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COVERING THE ARTS AND LOCAL FEATURES

## Young virtuoso to play famously tough work



Photograph by George Sakkestad

Twelve-year-old Stephen Waarts will be the guest soloist when the Silicon Valley Symphony opens its season Nov. 15 at the Presbyterian Church of Los Gatos. Stephen, who played with the Saratoga Symphony earlier this year, will perform a Tchaikovsky piece.

### It's Silicon Valley Symphony's opener

By HEATHER ZIMMERMAN

The Silicon Valley Symphony opens its season with a concert that offers quite a twist on the term "child's play." The program features 12-year-old violinist Stephen Waarts as guest soloist, performing Tchaikovsky's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Op. 35, a work so difficult that few adult virtuosos can master it.

"Prodigy and Pops" takes place Nov. 15, 7:30 p.m., at the Presbyterian Church of Los Gatos, 16575 Shannon Road.

The Silicon Valley Symphony, founded in 2001, is an all-volunteer orchestra. The symphony's music director, conductor and founder Michael P. Gibson says that in recent seasons, the group has played more than once to standing-room-only audiences, and with such a young virtuoso soloist featured, the "Prodigy and Pops" concert seems equally likely to pack the house.

"I think it's going to be an historic event to have a 12-year-old play that very difficult concerto,"

Gibson says, noting that he doesn't know of—and in fact, Google couldn't track down—another instance of a soloist Stephen's age playing a work of such difficulty with an orchestra. Gibson also says that Stephen learned and memorized the piece in just eight weeks.

Stephen is in seventh grade at the School for Independent Learners in Los Altos. He says that he has been playing the violin since he was 5½ and that he practices music for about three hours every day. "I went to a recital at my new school and they were playing violin, and I was very interested in it," he says of how he took up the instrument. He also began playing the piano at age 7.

Among Stephen's other interests are math, reading, biking and drawing. His two siblings, a younger sister and a twin brother, also play music, he says.

His favorite composers are Mozart and Tchaikovsky. Stephen says he enjoys Mozart because he was "a genius composer" and that he was a Tchaikovsky fan even before taking on his famously tough violin concerto.

Stephen is to the point about why the composition is considered by many to be so tricky. "It is a difficult piece," he says matter-of-factly.

So just how difficult is it? The

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story goes that even the top violinist for whom Tchaikovsky wrote the concerto, Leopold Auer, refused to debut the piece. "[Auer] said that it was impossible to play. Technically, it's got all kinds of jumps all over the place, triple stops," Gibson says. "It's so fast and furious at times. It's just an outrageous piece."

However, it's clear that Stephen has command of the concerto. "They applaud for him after every movement," Gibson says, describing the orchestra's rehearsals with Stephen. "He's just amazing. We don't stop for him; he stops for us."

During the 2007-08 season,

Stephen won the grand prize for grades 4-8 in the Mondavi Center third annual Young Artists Competition and first prize in the Young Artist Competition of the Diablo Symphony Orchestra, where the field of competitors included musicians in their early 20s. Earlier this year, he performed a Paganini concerto with the Saratoga Symphony. He will perform a difficult Mendelssohn concerto next spring with the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra.

Stephen seems down-to-earth about his accomplishments, and although he already has an impressive résumé as a musician, he sounds open to other career possibilities. When asked whether, as an adult, he might pursue the path of a professional musician, he says, "I'm not sure. I also like math.

It's one of the possibilities."

Stephen is not the first young musician to appear with the Silicon Valley Symphony. He and his mother were in the audience last season for the Silicon Valley Symphony's featuring 17-year-old Christine Chong. Gibson recalls that Stephen's mother contacted him after the concert and sent Gibson a recording of Stephen's performance with the Saratoga Symphony. "It was just so spectacular, I called her back and said, 'We'd love to have him play,' " Gibson says.

Because the young age of the symphony's soloist is likely to draw an audience with more families, Gibson says the other works on the "Prodigy and Pops" program were chosen accordingly. The concert also features music by Shostakovich and Smetana, two pops pieces by Leroy Anderson, and Franz von Suppé's *Light Cavalry Overture*. During the von Suppé piece, Gibson will invite several children from the audience to the podium for a conducting lesson, and they will then help lead the orchestra's performance of the overture.

For information, call 408.873.9000 or visit [www.siliconvalleysymphony.net](http://www.siliconvalleysymphony.net).