

*Favola in musica* means “tale in music”. It’s a phrase that appeared on opera scores in the 17th century, when opera first began to appear in the western canon. I picked it up last semester in music 1a, a course I took at a time when my relationship with music was settling into a new equilibrium.

I first began to explore music in high school. I didn’t have a “tiger mom” growing up so I was never forced to learn an instrument. It wasn’t until high school that I began to realize the benefits of being able to play an instrument...specifically in the getting-that-girl-to-notice-me department.

The timing was ripe. My mom had just remarried, and when my step-dad moved in, he brought with him an electronic keyboard and even a few teach-yourself-to-play-piano workbooks. The piano seemed as good an instrument as any, and since I couldn’t sing to save my life, piano it was.

I went through all the workbooks. I learned the different keys, began memorizing chord signatures. I would lookup sheet music for songs and painstakingly transcribe them note-by-note so I could practice. All this culminated in a short piano performance for the talent portion of my high school’s senior male pageant. Which I lost. I know—shocking.

My hopes of being able to call myself a musician came further crashing down soon after I arrived at Harvard. During those first few weeks, meeting 20 new people a day, you find yourself answering the same questions over and over.

One question I remember being asked regularly was, “Do you play an instrument?” And I would confidently reply, “Why yes, I play the piano.”

I soon came to realize, however, that “playing” the piano at Harvard did not mean you noodled around occasionally. It meant you were good—it meant you chose Harvard over Berklee, or more likely that you were enrolled in a conservatory concurrently. Even downplaying your ability isn’t sufficient. I dabble on the piano actually means: I’ve been learning the piano since I was five, but stopped playing in high school, so now I just have a few concertos memorized and am just a little too rusty to do paid performances.

I remember meeting a beautiful young lady my freshman year through the Christian fellowship I’m in who professed such meager playing ability. Imagine my surprise when she ended up performing with the worship band regularly at the weekly meetings! Not even in my league.

Eventually, I began to reply no, I don’t play an instrument. I decided that I wasn’t a musician—in fact, I wasn’t even musical. At the time I thought of it as humility, but it was really me trying to hide. If I didn’t put myself on the chart, then I couldn’t be at the bottom of it.

Now my younger brother, my younger brother is actually quite musically talented. In fact, he wants to do musical theater professionally. And it has been my interactions with him, especially over the last few years, that have helped to

change my perspective of my own musicality.

From when he first dove into music, he has always wanted me to be a part of his musical journey. To this day whenever I'm home he wants me to listen to him sing and give him feedback, something I feel unqualified to do. He is always trying to get me to sing duets with him, to learn the harmony part of the latest song he is learning. He has even tried to teach me a piece on the piano so I could accompany his singing. He has pushed me and challenged me and believed in me, even as I've attempted to cut music from my life completely.

From our interactions I've discovered that I'm not tone deaf, which means that while I can't hold a tune, at least I know it. But now that I know what it feels like to be on pitch, I'll practice every now and then.

By the time I took music 1a last semester I had begun to throw off this notion that music was something that had to be totally removed from my life. I took music 1a because I wanted to again explore music and to develop a vocabulary with which I could better interact with my brother, with that beautiful piano player who is now my girlfriend, and with my musical peers. And while I'll never be a professional musician, I can still let music be a part of my tale.