

*"We've got ourselves a guest tonight, folks," says the pianist from her bench. "Some of you veterans might recognize this stranger from when he used to play here regularly. Give a welcome to Julius, the prodigal son!"*

*He turns to her with a raised eyebrow and a scowl. "Prodigal son?" he asks while covering the mic. She merely smirks at him.*

*"What's Mr. High-Class want to play?" she asks.*

*"Just hit up some Blues in E-flat."*

*"How fast?"*

*"Start out slow-ish and follow me."*

*She begins a smooth, lyrical andante line, modulating around G-minor, rather than following any normal introduction. Any other soloist would be a little hesitant to play with a rebellious and spotlight-stealing pianist, but he knows better than to expect anything less. After she has her fun, she falls from B-flat, to A-flat, and he joins in with her following lilt in E-flat (finally). Playing around with low thirds, he keeps to the Blues pattern for a while.*

*He starts to speed up after a few times through the cycle, and his improvisation starts leaping between his low thirds and higher pitches. His pianist follows, content to hang in the background for now. As per usual, he leads quite a chase, continually speeding up and changing key, but she's a match for this silly saxophonist, not only keeping up with him but also adding some changes of her own. He finally stops the progression when he repeats an altissimo descending line several times over and lands on a long note, and that's when she takes over. He holds out his look-at-me-I-can-play-so-high note, and she lets her hands go wild underneath, finding every way she can think of to modulate back to an E flat.*

*He closes his eyes and plays some low tones, and she fades back to the background as they slow to a soft close. No one moves as the strings and the sax echo and fade.*

I'm sorry, this is the epitome of the "Mary-Sue," a concept from internet fiction in which the author writes him- or herself into the story. This is an excerpt from my writing, and for anyone who knows me, I'm very obviously the pianist in that fictional encounter. In my defense, she's more boisterous and buzzed that I usually am, and good writers, whether consciously or not, almost always write a part of themselves into their characters. This is also very futuristic, since lately I've been working on classics instead of anything remotely jazzy, but that still doesn't quell the scene or the question in my mind. I've always been involved in music and writing, but I decided to focus on writing when I arrived at college, and I pushed music into the realm of hobby; however, when I started writing more short stories, I discovered that my best descriptions and most realistic characters came out when I was writing about music and musicians.

Music and writing are the only constants in my life; one might even say it keeps me sane. I've played piano for thirteen years now. In middle school I added French horn, which I've now

been playing for nine years. Somehow I survived four years of a competitive marching band, an intense high school music program, and always medaled in both instruments at Solo & Ensemble Festival, plus Piano Federation.

After high school, most band kids from my high school gave up any serious musical aspirations. Some of the kids seated first in their sections are going on to be physics majors, nurses, zoologists, rocket-scientists (I'm serious), writers... I can only think of three off the top of my head who are studying music, and only one of them is interested in performance. Even the girl who says she destroyed Solo and Ensemble our senior year- she was declared "best of the day" by three separate judges for her flute, piccolo, and piano solos- is going into music education instead of performance.

Band is just a given in my life. Even though I came into college knowing well that I wanted to go into writing, I still auditioned for the top group; it's just what I've always done. Since GVSU's horn studio is so tiny, they needed people; I made it in and started taking private lessons here, too. Actually, since I can't seem to stop taking lessons or quit band, I'm going to declare a music minor next semester; yes, you can't do *anything* with a music minor, but it shows dedication and personal motivation to future employers, so I may as well get a line on my degree that says "Hey! I'm cultured, and I can multitask!"

So... this leads me to the question the keeps returning, the question that I just can't seem to shake: should I have majored in music?

I started writing a year after I started piano, and I loved it. Something clicked in my mind, and I knew this was what I was meant to do in my life. It was the first time we ever had the opportunity in school to just *write* about anything, and I ran wild. I started writing on my own during middle school, spent too long writing fanfiction, started re-writing some of it into original works, and eventually worked exclusively on my own ideas. Creating, no matter what medium, has always given me a kind of enjoyment that I can't get anywhere else. Writing about my ideas was comparable to playing a piece of music- there was a format I had to follow in order for the audience to understand the piece, but I could phrase it (musically or verbally) however I wanted.

