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"Ewwwww!" resonates through an elementary school cafeteria as my high school band director announces the next tune, said to be one of the greatest ballad arrangements ever written, "Prelude to a Kiss." What does the descriptor "greatest ballad arrangement" even mean to a crowd of little kids? They're certainly not thinking of the A-Flat augmented seventh chord harmonized by three trombones and colored by delicate clarinet doubling--and even less so when the song's title is about kissing! I should be offended by the disgusted reaction, being the alto saxophone soloist, but I'm not. I know I once was there, listening to the very same song, struck by its beauty but made uncomfortable by its subject matter. I know that in order to go from that opinion to that of this as one of the most poignant tunes in big band repertoire it takes exactly what this song speaks about: growing up.

Yes, the song's about kissing--but much more about the journey to that kiss--that prelude--and a long one at that. As I said before, I once sat similarly to those elementary-schoolers listening to the very same song. Over time the melody of it faded into memory, but the pure quality of it lingered. The song itself reappeared in life over and over again, seemingly following me as I aged, until I finally had a chance to play it in sophomore year. My friend played the solo. A senior, on the threshold of the rest of her life, she played it with a striking maturity that every bit reflected her as a person. As I learned the solo myself, I could hit the right notes, but not nearly match the emotion. Something was missing.

A simple answer could've been, "Oh yeah, I must have to go around and kiss a bunch of girls—that'll be the key to 'Prelude to a Kiss!'" Thankfully I wasn't naïve enough to try that one. No, what I needed was the same thing I needed to even understand in listening to the song—the key ingredient to differentiate understanding the song at an elementary school level and a high school level: life.

Life happened of course. Time passed, seasons changed, loves came and went; this is sounding a lot more dramatic than it actually was—basically, two years of high school happened. Take that as you will. With those two years came not only a boatload of more AP

classes, but greater maturity, understanding, passion, and yes, finally a comprehension of an A-flat augmented seventh chord. As had been the tradition, “Prelude to a Kiss” followed me this far too. This time I played the solo.

In preparation, I couldn’t help but think of the last six years that led me here—the musical and life experiences through which this very song threaded itself. I thought of how far I’d come, how I’d never trade my current self for the fifth grader who once struggled to play four notes in a row before running out of breath—or even the sophomore who couldn’t understand anything else but the right notes. I thought of my friend two years ago, on the threshold of the rest of her life and how I seemed to be in the same place now—how like the tender, anxious, and exhilarating moments leading up to a kiss, senior year currently was a precious, little space of childhood, separating me from graduation and the rest of my life.

Using these nostalgic emotions, I put my heart and soul into the solo—a heart and a soul that were far more developed than the ones I had sophomore year. It paid off. In this solo, I heard a different person than who I was two years ago, or even a week ago. It was a conglomeration of everything I’d experienced in life thus far pertinent to the song. As I had once guessed, it wasn’t about playing the right notes or memorizing the chord changes. It was about growing up—and I’d finally done it. My “Prelude to a Kiss” was no longer a prelude, at least musically. I had grown up with and grown into this music, and reached a peak of development I once only dreamed of.

As for life otherwise, like any high school senior, I’m still in that prelude—savoring the moments before I step into the real world. Graduation will be nice, but like a kiss, the time leading up to it lasts longer—can be just as sweet.