

Community



Benjamin Lai, 8, has played some kind of musical instrument since the age of four. He has performed in numerous youth orchestras over the years.

Courtesy of the Lai family

Music is the lifestyle for Cupertino third-grader

Local 8-year-old composes music, performs worldwide

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By AMY JENKINS

Benjamin Lai was only 4 years old when he started to play the cello. He started playing a cello that was one-tenth the size of a full size cello, and now at age 8 he has moved up to a cello that is one-fourth the size of a full-size cello. But regardless of the size of the instrument, he looks and sounds no different than a professional musician.

At 4 years old he began studying with renowned Bay Area cellist Michail Gelfandbein. He also composed music on his own, without any help from a teacher, says his mother, Lulu, a former piano teacher who now devotes her time to driving her three children to music rehearsals and performances.

Music undoubtedly runs in the Lai family. The oldest child, Sunny, is 15 and has played the violin for 9 years. She and her sister, Jenny, 14, are both members of the San Francisco Youth Symphony. Jenny has played the piano for seven years and the viola for three years. All three siblings compose their own music and each has won state and national awards for their music.

Last year Benjamin composed a piece for the piano that won the first place Award of Excellence in the California State Parent Teachers Association Reflection Program. He won in the primary division for children in preschool through second grade. After the win, he performed the composition at the San Jose Convention Center for an audience of 4,000, Lulu says.

Currently Benjamin is busy playing the cello in performances with the El Camino Youth Symphony. He has been a member since 1999 as the Camerata and Chamber Players' principal cellist. Those are two beginning levels of the symphony, but Lulu says Benjamin has already moved up to the Galbraith Honor Strings level and played with the Senior

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Symphony in the holiday concert.

On Dec. 16 Benjamin had a solo performance in the El Camino symphony's Holiday Concert, Tchaikovsky's Ballet Suite Nutcracker, conducted by Dr. Camilla Kolchinsky, with special guests from Western Ballet. Benjamin says the performance went very well and there was a full audience of approximately 1,000.

Last summer Benjamin auditioned and was selected to perform in the 7th North American Elite Youth Orchestra International Concert Tour, which is made up of young musicians throughout the United States. The tour included stops in Los Angeles, Dallas, Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei and Taichung.

Even on family vacations, the Lais like to travel to places to hear music. After the summer tour, the family, including the father, Jiin, who works as a computer engineer, traveled to Austria to see the Salzburg Festival. They spent two weeks in the Netherlands and two weeks in Switzerland, where they attended the Verbier Festival. In the Netherlands, Benjamin had a solo performance at the Fourth Soesterberg International Music Festival. He studied with Misha Quint, participated in chamber music and performed in several concerts.

Benjamin says he wants to continue playing and become a professional musician one day. He says he looks up to the world-famous pianist Lang Lang and would like to eventually play as well as he does.

"Aside from playing the cello I like to play the piano, compose music on the computer and draw sometimes," he says. "I also like to do karate just for fun, but I don't take lessons."

To find out more information about El Camino Youth Symphony's 2001-2002 season, call 650.327.2611 or visit

www.ecys.org.

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