

*I can't*, two simple whispers escaped my lips. I felt defeated. Each word caused pain, a reminder to myself that I couldn't sing while everyone else was filling up the choir room with their vibrant voices. Despite the melodious, rhythmic hum of drills, all I could hear in my inexperienced ears was my clashing voice amidst a chorus of unfamiliar tones. Daily practice routines seemed to be useless as my fluctuating voice conflicted with the harmony of the choir. I desperately needed something to hide behind; as the swell of the surrounding music overcame me, I felt my voice crack nervously and die down as I sought my sanctuary in the silence.

I had hidden myself behind my cello for years, performing yet trying to hide myself from the audience. I had honed my skills through years of practice, yet I oddly felt safe hidden behind the cello. One of my friends nudged me, snapping me out of my trance. *Sing louder*, she mouthed, her smiling gaze encouraging me to join the harmony as a whole. Bolstered by her encouragement, I tried. A barrier of fear stood between me and my voice, preventing me from producing any form of sound – nothing more than a dry rasp crept out of my throat. Self-doubt crept inside as the choir's voices surged around me, pressuring me to join the chorus.

Despite the continuous encouragement, I maintained a quiet presence during rehearsals, appreciating any moment I managed to sing an audible note.

The autumn concert arrived, yet I still felt far from ready to sing. My nerves coiled tighter as the spotlight beckoned me to come closer to the stage to show my full potential. I smoothed out my dress, nervously fixing my hair as I distracted myself from the impending performance. The auditorium hushed into a sea of expectation, and I could feel the weight of gazes fixated upon me. The orchestra began to play as I stood frozen amid the playing and entrapping melodies. Notes seemed to dance in the air, beckoning me to join the performance of each tune.

As the first lyrics approached, my mind became a chaotic swirl of doubt and fear. I looked at my friends, desperately needing something to hide behind. *Why had I quit cello?* The swelling music, combined with my thoughts and emotions, threatened to overwhelm me. *I need comfort, silence, my room, a curtain, mask, anything* — I paused, my mind turning blank. I had already chosen and couldn't go back in the past, but only head to the future.

I chose to open my mouth and let my voice flow out of my throat, oozing out in gentle melody, my voice gradually stabilizing as I met stares of friends and the conductor as they heard my voice for the first time.

Scanning through the crowd for affirmation, I met my parents' beaming eyes in greeting. An involuntary smile crept onto my face as I found myself compelled to sing louder, meeting the audience's attention with pride. This time, I stood proudly underneath the lights, singing lyrics that seemed to come naturally through practice.

At that moment, I realized that breaking through the barrier was not just about my vocal skills, but also about self-confidence. Since then, I've learned to find my voice not just in choir, but across a variety of other settings. Whenever I'm hesitant to assert my opinion in the classroom or stand up for myself in arguments, I think back to the auditorium, with its bright lights and sea of audience members, and I choose again to open my mouth.