

MELODY OF THE RECORDER

孔洞裡的聲音

Adapted from the real-life experiences of professional recorder players, this short story collection brings together music and literature to explore the challenges of a career in performance, the impact of lingering emotional wounds, and the healing power of music.

The world of Taiwan's recorder ensembles and performers is given its first literary treatment in this collection from author and musician Liu Ting-Yu. The structure of *Melody of the Recorder* reflects the structure of the instrument itself, its seven short stories and two works of flash fiction corresponding to the seven holes and two half-holes of the recorder.

In "Fingers" and "Demon Dance", aging prodigies come to terms with the inevitable decline of their technical abilities and the passing of the torch to the next generation of musicians within an ensemble. Middle school bullying and moral grey zones are illuminated through recorder music in "Student Diary". "Memory Manager" traces the historical wounds of the 228 Incident and the role of music in preserving individual and collective memory. Making use of musical source material, "Seaside House", "Solitary Star", and "Ping the Geek Girl" explore intimate emotional connections between past and present. "The Girl and the God of Death" and "On Sad Sisters and Phone Calls" consider the potential of music to transcend death by acting as a gateway to the heart.

The interpretation, techniques, and emotional expression of the recorder repertoire are seamlessly woven into these seven stories about female musicians, providing narrative keynotes and offering metaphors for critical elements of the characters' inner lives. Readers with a passion for music or literature, or both, will take great pleasure in the allusive overtones and resonant chords struck by this collection.



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Rights contact:

bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

Liu Ting-Yu 劉庭妤

Born in 1994 in Taipei, author Liu Ting-Yu holds degrees in literature, art management and cultural policy, and multi-disciplinary literary creation from National Taiwan Normal University, National Taiwan University of Arts, and Taipei National University of the Arts. A member of the Taipei Recorder Orchestra for over twenty years, she has extensive performance experience domestically and abroad. She has won numerous literary awards, and has published a collection of essays, *The Post-Girl Era*.

MELODY OF THE RECORDER

By Liu Ting-Yu

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

Fingers

Fingers, blunt.

She hasn't practiced her instrument in ages. More precisely, she has never practiced her instrument seriously, and now she finds her fingers blunt.

These are the hands of a professional recorder player. The smooth, fair skin is meticulously cared for, rarely subjected to labor or wear, and without the slightest scratch. Every finger used to be as nimble and robust as a sparky child, but now they've grown sluggish.

She carefully examines her fingers again, from the proximal phalanx, to the middle phalanx, to the distal phalanx. She sees the fine fuzz on the back of her fingers and the intricate wrinkles woven into complex lattices, like yellowed vellum that cracks due to old age, repeatedly bending and stretching with the movement of her knuckles. Then her sight lingers on a fingertip, her pink crescent nail demurely embedded in the flesh like a dainty shell. She scratches her nail subconsciously – it's a tic that has formed unwittingly over the years, so whenever she feels anxious and keyed up, she will drop her head and scratch her nail. The edges are serrated. She has had the habit of biting her nails since childhood, and she has to resign herself to the fact that they never turned pretty once she grew up.

Nothing seems wrong on the outside, but as soon as she works her fingers, they feel so blunt indeed.

She never thought time would send her a message in such a concrete way.

In her youth, she exploited her talent and the agility of her fingers and body, and she rarely practiced. Thanks to her flair, performance had never been a problem – this had always been her knack, because an extraordinarily talented musician could afford to be willful and even have the luxury to abuse her gift. That is, until she discovered in recent years that things had changed, that her fingers had blunted, especially her ring fingers, a musician's most precious digits. Musicians who have been training their fingers since childhood tend to have ring fingers that are more powerful and deft compared to the average layperson, ring fingers that dance effortlessly between semitones and whole tones. But now, as she rotates her hands, she finds the muscles connecting her palms to her fingers so stiff. Every time she lifts her ring finger, the fasciae just below the skin are pulled taut, and bluish veins bob up and down, looking tense and strained.

Her ears feel blunt, too.

