

Dear Mikoko Hirata,

Thank you for sharing your completed manuscript with me. This memoir breathes reflection, understanding, and change within its readers. Through exposing personal experiences and breaking down societal expectations, this manuscript reveals the true reality of being an Asian woman within the classical music industry. It crushes hope just to mold it back together through a different light. I look forward to continuing to work on this manuscript with you.

The biggest strength of this manuscript is the ongoing theme of memory. From the fear of memory lapses throughout each chapter, to the question of memory authenticity from those around you, to the conflict of memorization versus knowledge. The human mind is so malleable and easily taught to turn against itself, so this uncovering of how heavily outside factors can influence remembrance is powerful and thought-provoking. One of my favorite lines that encapsulates this is on page 185, “These were the records, the external memory, of many things that were important to me: what made me, me. They were snuffed out—no longer in existence.” While directly discussing deleted computer files, it also represents your perception of memory as a whole—the ongoing fear of having it extinguished. I also found your use of repetition to be an unconscious manifestation of this. Starting at the end of page 3, there is a line that is mimicked throughout the entire manuscript: “*Go down: 1-2-3, stay down: 1-2-3, come back up: 1-2-3.*” While the words may change, the collection of ideas and counting remains the same (recreated on pages 27, 48, 120, and 136). This is an excellent inflection into how much you try to prove memorization abilities and the need to follow a strict agenda to feel in control. This theme is integrated into the storyline effortlessly and is wonderfully crafted.

Furthermore, there are many moments where you disclose small acts of humanity that are awe-inspiring. Within non-fiction writing, it is easy to be caught up in the big picture, ignoring

little details that make all the difference. Much of this manuscript is heavy and unravels through harmful acts, mindsets, and characters, yet you are able to gift the reader with adlibs that bring on warmth and delight. My favorite examples of this include the act of removing your heels before playing the piano (pages 119-120), the violinist crafting the doll for you (page 131), and your dad's separation of the wrong peppers in his Ma Po Tofu (page 219). These moments reveal acts that may seem miniscule, but effortlessly paint a picture of you as a person and the life that you lived and are continuing to live. It adds authenticity and connection to you as a writer and provides a break from the deeper topics at hand.

Another aspect of this manuscript that is beautifully done is the inclusion of actual letters. It adds insight into the authority of your story and gives the reader a more personal view of these relationships. While you also reveal these partnerships through your writing, this proof of correspondence adds a layer of transparency and delves deeper than the present written reflection could. These messages that I'm referring to are the letter to Hungary (pages 38-40), the letter from Dr. D (page 108), and the letter to Phillippe (pages 150-151). If you can find any more letters that could be vital to the manuscript, I'd love to explore the idea of adding them in. They have become an integral part of the story that creates dimension and inspires needed judgment.

While this manuscript has many strengths, some aspects could be improved upon. First, I'd like to express my confusion about the timeline. This story is natural to you since it's yours—you are cognisant of when every moment happens, but the readers are left in the dark. There is constant jumping around years and locations, which isn't exactly a negative thing, but it needs to be done in a way that is clear and concise. For example, at the end of page 8, after discussing childhood, you explain how old you were for one story, but leave the previous stories undated. Or, the second paragraph on page 147 discusses the possibility of Paul's advances

causing the stage fright, yet I was under the impression that this section took place post-Hungary. Or, on page 175, you begin the section stating your age at the time, which is a ten-year jump from the beginning of the chapter on page 174. It would be helpful to go through each paragraph or section and write on a piece of paper the year and age that moment takes place. Then, when going through your revisions, ensure that these dates and ages are clear in your writing. It seems as though the format of this manuscript is nonlinear on purpose, so to make this effective, pieces of the puzzle need to come together to form an accurate timeline and understanding of your growth and development.

It is also important to note the jarring tonal shifts within your manuscript. The majority of this manuscript is profoundly personal and unravels your fears and self-perception, which is well done. However, when you go into the sections that revolve around history and academic facts, which begin in “Development,” your voice drops off and it feels more like a thesis as opposed to a memoir. My first note of this is the second paragraph on page 52. You begin to share statistics on average salary and piano costs, which is fascinating and gives insight into the expenses of your musical talent, but feels out of place from the rest of the chapter. Your conclusion especially falls victim to this. Starting after the break on page 208 until the first paragraph of page 213, returning after the break on page 214 to halfway through 217, the manuscript begins to read more like a Wikipedia page than a personal perspective. This history is valuable to who you are and how you hold yourself, but it is written in a way that is tedious and quickly loses its readers—which is apparent throughout large chunks of the manuscript. This is an easy fix, but it will take time and reframing. The first paragraph on page 207 is a great example of how to include history effortlessly and effectively. While still providing information on WWII and life as a Japanese soldier post-war, you did so while connecting it to you and your

