

Music Gives a Soul to the Universe

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PROSE, 2ND PLACE (tie), (Grades 10-12)

“Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.”--Plato

His wooden bow dances gracefully across the cello strings as a tear escapes my glistening eye and travels down my cheek. *This is the most beautiful thing I have ever heard*, I whisper to myself. *Saint-Saëns, you are a genius.*

In my mind the soothing melody transforms into a swan gliding across a motionless pond, and underneath, the gentle piano accompaniment becomes grass swaying in the breeze, birds whistling in the trees. The cellist plays each note more passionately than the last, with such intensity yet such smoothness and calm. Closing my eyes, I am transported into a cathartic new dimension. Seldom has music been so awakening. I will never forget this breathtaking moment.

As I sink further into the cushioned seat, I telepathically plead to the soloist, desperate for him to hear my silent appeal:

Please don't end.

Please don't release me back into reality.

Please keep me under your spell.

In this moment, ten rows back, I am liberated. I see a world and future brimming with optimism, beauty, hope. *The Swan* by Saint-Saëns protects me in a musical force field, shielding any anxieties that could potentially penetrate my peaceful bliss. Like rain re-moisturizing a desert, the cellist pours emotions into my soul, reminding me that *I can still feel*—even during the driest of seasons, the rain will come again. My emotional drought will not last forever.

I fear, though, once this trance ceases and the music evaporates, my cloud of stressors will loom again. I fear the squeezing in my chest will return. As if I am swimming across a stormy lake, my worries are currents and winds, whipping and crashing and tugging me down, yanking me off course into directions I cannot control nor fight. Just endure.

Music is my coping mechanism; it shifts my paradigm from negativity to optimism. When I am overthinking or drowning in my thoughts, music lifts me to the surface, fills me with peace, and reassures me that all storms will end. During and after a musical oasis, I see more clearly. I realize my nerves are normal. I am human. This, to me, is the power of classical music: my escape from reality.

The house lights of the Brevard Music Center rise, applause erupts around me, and I sit silently basking. I yearn to stop time. Replay the concert. Never leave. I pledge to persistently search for—live for—these moments of freedom, moments of inspiration, moments that remind me *life always has beauty*.

As I return to my cabin, I continue to contemplate my awakening as a soft rain sprinkles the North Carolina soil. The first concert of the summer has already changed me. And to think, I still have three more weeks... This new environment brings me such hope.

A calmer version of myself arrives at the illuminated dock where my friends are waiting. *I need to share this with someone*. Upon noticing my teary eyes, they ask what is wrong.

“This piece of music. I just...” my voice cracks at a complete loss for words.

“Oh, Sara, we understand. Saint-Saëns, right?”

How did they know? Together we discuss the emotions this piece has evoked in each of us. I have never felt so completely understood—I was not alone. Today, I look forward to a future where I will connect with musicians and students who share my passions and with whom I can relate on the deepest level.

The cellist has awakened me.

My voice is *my* cello.

Singing from the stage, I hope my voice will awaken the souls and imaginations of others, as this performance did for me.

Sara Shiff is a senior at Armstrong High School. She loves singing, theatre, painting, and being outside. She also enjoys leading her school's Recycling Project and running her art business.