Ears are the soul of a musician. When soundwaves bounce from the auricle into the ear canal, get compressed in the middle ear, enter the inner ear, transform into nerve impulses, and

get delivered to the eighth cranial nerve, this is how sound is born. Music, somewhere between noise and pure tones, is a complex type of aural information, which musicians can decipher through pitch, rhythm, and tone, from scores to instruments, from solo to ensemble performances, and from practice rooms to rehearsal halls, recording studios, and concert venues. Sound varies infinitely depending on the space, acoustic effect, composer, and performer. It begins then fades. Transient but haunting.

But her ears have blunted.

She can't even hear some high-pitched overtones anymore. When performing in the past, she used to be able to guide her breath with her acute ear, adding harmonics as she saw fit to vary the texture of her sound. But now she can barely hear them – this exacerbates her fear. She is afraid of losing her ear, which had perfect pitch and used to make her so proud. This fear, new and alien, disconcerts her; it's like opening a gift without being sure whether it contains a godsend or a malicious, mocking prank. Her acute senses not only bless her with talent but also carry a curse – for instance, her oversensitive hearing often agitates and annoys her, and her body is less resilient than the average person's, so she's always seen as neurotic.

Perhaps fear is the fruit of uncertainty? Future changes are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Where does fear come from? Is her predicament hostile or helpful? Fear scares her.

Or perhaps part of her fear stems from self-knowledge. She knows she's no longer the best musician on the stage, fallen to the ranks of those who have abdicated from the spotlight. She remembers Hsieh Kai-hung, a top philosophy student and former president of the recorder club. She has heard that he worked in a scholastic publishing house after graduation, but he might have switched to selling insurance now. She even bumped into him in a restaurant once, while he was explaining a new long-term care plan to a client. He had grown haggard, his round face wrinkled, and he had some white hair too. She didn't call out to him, as if saying his name might shatter her dreams of the stage. Kai-hung used to be the most prodigious soloist, earning his legendary status in their circle by performing "Flight of the Bumblebee" with three variations – no one's performance would ever beat this eleven-year-old boy's.

Looking sideways, she observed how Kai-hung held the insurance leaflet and carefully stared at the client, his gaze earnest and intent, as he actively engaged in conversation and wrote down calculations. He seemed poles apart from the inexperienced boy all those years ago. The erstwhile Kai-hung had no eyes for others when he was on stage, as if he couldn't even see the judges in the audience. His gaze defied description. Galaxies hid inside his pupils where nameless gods appeared. He seemed unconcerned about how others saw him, while right in front of him there stood a more substantial beast awaiting his consolation.

Were they the same Kai-hung?

She never managed to surpass his performance. Nobody could.

But right there and then, at the dining table, she realized time had transformed everything.

She opens the ebony case, takes out an alto recorder, and attempts a chromatic scale. Her fingers drag.

She sighs, puts down her instrument, and tries to swing her right ring finger. It snubs her, its movement more restricted than in the past. She sighs again and launches into hand exercises. Relax the wrists, stretch the fingers, wag them up and down with a specific technique, going from the index finger to the middle finger and the pinky, and back to the ring finger, repeating these movements three times. Her tendons seem to have loosened up. Her ring fingers, like impish children just awoken from sleep, suddenly realize they have to work – lo and behold, she’s taking up hand exercises! She used to think only beginners and the elderly needed to relax their joints before playing, like warming up before a swim, one two three, two two three, three two three, stretch every muscle, warm up every joint, then hold your breath and dive in, let the music swim with long strokes, the notes throw up splashes, the slurs stretch out like waterways, swaying up and down with the undulating surface. She always arrogantly deemed it unnecessary to warm up: it’s a joke to talented professionals, nobody bothers with it, major and minor scales simply flow at your fingertips – but now, even she has started doing hand exercises. Incredible.

Her ring fingers remain sluggish. She applies pressure to her joints.

Then she bends her ring fingers back, the left and then the right, feeling the stretch at the root of her fingers.

They draw circles in the air, one, two, three, like tiny batons.

These ring fingers are sore and numb, as placidly miserable as windless waters.

