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Talented Piano Students Make it Up as They Go Along at Unique Improv Show

By Mei Sun Li



Luke Mayernik Photos provided

Lafayette 13-year-old Marcello Severo, current winner of the National PTA Middle School Award for original composition, was 2 years old when he discovered the piano, an experience that immediately entailed making up "ditties."

At the age of four, parents Karen and Anthony Severo enrolled Marcello at the Lafayette Recreation Center's group piano class for kids, and suddenly Marcello was not simply producing a straightforward rendition of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" but creating variations using both hands independently and together. Unknown to the little budding musician at that time, Mozart, a master improviser himself, over 200 years earlier had composed 12 very famous variations of this familiar melody.

Now a proud member of the Stanley Middle School's renowned Jazz Messengers Band, Marcello is extremely grateful to mentor and music education director Bob Athayde for his extraordinary leadership and inspiration.

Severo was one of 10 musicians who participated in the one-of-a-kind Piano Improvisation Demonstration and Exhibition at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Walnut Creek on Friday June 24. Performers ranging in age from 12 years to seasoned retirees overwhelmingly impressed the enthralled audience with their musical gifts and dramatically differing styles of spontaneous composition.

"I thought that improv only applied to jazz!" exclaimed one wide-eyed audience member who had been drawn to the event out of curiosity as well as a love of music.

Dwight Stone, musical director at St. Paul's and an accomplished performer and composer himself, reiterated that no musician coming stage center would know what they would play before sitting down and placing their hands on the piano keys. What followed, as one attendee later noted, "blew my mind."

Swooping lyrical charges, percussive jazz progressions, and themes inspired by the ghosts of Beethoven, Stravinsky all the way up to modern day Cole Porter and Carol King filled the St. Paul's sanctuary eaves.

Performer Luke Mayernik, musical director at Hillcrest Congregational Church in Pleasant Hill who is currently studying composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, was profoundly moved by the variety of different musical styles and the wide range of ages represented.

"Spontaneous creativity needs to be fostered and encouraged among the young," he said. Asked what inspires his own musical path, Mayernik replied, "Using the universal language of music is fulfilling and humbling. It is a way of communion with the divine."

Stone later acknowledged that he was so moved by Mayernik's composition that he was reluctant to check the timer for fear of disrupting the flow and beauty of the performance. The musicians were limited to six minutes. "I've never heard such imaginative playing," said Stone. "It was stretching my own concepts of music and I couldn't bear to be the person who would interrupt such genius."

The Piano Improvisation event is a part of St. Paul's Concert Series, which offers a wide range of programs. Another Piano Improvisation Concert is being planned for early next year. Also, there will be an informal piano improv workshop from 10:30 a.m. until noon on Aug. 20 at the church. For more information, contact Stone at

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Marcello Severo

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