



Uncommon Measure

A Journey Through Music, Performance, and the Science of Time

by Natalie Hodges

Trade Paperback Original ISBN: 978-1-942658-97-9 | eBook ISBN: 978-1-942658-98-6

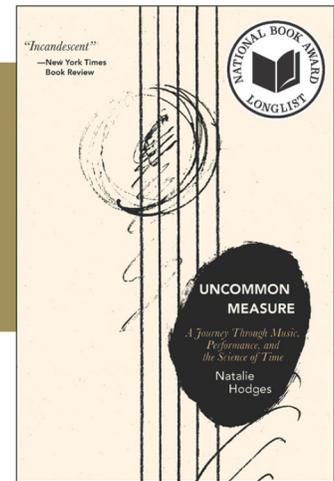
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD LONGLIST
NEW YORK TIMES “EDITORS’ CHOICE” SELECTION

“Uncommon and genre-defying.” —**Alexandra Jacobs**, *New York Times*

“Incandescent.” —**Kat Chow**, *New York Times Book Review*

“Hodges considers the elemental truth pulsating beneath our experience of music and of our very lives.”
—**Maria Popova**, *Marginalian*

“Korean American violinist Hodges debuts with a literary mosaic of invention, inquiry, and wonder that interrogates classical music, quantum entanglement, the Tiger Mother stereotype, and the fluidity of time [to] offer a luminous meditation on the ways in which art, freedom, and identity intertwine.” —**Publishers Weekly** (starred review)



INTRODUCTION

How does time shape consciousness and consciousness, time? Do we live in time, or does time live in us? And how does music, with its patterns of rhythm and harmony, inform our experience of time?

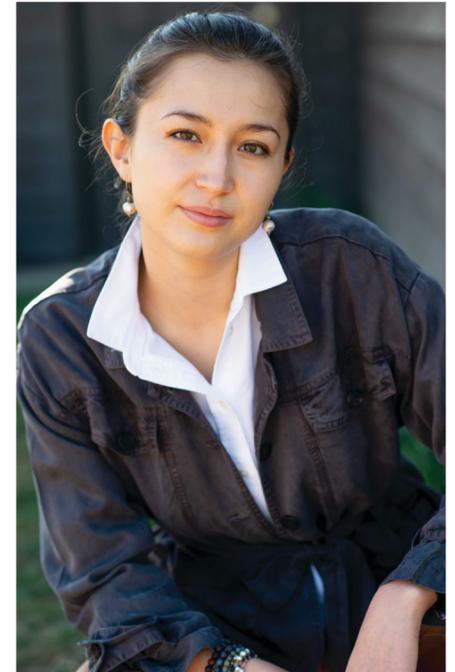
Uncommon Measure explores these questions from the perspective of a young Korean American who dedicated herself to perfecting her art until performance anxiety forced her to give up the dream of becoming a concert solo violinist. Anchoring her story in illuminating research in neuroscience and quantum physics, Hodges traces her own passage through difficult family dynamics, prejudice, and enormous personal expectations to come to terms with the meaning of a life reimagined—one still shaped by classical music but moving toward the freedom of improvisation.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. The *New York Times* lauds *Uncommon Measure* as “a genre-defying memoir.” How does the author’s personal narrative intertwine with the psychological and scientific concepts she illuminates? How would you classify Hodges’s merging of memory, music, and scientific investigation?

2. Hodges describes classical music as a genre “at the dusty peak of Western high art, one in which contemporary American culture is increasingly less interested.” Have Hodges’s reflections or her **accompanying playlist** enhanced your appreciation for this art form? What were your impressions of classical music before and after reading the book?

3. Hodges evocatively recounts her deep longing to play Bach’s Chaconne and her difficulty with practicing it. For violinists, she writes, “it’s the pinnacle of our repertoire.” Why does she feel so drawn to the piece, yet so reluctant to play it?



4. The “Chaconne” chapter offers, in part, an alternative to the “five stages of grief” as a model for how we come to terms with loss. In your own experience of grief, does it tend to take the form of a linear progression (“stages”) or, as the author says, of “iterative, circular variations, different feelings and memories buried within one another”? Why or why not?
5. Despite her academic successes, Hodges has identified as “someone who never felt confident when formally studying math or science.” She revealed that “the biggest epiphany for me, while writing this book, was the realization that you don’t have to have a STEM background in order to explore and delight in science on your own terms.” In what ways are science and art connected? What new ideas did the book spark within you about creativity and the way our brains experience conditions such as performance anxiety?
6. On top of the immense stress of striving to become a soloist, Hodges feels the added pressure of being a “model minority.” “Fail to make the most of your opportunity, and all your family’s sacrifice was for naught,” she writes. How does her experience as a Korean American shape her relationship with classical music? How do the internal pressures of her family and the external force of assimilation influence her identity?
7. The author has a complex relationship with her beloved mother: “She gives, I take: that has always been the imbalanced equation of our relationship, its asymmetry and equilibrium.” Is this imbalance inherent in the mother/daughter relationship? Do you agree that there must always be a “frightening asymmetry at the heart of love”?
8. Hodges outlines an “immigrant credo”: “to be able to give your children what you did not have yourself.” Her immigrant mother passed on her love of music and worked tirelessly to ensure that Hodges and her siblings could have instruments and lessons. In what ways is the violin an opportunity but also an obligation for Hodges? Did her mother succeed in giving her daughter what she didn’t have herself? How did the stereotype of the Asian “Tiger Mother” harm her mother in family court, in her relationship with Hodges’s father, and in society as a whole?
9. As Hodges mourns the loss of her identity as a violinist, she writes, “I felt haunted by a monumental sense of failure, of aborted struggle and lost time.” Yet she found new joy and freedom in jazz, tango, and the magic of time’s smooth movement during improvisation, “a strange feeling, beautiful but also eerie: not only that you can step into time’s flow, but that you are the flow itself.” What is your experience of time and improvisational flow? Have you ever felt time moving differently? Is time ever truly lost?
10. Hodges opens and closes the book with the same idea. Connecting our subjective experience of time with a revolutionary physics experiment, she concludes, “If you want to change the past, all you have to do is try to record what happened in it.” Do you agree? In writing this book, has she changed her own past? Has your perception of time, and creative possibility, changed since reading this book?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalie Hodges has performed as a classical violinist throughout Colorado and in New York, Boston, Paris, and the Italian Piedmont, as well as at the Aspen Music Festival and the Stowe Tango Music Festival. She is a graduate of Harvard University, where she studied English and music, and currently lives in Boulder, Colorado. *Uncommon Measure* is her first book. Visit her website at www.nataliehodges.com.

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