Despite all my efforts and progress, I never seriously considered a career in music. My mom is a teacher, my dad was a technical writer, my grandparents on my mom's side were both in education, my other grandpa was a surgeon and grandma a surgical nurse. Looking back, however, I can't remember anyone specifically saying to go into a "real" career, but I've always felt like music and arts are supposed to be a hobby unless you're the next Beethoven or Mozart, and that I was supposed to go into something that "mattered." Still reflecting, I have no idea how I was defining "real" or "mattered," which is probably why I had such a hard time deciding on something. Maybe I was thinking of "real" as academic. For a while, I thought all smart people were supposed to go into math and science, but I never *loved* either subject.

I had a hard enough time convincing myself that writing was a viable option. Sitting around

writing a novel didn't pay bills any better than sitting at a piano or standing in front of mirror with an instrument on my face. When I found out that practical writing jobs, "real" jobs for writers, existed, I was sold. Eventually, after some exploration around Grand Valley's writing department, I realized writers were in demand, and that technical writing spanned far beyond my dad's job.

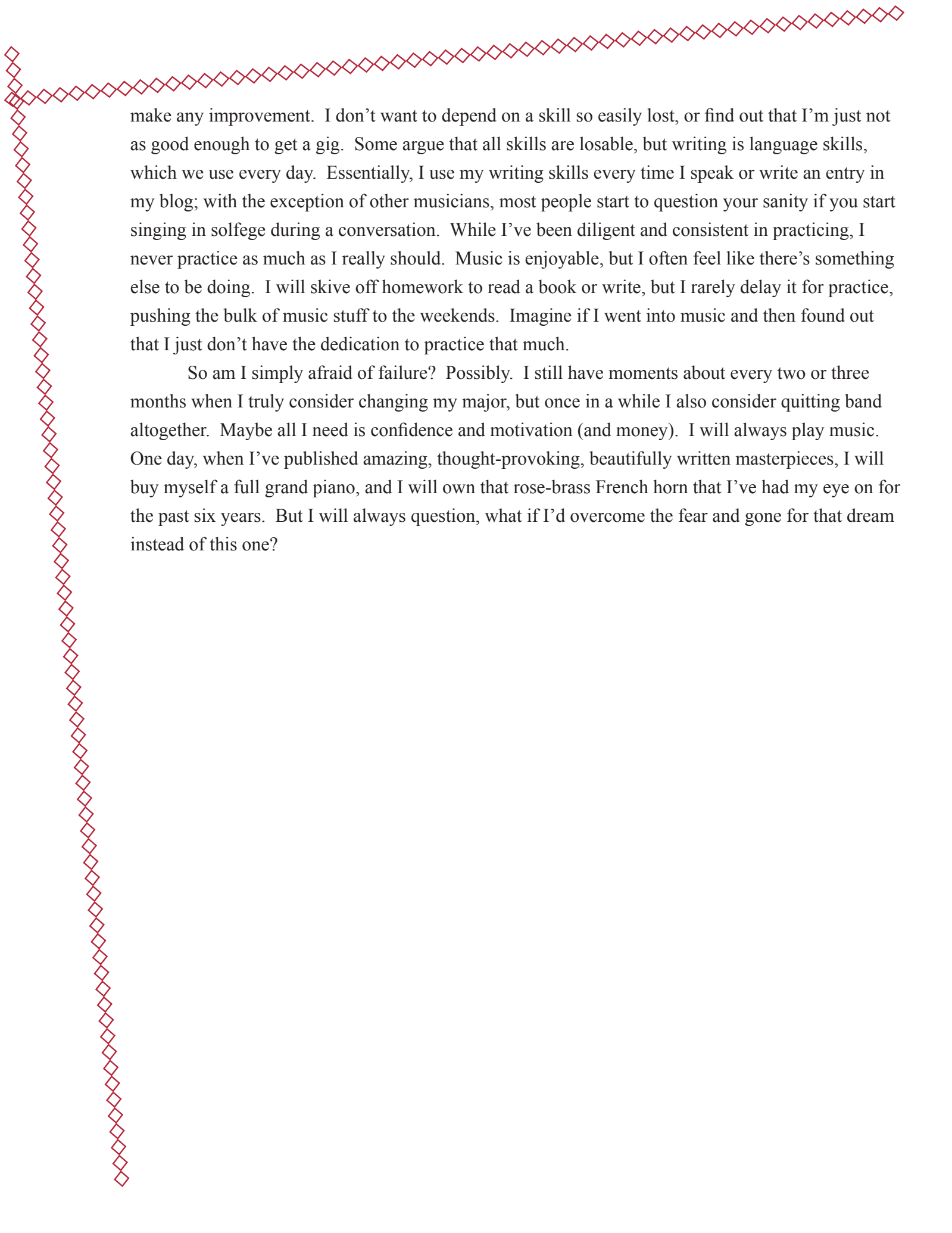
Realistically though, there's a very practical career option for the musician: education. Aside from College of Education requirements, courses include music history, music theory, ear training, marching band, conducting, piano classes, and introductory courses on how to play every instrument. That all sounds fun, but there is one major drawback for me: I do not enjoy teaching. My mom has come home too many times after dealing with kids and crazy parents, and she's actually *thanked* me and my dad for being normal.

