

Imagine. It's your turn to get on the stage. Only the sound of your footsteps are heard. Everyone is looking at you, no one is smiling. Your rivals are staring at you with keen interest. Your heart is beating fast and it seems that everyone hears it. How do you feel? This is what I have experienced since I was 4.

I started practicing the piano when I was 2, influenced by my mother, who is a pianist. When I was little, I enjoyed playing the piano because it was the only time that I was able to be with her. Since she was very busy teaching piano to other children, I cherished my turn at the piano with her. When I was 8, I met a Russian pianist and I started to take her piano lessons once a week in Tokyo. She was such a wonderful coach, but she was very strict and didn't allow for mistakes. Thanks to her, I had many opportunities to enter piano contests. However, because of the intense pressure, I wasn't able to enjoy playing the piano anymore. It seemed as though my only purpose to play was to compete with others and get bigger and better prizes which pleased my coach and my mother. I now realize that my mother felt more pressure than I did, but at that time I disobeyed her and we always quarreled. I was upset that I had forgotten the pleasure of playing the piano like when I was little. Actually, when I was ten, I WON the All Japan Classical Contest, but I was entirely lost. "Why am I playing the piano?" I thought. "For whom do I play?" I couldn't think of a way out of that vicious cycle.

A year after my big win I was offered a ticket to take part in the 2-week-master's class held in Belgium. About 70 students who were chosen from all over the world gathered there. Of course, being only 11, I had never been abroad alone. Instead of feeling excited, I was frightened and I wanted to escape. But, to my surprise, everyone welcomed me and treated me like an old friend. We were assigned to several ensembles such as piano duo, trio, quartet and four-handed performance. I had never played with other pianists, so it was an amazing experience for me to play with others. There was no competing and no hesitating to make mistakes. I found myself thoroughly enjoying playing the piano. Just being into music, we didn't need any words. The music itself was the language. We were able to share the sound and the emotions together. I realized that creating music with others involves acceptance and respect for each other to produce the harmony. I'm sure that music has the power to connect all people no matter who they are or where they are from. It's universal.

The next stage performance awaits me, this time with others. On that stage, I will not feel lonely. There will be no pressure, no more fear, no rivalry, just everyone enjoying the music in the moment. Through music and sharing it, I hope to heal and connect with people. Their pleasure will be my reward. The experience in Belgium lit a fire inside of me that cannot be extinguished. Now I understand why I play the piano...to bring people together. I am forever grateful to the people in my life who helped cultivate my gift and in return I intend to give people my very soul, and give them music.