Sophia's first three piano teachers were not good fits. The first, whom Sophia met when she was three, was a dour old Bulgarian woman named Elina, who lived in our neighborhood. She wore a shapeless skirt and knee-high stockings, and seemed to carry the sorrows of the world on her shoulders. Her idea of a piano lesson was to come to our house and play the piano herself for an hour, while Sophia and I sat on the couch and listened to her tortured anguish. When the first session ended, I felt like sticking my head in the oven; Sophia was playing with paper dolls. I was terrified to tell Elina it wouldn't work out, for fear that she might throw herself wailing over a parapet. So I told her we were incredibly excited about having another lesson, and that I'd contact her soon.

The next teacher we tried was a peculiar little person with short hair and round, wire-rimmed glasses named MJ, who
had been in the military. We couldn’t tell if MJ was male or female, but it always wore a suit and bow tie, and I liked its matter-of-fact style. MJ told us the first time we met that Sophia was definitely musically gifted. Unfortunately, MJ disappeared after three weeks. One day we arrived at MJ’s house for a lesson as usual, and found no trace of MJ. Instead, there were strangers living in the house, with completely different furniture.

Our third teacher was a soft-spoken jazz guy named Richard, with wide hips. He said he had a two-year-old daughter. At our first meeting, he gave Sophia and me a big lecture about the importance of living in the moment and playing for oneself. Unlike traditional teachers, he said he didn’t believe in using books written by others, and instead would emphasize improvisation and self-expression. Richard said there were no rules in music, only what felt right, and no one had the right to judge you, and the piano world had been destroyed by commercialism and cutthroat competition. Poor guy—I guess he just didn’t have what it took.

As the eldest daughter of Chinese immigrants, I don’t have time to improvise or make up my own rules. I have a family name to uphold, aging parents to make proud. I like clear goals, and clear ways of measuring success.

That’s why I liked the Suzuki method of teaching piano. There are seven books, and everybody has to start with Book One. Each book includes ten to fifteen songs, and you have to go in order. Kids who practice hard get assigned new songs each week, whereas kids who don’t practice get stuck on the same song for weeks, even months, and sometimes just quit because they’re bored out of their minds. Anyway, the bottom line is that some kids go through the Suzuki books much faster than others. So a
hardworking four-year-old can be ahead of a six-year-old, a six-year-old can be way ahead of a sixteen-year-old, and so on—which is why the Suzuki system is known for producing “child prodigies.”

That’s what happened with Sophia. By the time she was five, we had settled in with a fabulous Suzuki teacher named Michelle, who had a big piano studio in New Haven at a place called the Neighborhood Music School. Patient and perceptive, Michelle got Sophia—appreciated her aptitude but saw beyond it—and it was Michelle who instilled the love of music in her.

The Suzuki method was perfect for Sophia. She learned really quickly and could stay focused for a long time. She also had a big cultural advantage: Most of the other students at the school had liberal Western parents, who were weak-willed and indulgent when it came to practicing. I remember a girl named Aubrey, who was required to practice one minute per day for every year of her age. She was seven. Other kids got paid for practicing, with giant ice cream sundaes or big Lego kits. And many were excused from practicing altogether on lesson days.

A key feature of the Suzuki approach is that a parent is expected to attend every music lesson and then to supervise practice sessions at home. What this meant was that every moment Sophia was at the piano, I was there with her, and I was being educated too. I had taken piano lessons as a child, but my parents didn’t have the money to hire anyone good, so I ended up studying with a neighbor, who sometimes hosted Tupperware parties during my lesson. With Sophia’s teacher, I started learning all kinds of things about music theory and music history that I’d never known before.

With me at her side, Sophia practiced at least ninety minutes
every day, including weekends. On lesson days, we practiced twice as long. I made Sophia memorize everything, even if it wasn’t required, and I never paid her a penny. That’s how we blasted through those Suzuki books. Other parents aimed for one book a year. We started off with the “Twinkle, Twinkle” variations (Book One); three months later Sophia was playing Schumann (Book Two); six months after that, she was playing a sonatina by Clementi (Book Three). And I still felt we were going too slow.

This seems like a good time to get something off my chest. The truth is, it wasn’t always enjoyable for Sophia to have me as a mother. According to Sophia, here are three things I actually said to her at the piano as I supervised her practicing:

1. Oh my God, you’re just getting worse and worse.
2. I’m going to count to three, then I want musically!
3. If the next time’s not PERFECT, I’m going to TAKE ALL YOUR STUFFED ANIMALS AND BURN THEM!

In retrospect, these coaching suggestions seem a bit extreme. On the other hand, they were highly effective. Sophia and I were a great mother-daughter fit. I had the conviction and the tunnel-vision drive. Sophia had the maturity, patience, and empathy I should have had, but didn’t. She accepted my premise that I knew and wanted what was best for her—and she cut me a break when I was bad-tempered or said hurtful things.

When Sophia was nine, she won a local piano award, performing a piece called Butterfly by the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. Butterfly is one of Grieg’s sixty-six Lyric Pieces, which are miniature compositions, each meant to evoke a
particular mood or image. *Butterfly* is supposed to be light and carefree—and it takes hours and hours of grueling drudge-drilling to get it to sound that way.

What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you’re good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences. This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents tend to give up. But if done properly, the Chinese strategy produces a virtuous circle. Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America. Once a child starts to excel at something—whether it’s math, piano, pitching, or ballet—he or she gets praise, admiration, and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun. This in turn makes it easier for the parent to get the child to work even more.

At the Winners Concert where Sophia performed, as I watched her deft fingers fluttering and tumbling up and down the piano like real butterfly wings, I was overcome with pride, exhilaration, and hope. I couldn’t wait for the next day, to work more with Sophia, and to learn more music together.