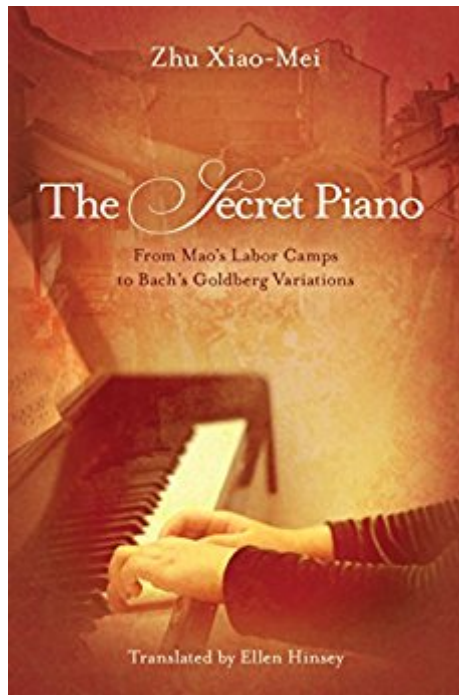




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# **The Secret Piano: From Mao's Labor Camps To Bach's Goldberg Variations**



## Synopsis

Zhu Xiao-Mei was born to middle-class parents in post-war China, and her musical proficiency became clear at an early age. Taught to play the piano by her mother, she developed quickly into a prodigy, immersing herself in the work of classical masters like Bach and Brahms. She was just ten years old when she began a rigorous course of study at the Beijing Conservatory, laying the groundwork for what was sure to be an extraordinary career. But in 1966, when Xiao-Mei was seventeen, the Cultural Revolution began, and life as she knew it changed forever. One by one, her family members were scattered, sentenced to prison or labor camps. By 1969, the art schools had closed, and Xiao-Mei was on her way to a work camp in Mongolia, where she would spend the next five years. Life in the camp was nearly unbearable, thanks to horrific living conditions and intensive brainwashing campaigns. Yet through it all Xiao-Mei clung to her passion for music and her sense of humor. And when the Revolution ended, it was the piano that helped her to heal. Heartbreaking and heartwarming, *The Secret Piano* is the incredible true story of one woman's survival in the face of unbelievable odds and in pursuit of a powerful dream.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When one first thinks of pianist Zhu Xiao-Mei, those familiar with her works immediately jump to her exceptional interpretations and performances of J.S. Bach and the Goldberg Variations. Finding her autobiography, *The Secret Piano: From Mao's Labor Camps to Bach's Goldberg Variations*, was a pleasant surprise, yet autobiographies like this can sometimes be a disappointment to the reader. Happily this was not the case, as the author has presented her life in an interesting and fascinating chronological format, one that expresses the emotions that she felt along the way. Born in Shanghai into a creative middle-class family during those turbulent years following WW-II, her family moved to Beijing when she was very young. Her first encounter with the instrument that was to shape her life is movingly remembered in her own words: "I didn't know what it was, a piano. I was barely three years old, and I had never seen anything like it. I was fascinated. I wondered where it had come from, this object that spoke when you touched it. Strangely, my mother never played the piano. But every morning, she dusted it: her first act of housework. 'Such dust! In Shanghai, there wasn't so much dust. Why did you bring me here?' she would add, turning towards my father." And that curiosity sets the pace for this book in which she takes us on a journey in which we witness first hand a side that is usually veiled to most Westerners. Learning the piano during those young years, she was a prodigy who played the piano in radio and television in Beijing when she was only eight, and at ten, she entered into the Beijing Conservatory of Music in a program for unusually gifted children. As a teenager her studies there were putting her on the path for a brilliant musical career, but that was stopped cold by Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution. As it took hold, even music at the Conservatory faced the consequences of the time, as we witness through her eyes: "Everything was burning. Today it was the bodies; tomorrow it would be the spirit. I imagined the bonfire where the Red Guards were melting down our records and burning our scores... a thin veil of smoke lifted towards the sky. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven vanished into the air. But in the end, the Red Guards were right: it had to be done. As Mao said: 'The Revolution is not a dinner party. It is an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.'" Through her eyes we see her family split apart by forced relocations. We observe the five years she spent in a work camp in Mongolia, her own political indecisions, the sometimes painful memories, yet where despite many difficulties she managed to practice the piano in hiding... *The Secret Piano*. Zhu Xiao-Mei's story reads like a novel, with all of the color and dimension that keeps the reader glued to her words, page after page. She left the work camps in 1974, after being 'assigned' there for five years. During her stay in Beijing, her life again changed as through her music she began to explore ways to get to America, a dream that she realized finally in February, 1980, thinking of Jonathan Livingston, "the seagull who wanted

