

# LIVING ROOM

I have damn near torn myself apart trying to find home inside my body. I travel three hundred days a year. Hotels are my domicile. The circles I have run around the world over the past decade as an opera singer and creator took me far from any stable sense of home, and lord knows I’ve tried to find it in myriad other ways—some inadequate, some futile, some destructive. I have built and demolished many homes in my time. I have felt them take root and felt them evaporate.

Have you ever imagined what it would be like if the room you were in dematerialized around you? A room: six or so flat planes enclosing a space in which someone or something can exist removed, protected from the environment beyond those walls. But walls do not only frame space, they preserve the ephemeral; they materialize the intangible.

Through harrowing trial and error, I have learned to conjure my primary ideal of home, teleporting myself back to the place that has been a constant in my life: my grandparents’ living room. I grew up in that house. A hundred years ago, the house sat on a beautiful horse-country road that would eventually take you from the Virginia countryside to Washington, DC, but not before overwhelming you with rolling hills and glowing vegetation, framed

in the infinite distance by purple mountains whose majesty came from their weathered repose. I gestated in this house and in this region I now describe as a Ralph Lauren ad built atop a slave burial ground.

The living room, toward the bottom of the list of spaces most commonly inhabited in the sprawling twelve-room house, became my personal sanctuary, laboratory, therapy chamber, and private reckoning place. The absence of regular traffic gave the room a sanctimoniousness that made it feel like a privileged place.

The room exists, in part, in its contents and surroundings: soft cream carpet against ruby silk drapes; clean Virginia sunlight pouring through the branches of a centuries-old oak tree beyond the window;



Mayank Chugh, Alma’s Kitchen, 2024



Davóne Tines, Family Piano, 2024

a perfectly off-key piano serving as ruddy plinth for the complete family tree of portraits; a piano bench, an archeological site stacked with the compressed sediment of my musical life; a golden china cabinet with ceramic black angels and keepsakes fought for in the Vietnam War; a grandiose golden mirror I pilfered with high-school friends; a reproduction of the painting *The Touch* by Aaron and Alan Hicks found in so many Black homes; a portrait an artist friend painted of me while I ran her husband's plein-air painting school; the 150-year-old family Bible; and my great-grandfather's grandfather clock.

The room also exists in memory: a magic box filled with hundreds of my core musical experiences. My origin story. Where did the music begin?

Well, I sang at Providence Baptist Church four minutes down the road since before I could remember. But the more precise question that I am never asked in interviews is: "When was your passion for music born?" As the story goes, one day during a routine Blue Ridge Mountain blizzard, I, in my late single digits, wandered over to the piano out of boredom and struck a single note. As my grandfather puts it: "I saw it happen, and it seemed like that note got stuck in your head and never came out."

I started taking piano lessons from a woman down the street. I would kind of practice with the sheet music I was given, but mainly I would listen a few times and memorize the notes, which peeved my teacher because I was not "learning correctly." In the living room, education was whatever I wanted it to be—lying on the floor listening to Scott Joplin and Mary J. Blige, pacing endless circles repeating a Vivaldi phrase, or quietly chanting German to myself in my grandmother's wingback chair. I spent countless hours a day practicing the violin with a focused fervor of incidental joy born of concentrated, minute, and incremental effort. I was such a nerd about it all. I kept my sheet music on a black Wenger music stand in a bright orange half-inch D-ring binder and took secretarial glee in organizing new pieces into nonglare protective sleeves. I practiced my way into being concertmaster of every school orchestra I was in from sixth grade forward.

The living room is where I would get to intimately know my new violin after I had earned my way up to trading in my old one. Her name was Sofia, and I'd pore over her woodgrain, noting every historic nick and repair, every contour of her back's deeply flamed

maple and ebony-rosewood pegs. I'd luxuriate in the smell of her case's factory-new stiff velvet, whose scent I cannot describe aside from there being an intoxicating element of chemically enhanced cedar. I was in love with how the small golden hygrometer looked against the luscious deep green.

The living room holds the music I have learned there and the music I have shared with other people: one late fall day when I was in high school, I taught my neighbor the entire alto line of Handel's *Messiah* by playing it on violin and singing along with her. I basked in the sunny lilt and drive of Dmitry Kabalevsky's exuberant violin concerto, the last concerto I would learn before laying the violin down for singing.

I meticulously learned the score of the opera that would be my international debut: the Peter Sellars-directed *Only the Sound Remains*, written by godmother Kaija Saariaho. May her memory be a blessing as she rests in peace. She was a steel blade encased in felt as she sat toward the back of the rehearsal hall of the Dutch National Opera, one eye piercing the orchestra and the other fixed on the mirror of her compact while she judiciously applied red Chanel lipstick. I like to imagine that part of her spirit lives in the living room, anchored by the horcrux of my tattered scores stuffed in the piano bench next to Kabalevsky and *The Black Clown*.

I have returned time and again to dig into more scores I was preparing for increasingly "prestigious" (i.e., stressful) contexts; the weight of that pressure was held at bay outside the windows while I swayed barefoot on the creamy carpet.

The living room is where the thorny complexity of the family dinner table went to be baptized in solace and reflection.

The room holds emotions I've processed—throwing myself onto the antique sofa, wallowing in tears after learning, within the span of an hour, that I was rejected from Yale University and that my dog had died.

The room holds the evidence that family can be bliss. At Christmas, it is where we would sit around for hours after opening gifts at midday. It was the only time when that many people would be in the room at once. We would bask in the warm, hazy glow of the moment we fragilely yet determinedly wove together from the strands of nostalgia and good cheer we each silently offered up.

A decade into my career, when I realized that staying in an endless procession of hotels does not a home make and that I was, in practice, homeless, I became aware that I needed to find a psychic home or I would die. (Maybe not die, but I would surely bankrupt my soul by not having a place to replenish it.) I decided that I needed to do what I could to recreate or borrow or teleport that feeling of home. So, I created a two-part ritual:

ORCHIDS

The living room always has plants in it—my grandparents’ other “grandchildren.” I bring this on the road by way of orchids, specifically white ones, because of their beguilingly alien yet elegant form and ethereal radiance. These days they’re available at reasonable prices in many grocery and convenience stores, so I pick one up (or three), position it in my hotel room, and when I am done with my stay, gift it to the person I am most thankful for on the trip.



Mayank Chugh, Hotel Room Orchid, 2023

INCENSE

The living room also, more recently, has incense, a choice I think my family tacitly made to honor my late mother, resting in power, who loved incense. She burned it everywhere all the time. When I was younger, I hated the scent, which I thought choked the air, but over time I realized its magical ability to elevate any space into a spiritual realm. The room now exists in this scent, and my mother’s spirit lingers in the smoke that wafts to connect every single thing.

I know I am not done finding the physical and emotional materials that will ensure safe passage back to that place, but for now I am so thankful to have finally found a way to travel from anywhere in the world, or my mind, to this room that contains the essence of what grounds me. Its objects, organisms, memories, scents, and glowing images have become the portals through which I can actually go home.