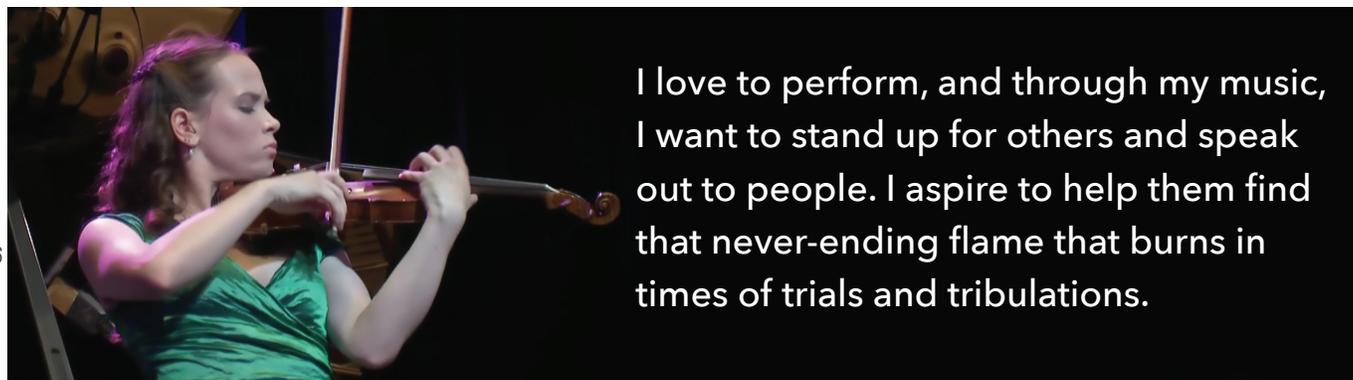
Every day I have a choice to make—the chance to decide to take that extra mile to go out there, to embrace my hearing loss, and to allow it to be a tool that can propel me to do more.

I love to perform, and through my music, I want to stand up for others and speak out to people. I aspire to help them find that never-ending flame that burns in times of trials and tribulations. As a Christian believer, I want to glorify God through my music. I dream that people find a sense of comfort, peace and inspiration when hearing my music—just as the song of the morning birds have been a source of solace, tranquility and joy for me. **HL**

Abigel Szilagyi attends the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and is working toward her Bachelor of Music in violin performance. She was born with a 50% sensorineural hearing loss in both ears.



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