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Lifestyles

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A virtuoso violinist - and he's only 12

Los Altos' own Stephen Waarts amazes with outstanding talent

By Rie Nakanishi

Special to Town Crier

Closing your eyes and listening to Los Altos resident Stephen Waarts play the violin, you wouldn't believe you're hearing a 12-year-old boy. His virtuosity leaves seasoned musicians shaking their heads in wonderment.

"He's just outrageously amazing," said Michael Gibson, conductor of the Silicon Valley Symphony.

Stephen is scheduled to perform the challenging Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto at the symphony's "Prodigy & Pops" concert 7:30 p.m. Nov. 15 at the Presbyterian Church of Los Gatos.

Although young, Stephen has already had several experiences performing live in concert and on the air. He recently played Tchaikovsky's Concerto in D major, Opus 35 3rd movement, which was broadcast on Pen TV.

He has won top honors, including the grand prize in the 2008 Mondavi Center Third Annual Young Artists Competition, grades 4-8, and first place in the 2008 Young Artist Competition of the Diablo Symphony Orchestra.

Talent and relentless practice have framed Stephen's musical development. He started to play the violin at 5, after his first encounter with the instrument at his kindergarten violin concert.

"That time he said he wanted to play guitar because my husband (Robert) plays a little bit of guitar," said his mother, Orli Waarts.

But given the opportunity, Stephen picked up the violin.

"I like playing violin because it's challenging and it's nice to play music so that the audience can understand music better if I play it well," Stephen said.



PHOTO ABOVE BY JOE HU/TOWN CRIER; PHOTO BELOW COURTESY OF ORLI WAARTS

Stephen Waarts of Los Altos, shown above practicing at home and below, with the orchestra, takes on Tchaikovsky's difficult Concerto in D major, Opus 35 3rd movement, at the Silicon Valley Symphony's Nov. 15 concert.

The young violinist is dedicated. While other youth his age play on the playground, he stays home and practices his violin at least three hours a day.

"I know that if I don't practice, I won't perform as well and I like to perform well," Stephen said.

Despite an ear infection and wrist injuries, Stephen has persevered with his violin playing. He has not missed a practice in five years.

Two years after starting violin, he began to learn piano to help his violin playing.



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At 12, he can already explain the technical differences between the two instruments.

Stephen's favorite composers are Mozart and Tchaikovsky.

"I like Mozart because he's very clever, so (his piece) is very clever music," he said. "And Tchaikovsky, I like because it's really passionate and more expressive than Mozart, and it's more challenging (to play)."

Orli said she and her husband didn't realize how gifted Stephen was until they heard people praise his performance at a summer camp.

"To me, his playing sounds very natural, very meaningful," Orli said. "Like, he plays the piece, he immediately knows the phrasing, what should be important in the piece, the mood — he knows it."

In addition to his technical talents as a violinist, Stephen also has an unusual memory.

"He doesn't just play the notes, but he interprets the music and conveys it in his own musical voice," Orli said.

Li Lin, Stephen's violin teacher and a faculty member at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, said, "What is most fascinating about Stephen is that he possesses musical language as fluently as a mature man. His own voice might be as young as he is, but the voice of his violin playing is like a jewel

"He doesn't just play the notes, but he interprets the music and conveys it in his own musical voice."

*— Orli Waarts,
Stephen's mother*

of an ancient legend. Stephen is truly spectacular and definitely a rare talent."

Stephen, a seventh-grader at the School for Independent Learners in Los Altos, shows talent in academics, too. He excels at many subjects, including math, science, history, English and French, and he recently finished the 12th-grade level of math — his favorite subject. He said math and playing the violin share something in common.

"Something in violin is very mathematical," Stephen said. "In math, there's only one correct answer, and in violin, there's only one place to put your finger so it's in tune."

It's obvious that he's special, but Stephen still enjoys childhood pleasures.

Piled on the chair of Stephen's room are stuffed animals that he treasures. From small to mid-sized, there are gorillas, lion, bears, monkeys and more.

"I don't think I'm that much different (from other children),"



COURTESY OF SILICON VALLEY SYMPHONY

Stephen Waarts excels in a range of academic subjects, in addition to his mastery of the violin.

he said. But he does believe he is fortunate.

"I'm lucky to have a good teacher — and ... I have some kind of talent," Stephen said.

Tickets for Stephen's Nov. 15 concert are available online. For more information, visit www.siliconvalleysymphony.net/index.html.