to fly higher than all the others."It was during her flight to Los Angeles that she learned of the Chinese philosopher Laozi, and this from an American woman, a teacher in a university. This was the profound beginning of a new philosophy for her, and one that with her music would help to guide her. Xiao-Mei's sojourn to California resulted in her living with friends and relatives and working menial jobs to survive. She went to the New England Conservatory in Boston to complete her music education, then beyond, dealing as she went with problems with her English pronunciation. She paints a sometimes witty picture of her experiences, such as a waitress job in Boston's red light district. It's a fascinating tour of what the US looks like to someone from China, and the adversities that one must overcome to just survive, right down to a marriage of convenience just to stay in the country. And in December 1984, Xiao-Mei's odyssey led her to Paris, starting over again, with a diploma from the New England Conservatory that meant little in France. Yet it was during a return trip to Boston that she truly blossomed with her first attempts to tackle what she became so well known for: her interpretations of the Goldberg Variations by J.S. Bach, the musical encounter of her life: "Buddhists always depict Buddha smiling. There are always two aspects to everything, to every being. There is no single truth--everything depends on the way in which one wants to see reality. That is life, and that is the Goldberg Variations. Through it, I also now understand why polyphony, Bach's in particular, affects me more deeply than any other type of music. By means of its various voices, it alone is capable of simultaneously expressing multiple and contradictory emotions, without one necessarily taking precedence over another." And Xiao-Mei lives those words, as can be heard in her J.S. Bach: Variations Goldberg. She teaches at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in France, and has performed for appreciative audiences on six continents. She is one of the world's most renowned interpreters of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" as one can hear on this album. Zhu Xiao-Mei is also the inspiration behind and subject of Andre Leblanc's book for children, The Red Piano, a touching work of fiction in which a young girl stuck in a Chinese Cultural Revolution Camp where the Communist Party conducts "learning through labor and self-criticism." It's also worth mention that the translation was beautifully done by Ellen Hinsey, whose own works as a poet and author include The White Fire of Time. Her expertise shows through in this beautifully-formatted Kindle edition. This book is more than an autobiography; it's a moving story of the human spirit prevailing over incredible odds. It's highly recommended not just as a beautiful autobiography, but as a background to those who enjoy Xiao-Mei's interpretations of the Goldberg Variations. 4/16/2012

This is a memoir of a Chinese classical pianist who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and later

moved to the US and France. It is written in a simple and honest style. This is a very good reading for all musicians, people who love classical music, or people interested in China and/or communism, or even stories of immigrants. It covers enough of a human experience that it should be a satisfying reading to many. As the author is a pianist and this is not a detailed life memoir, the book is sometimes not as detailed as one would expect. For example, one feels that there are some prison experiences that she has no words to describe. I like the fact that she didn't blame individuals too much. She certainly has had a fair share of bad experiences yet has never become bitter or cynical. Music was for her a huge help in life in the sense of healing, consolation and a source of hope. This is a remarkable book.

I am not a musician nor have I played an instrument, however, that really didn't keep me from appreciating this powerful autobiography. The hardships that the Chinese endured during Mao's "Cultural Revolution" have never been so vividly recounted in any of the many books I've read on this human catastrophe. Her personal sacrifices profoundly illustrate the cruelty of Mao's madness. Despite excruciating circumstances she was able to get her family's piano transported to her work camp and scrounged for scores to play surreptitiously. I was so moved by her description of her beloved Goldberg Variations that I downloaded her first CD. I find it truly inspiring. I wish I could directly communicate my admiration and appreciation for her courage and the music she has left us. This book provided me with considerable insight into her extraordinary life, and I am grateful for her fascinating autobiography.

Xiao-Mei does a good job of explaining the toll the cultural revolution took on individuals; and her tale of survival is encouraging and inspiring. *The Secret Piano* is a personal tale of a woman focused on music, and her journey from music school, to reeducation camp, to the United States, to France, and maybe someday, back home to China. Throughout her journey, music has comforted Xiao-Mei and given her a goal, but even more, Xiao-Mei's search to understand and perform music has given her life meaning and, to her, importance; even while she maintains great humility about her importance to the world. Music lovers will love this book. Those who can't read notes, may find Xiao-Mei's musical metaphors a little over done, but her message comes through as clear as a bell. Immerse yourself in and perfect what you enjoy: that process will perfect your skills, yourself, and maybe, eventually, affect the world. It's worth reading.

I just finished this book, *THE SECRET PIANO*, by Zhu Xiao-Mei. I have never read of such courage

as this author has. She survived Mao's labor camps and all the knocks life gave her. What a hero. The author tells the story of her life in China and her family's life and how each one suffered and overcame in their own way. Chinese people have different ways of looking at life and family so don't expect this to be like an American story, it isn't. I admire this woman's strength and courage to go on and succeed.

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