family—informational and insightful. It would be valuable to read through these texts that only hold information, and find ways to incorporate more about you and how it wholly relates to the story. It's also clear that you're passionate about these topics, but you can tend to ramble into territory that doesn't connect with the point being made, so I also recommend cutting sections that aren't vital to the story. Excluding the ones previously mentioned, the sections of text to reexamine are on page 74, 102, 110-114, 137-138, 169-172, and 200-204.

To steer away from technical adjustments and dig deeper into theme and narrative fixes, it would be formidable to expand on the intense power dynamics. Throughout the manuscript, there are continuous relationships, in which the other holds all the power and paints you as a weaker, younger, and more impressionable person. Whether it be your mother, Paul, Dr. D, your American family, or Peter, there was an abuse of power that was held over your head. While I understand that these topics can be challenging to express and expose, they feel integral to the plot. To name a few, beginning with your mother, I am interested in distinguishing how her power and manipulation tactics affected your relationship with your sister. On page 56, Aya is introduced as the favored child, yet there is never an explanation of how the two of you interacted or the familial dynamics that formed from this tension of completion. Aya recognizes this hurt on page 206, but is absent from the picture between these two instances. Or, pivoting to page 176, when your mother shares her insight into you finding love, there is simply an admission of defeat without acknowledging why the power was placed in her hands. Moving on to Dr. D, on page 108, it's written that "I may have been delusional about his power as my teacher to deliver me from my insecurities," yet it is left at that. While there's an acknowledgment of the power and control he held, there's no deep dive into it. Sometimes, just stating what happens isn't enough, and personal anecdotes need to be shared for the reader to

understand your stance. Or, even how you yourself were occasionally the person who held the power. On page 145, it's explained that presenters would often spoil you, while leaving the rest of the orchestra members to fend for themselves. How did this switch in power affect you? I recommend exploring all the relationships written in this manuscript and sharing more personal insight into what these power dynamics entailed and how you overcame them.

Going off of that point, throughout the manuscript I noticed a fear of lingering on topics that were deemed uncomfortable. It seems like there are moments where you want to discuss the sexualization, exploitation, and infantilization of women—especially women of color—but quickly brush it off or use outside sources to make your case instead. For example, at the beginning of page 103, there is a vignette on the pianist sharing a joke about Japanese ex-wives, which is cut off shortly after being introduced. Or, on page 86, when transforming yourself to fit the exotic stereotype you felt pushed into. The reader is only given a peephole into these moments rather than a window. Then, there are the topics of gaslighting and mental health, which are introduced briefly, die off, and then quickly wrap up in the conclusion. On page 59, the idea of paranoia is introduced, but is silenced in the following page. These themes are crucial to the storyline, but seem unfinished. It's clear that these stereotypes and expectations follow you and that you want to uncover the source and harm of them, but have only scratched the surface. I think it's necessary to revisit why you want to cover these topics and how you can flesh out your thoughts and grievances, while still protecting your peace. I am happy to brainstorm ways to do this if you find yourself getting stuck.

Below, I have included a bulleted list of more lines, moments, and other details that stood out to me—positively and negatively. They are placed chronologically with their assigned page number for easy assessment.

- **Page 2:** The opening is powerful and instantly grasps the reader's attention.
- **Page 5:** The line “I try my best to regain control over my mind that randomly jumps every second from one distracting thought to another with my racing pulse. I try to steady my breath. I try to listen, and lose myself in the music,” does a great job setting up tension and stakes.
- **Page 34:** There isn't enough set-up to distinguish why you'd want to punch Paul in the face, so this assessment seems sudden.
- **Page 36:** The sourness of Paul's character is slowly revealed, but not entirely peeled back. I recommend adding more on your relationship with him and how it unraveled (i.e., power dynamics).
- **Pages 48-49:** The first section of this chapter feels out of place. I wonder if removing it and beginning the chapter with “I was born in Japan...” would make it smoother.
- **Page 54:** The last paragraph on this page needs a smoother transition. Feels sudden and unrelated to the previous text.
- **Page 55:** Mom's comment, “It's not easy having a child with talent,” is powerful and thought-provoking. I would love to explore this more.
- **Page 62:** There is mention of not finding a conclusive cause for symptoms, but the reader is told that it's from liver failure on page 60.
- **Page 63:** When people think of Julliard, they think of the college program, which confuses the timeline. Make it more apparent what program you auditioned for.
- **Pages 67-68:** Once again, I'm not sure if we need the present-day anecdotes. I think it may be more significant to focus on the past.