She puts down her instrument, closes the music score, and gets up for a glass of water. She seems troubled, stretching her fingers anxiously while walking. Her digits are brandished claws swiping in the air, as if playing an invisible keyboard, the spines of her hands drumming like rebellious piano hammers. She’s upset at her taut, pale hands and her shriveled, weak fingers, which have lost the rosy vitality of youth. The tender skin wrapped around her knuckles clearly outlines the shape of her bones. She has never distrusted her hands so much or found them so inadequate – in fact, she has rarely ever put them to work; to pamper these musician hands, she used to avoid carrying heavy objects, refrain from manual labor, and regularly apply creams and balms, all for the sake of these supposedly precious and inviolable hands.

But now, time has blunted her fingers. Aging is irreversible.

Boiling water rumbles in the kettle. She unplugs it and pours the water into an empty white mug, which produces a slight but clear noise. A thought flashes through her mind: what note is this? Sound pervades her life, each with a pitch that corresponds to a note on the piano. What note is she hearing now? Water keeps flowing and the sound fades as the mug fills up. Gone. She sighs. She can’t pinpoint the pitch. But she decides to cut herself some slack, let it go, and keep things as simple as possible. It was just pouring water, no need to overreact, and definitely no need to doubt yourself, it wasn’t a note, just hot water pouring into a mug, a mundane detail, nothing to do with music or sound.

She picks up the mug and hugs herself with one arm. Hot water flows down her throat, esophagus, and into her stomach.

Her stomach warms up. The sky outside is in turmoil, the early autumn a bit chilly.

Her feet are planted on the cold floor. So cold. She should wear slippers.

She recalls Kai-hung's round face again. Does he still play?

Twenty years ago, a boyish Kai-hung entered the stage and played the "Flight of the Bumblebee" variations.

Red curtains draped the stage. Contestants sat on plastic chairs on the side. The air conditioning was so cold that some people were rubbing their hands to warm up their fingers. Things had been at a standstill for a while now, and drowsiness was spreading. Then it was Kai-hung's turn to perform. Sporting black velvet shoes and checkered trousers, he confidently walked to the center of the stage, stood firmly and began to play. It started with the familiar tune from "Hänschen klein", known as "The Little Bee" in Chinese, which sounded comical. Buzz buzz buzz, buzz buzz buzz, let's all get to work, bumble here, bumble there, let's all learn from busy bees. Once he was done, he repeated the same theme again. Buzz buzz buzz, buzz buzz buzz, let's all get to work, bumble here, bumble there, let's all learn from busy bees. The judges sitting in the audience burst out laughing. Was this contestant pulling a joke? Or mocking the competition? What a shock for someone to play "The Little Bee" in the solemn finals, with such seriousness and poise too. The previous contestant had just performed Vivaldi's "RV 443" – a popular competition piece teeming with intricate techniques and challenges – then suddenly entered "The Little Bee", so out of place that it made people laugh. Kai-hung paid them no mind, ignoring their sniggers and focusing solely on his playing. A short section later, the melody fleshed out, the piano accompaniment grew busier, and before the judges knew, the tune had already expanded into a dense sound cluster: Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee".

Chromatic clusters soared and plunged as Kai-hung's fingers flew, filling the venue with sonorous notes like bees beating their wings. His breath was so full and fluent that there was practically no pause between notes. His astounding technique seemed to conjure up massive, quarrelsome bumblebees, eager to attack. Such vigor – not just one brave bee breaching forbidden territory but an entire swarm ready for battle. Vibrating sound molecules stabbed at people's eardrums, each note a vicious foray. With such aplomb, Kai-hung puffed up his cheeks as he inhaled and exhaled in big gulps, he who opened with a prank, who controlled the scene, commanding swarms with his recorder like the Piper luring unsuspecting listeners into a dark cavern.

The audience fell silent from concentration, including those who were laughing just a moment ago. Kai-hung looked at no one but held everyone's gaze. His music was like an invisible but immense hand, pulling strings in the air to manipulate the listeners' souls, or like a hook drawing them out. The audience held their breath as they stared at this eleven-year-old. His boyish naivety made him fearless, his heaven-sent talent giving him poise and ease. His notes were rapid, seamless, mesmerizing. Given the difficulty of "Flight of the Bumblebee", the slightest error in fingering or shortness of breath could make the whole piece fall apart, but no such thing happened. Like walking a thin tightrope in the air, Kai-hung moved with precision and ease, and the melody poured out like a ceaseless stream, his notes rapid, seamless, and mesmerizing.