Being a section leader really sealed the deal against music education for me. A section leader is the person in charged of making sure her section can play their parts and knows their drill sets. It's also our job to help people who are having trouble; we're basically mini-teachers, and I learned that I cannot teach people who do not want to learn. Some people didn't really care about marching band and were just biding their time until concert season. I also don't know if I ever truly had my section's respect; we were all friends, but they didn't listen to me. Doing that for the rest of my life was definitely out.

As a non-teaching musician, there is one more option: perform. The experience of playing in college is irreplaceable, but essentially one majors in performance for private instruction and musical growth, not for the degree. Usually, most studios and ensembles will want some kind of degree in music, but all that really matters is the audition. There are professional orchestras, chamber groups, soloists, and military bands just to name a few. Studio musician is a great job for the talented who don't mind working behind the scenes; who do you think plays all the music you hear on commercials? Studios have lists of musicians and just call them up when a piece requires their instrument(s). If a kid fresh out of high school dazzles the judges and rocks out on his saxophone, it doesn't matter that he doesn't have a degree. If he's awesome, he gets the spot.

Being a professional musician is one of those jobs in which all the real work is invisible. Studios and orchestras have to pay every musician a set fee every time they play, plus extra fees depending on how long they're playing, so most organizations have minimal practices and expect musicians to learn their parts and be prepared. Most studio musicians don't receive their parts until the day of the recording. To play music well while sight-reading means they need daily individual practice, flawless technique, and impeccable musicianship. Professional musicians practice seven to eight hours every day, even when they don't have a gig. If they don't stay in musical shape, they won't get spots, or a paycheck.

This is where I jump off the bandwagon. Music is a losable skill, as I've discovered now that I don't have weekly piano lessons. When I sit down at the piano after it's been a few weeks, sometimes it takes all I have just to get a piece back to the level it was last time I played it, little less



make any improvement. I don't want to depend on a skill so easily lost, or find out that I'm just not as good enough to get a gig. Some argue that all skills are losable, but writing is language skills, which we use every day. Essentially, I use my writing skills every time I speak or write an entry in my blog; with the exception of other musicians, most people start to question your sanity if you start singing in solfege during a conversation. While I've been diligent and consistent in practicing, I never practice as much as I really should. Music is enjoyable, but I often feel like there's something else to be doing. I will skive off homework to read a book or write, but I rarely delay it for practice, pushing the bulk of music stuff to the weekends. Imagine if I went into music and then found out that I just don't have the dedication to practice that much.

So am I simply afraid of failure? Possibly. I still have moments about every two or three months when I truly consider changing my major, but once in a while I also consider quitting band altogether. Maybe all I need is confidence and motivation (and money). I will always play music. One day, when I've published amazing, thought-provoking, beautifully written masterpieces, I will buy myself a full grand piano, and I will own that rose-brass French horn that I've had my eye on for the past six years. But I will always question, what if I'd overcome the fear and gone for that dream instead of this one?