- **Page 73:** The insight into your mother's actions and behaviors is strong.
- **Page 75:** Note on women being barred from taking classes in theory or composition, which is super fascinating. Expand on this.
- **Pages 78-79:** The inclusion of *chikan* is fascinating and adds to the sexual themes of the book. It would be interesting to sprinkle more about it in further pages.
 - "But if one *chikan* finds me sexually arousing, can others?" is powerful and encapsulates a universal part of girlhood—wanting to be wanted.
- **Page 80:** Comment on wishing to be a man. Was this genuine gender dysphoria, or only about the social aspect of manhood? Expand.
- **Page 86:** There's mention of a journal; it could be interesting to pull some pages from it to add to the manuscript.
- **Page 96:** The theme of alienation and dissonance is strong.
- **Page 101:** Note of no longer being called "*espressivo*," was this ended due to the orgasm comment?
- **Pages 110-114:** This entire section feels unimportant to the narrative.
- **Page 115:** Rather than moving on to the story of Paul, I want to linger on Dr. D a little longer. Instead of just stating facts of what happened, try to also include reflection and emotion.
- **Page 118:** The first paragraph adds humor and helps create comedic relief between complex topics.
- **Page 121:** Mentioned that you've lived in Manhattan since 17, which begs the question: how long did you live with your American family? When did you move

out? It could be beneficial to expand on your relationship with them post-move-out (i.e., power dynamics).

- **Page 126:** The inclusion of the West Essex Tribune article is vital and helps support your points.
- **Pages 132-134:** The explanation of a conductor's role is lengthy and unnecessarily complicated. The metaphor of the conductor being a traffic control officer is well explained, but then the more concrete explanation of them should be removed (or vice versa).
- **Page 135:** Linger on the #MeToo movement more. Rushes over the sexual harassment cases too quickly.
- **Page 143:** Mention of Paul's "sadistic tendencies," but we don't fully see them throughout the manuscript. Expand.
- **Page 148:** The third full paragraph is a great insight into your mind and adds a deeper sense of personhood.
- **Page 165:** There is mention of being a musician equated to being a slave; expand on this in your own experience.
- **Page 168:** Note of stage fright becoming less severe, but it feels untrue since there hasn't been much discussion on it lessening.
- **Page 169-172:** Unnecessary history. This also brings up the question of who the audience is. Is this for people interested in classical music and Japanese history, or people interested in your story?
- **Page 171:** Repeating topics already mentioned on page 75.

- **Page 171:** Can this conclusion be written in a more personal and self-reflection way rather than a historical one?
- **Page 174:** Mention of mom claiming to forget her blow-ups. Can you provide personal reflection on this? Why do you think she reacted this way?
- **Page 177:** The last sentence of this page seems important, but is unclear and confusing. What do you mean by this?
- **Page 180:** When Peter proposed, what was your reaction? Did you want to accept, or did you feel forced into it?
- **Page 184:** Comment of possibly being paranoid with a faulty memory. You could use this to delve deeper into how you were told this as a child.
- **Page 187:** Mention of wedding continuously being postponed and canceled prior to you leaving. Why?
- **Page 193:** I love the showcase of community and protection. It's beautiful.
- **Page 203:** We are given a lot of info on Placido Domingo, whom we are not previously made aware of, so it feels out of place.
- **Pages 223-225:** These ending paragraphs are strong and wrap up the memoir well. The ending feels earned. Good job.
- **General Note:** Translations feel clunky when placed inside the quotation marks. I recommend moving them outside for clarity.
- **General Note:** Do you have any ideas for the manuscript title? I am happy to help brainstorm with you if needed.

Thank you again for sharing your manuscript with me. This memoir is strong and will act as reassurance for those who find themselves walking in your footsteps. I hope that my notes are

helpful for your revisions and for delving deeper into the themes and execution of this manuscript. Please review my suggestions and submit your edits by December 1st. Do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions, concerns, or comments.

Best,

Ava Sofia Bratt