The music ended. People came back to reality.

Then it dawned on them what had just happened.

It wasn't about the competition or winning anymore.

Kai-hung was a performer who truly cared about music. His performance was *the* performance. It was Music.

The kettle boils again. The red light flashes. The switch flips. Soon, silence returns.

She stops hugging herself, puts down the mug, and emerges lucid from her thoughts. Time was compressed into the three minutes it took for the water to boil, from calm to boiling and back to calm, but in reality, twenty years have elapsed, enough to make a brilliant musician begin to feel her physical changes, her blunt fingers, her blunt ears. Time has finally engulfed her. It manifests very specific bodily changes, vaguely perceptible, some barging in, others creeping up. Or maybe this is just an illusion, time being so skilled at playing with minds and shifting mentalities. She's almost certain about where she stands, but not quite – but it might not matter anyway. She has decided to head back to her room and resume practicing the unfinished major and minor scales.

Freakish Aping

The most impressive thing about recorders, for me, is the low-frequency resonance created when multiple notes are sounded together, a booming resonance.

Also known as Tartini tones, this resonance was etched in my mind as soon as I first heard it. Ever since then, whenever I think about recorders, these “third notes” come to mind. They're as maddening as the devil, but they also compel you to search for them, like a moth to the flame, and make goosebumps creep across your skin. Any recorderist who has played in an ensemble must know what I'm talking about.

The third note possesses a certain magic, like the “punctum”¹ Roland Barthes used to describe photographic images. It strikes the listener profoundly, “arouses a great sympathy... almost a kind of tenderness”, but also “shows no preference for morality or good taste”. Its allure is far more interesting than any ostensibly interesting thing in the world, pushing me to search for it continually, for the transcendent feeling that sends goosebumps all over my skin.

For this bizarre reason, I founded a recorder club at university. Popular clubs were as numerous as stars in the sky, but I didn't join any of them, and instead founded this quirky and niche recorder club with just a few members.

Starting the club wasn't easy. First, I had to put together a committee to help run it. I decided to wantonly promote the beauty of recorders, so I would be seen as the “recorder fanatic” and attract companions who shared my passion.

On the first day of the clubs fair, I discussed the matter with a few new committee members and decided to host a recital. As an easy-going president, egged on by the committee to perform Jacob Van Eyck's “More Palatino”, I obediently went on stage with the self-sacrificial thought that

¹ Translator's note: the “punctum” quote comes from *Camera Lucida*, by Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Howard, Vintage Books London 2000 edition, p.43.

my performance would boost the freshers' confidence in their own playing. The turnout was small, with just a few freshers in the audience, but I wasn't nervous. I played with ease, half resigned, and by the time I came back to reality after playing, the first person I saw was Aping.

Aping was petite, had long straight hair and wore glasses, exactly like the kind of well-behaved students that teachers would like. She looked like a thinner version of Naomi Watanabe, not an ugly girl at all, and even resembled Yui Aragaki from certain angles. But unfortunately, her fashion sense ruined everything. Clashing colors and a rough hairstyle accentuated all her flaws, making her seem like some kind of misfit. What made me curious was her name “阿平 (Aping)” written neatly on the new member's name tag pinned to her chest. I committed her to memory and intended to find the right moment to ask about the story behind this “Aping”, written in the Latin script.

After the performance, the freshers began to introduce themselves. Aping was the first to stand up, speaking with a blank face. It was then that I noticed her chiseled features and angular profile. Her skin was quite dark, though it was covered by makeup.

She told a story that remains vivid to this day, as shocking as Tartini tones.

Aping was Bunun, raised by her grandparents in Neighborhood 1 in Tunpu. She left home and came north for high school, but she often missed her indigenous community while living in the city. She had joined a recorder ensemble in elementary school only, because her homeroom teacher thought she might be on the autistic spectrum and suggested she join the team. She mostly played the soprano.