Telling Our Story

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, one of the most prolific composers of all time, had his musical debut at age 4. World renowned cellist Yo Yo Ma performed for audiences at just 5 years old and for John F. Kennedy at age 7. Each musician clearly had their own special spark, but have you ever stopped to wonder how a young child can go from banging spoons together to performing in front of a sold-out concert hall?

Meet Ian, age 10, a musical prodigy who discovered his talent at the Thurnauer School of Music, where he has been playing the cello since he was three years old. He is a student of Madeleine Golz, one of the school’s most sought-after instructors, who is well-known throughout the northeast. Though she rarely takes on students at such a young age, Ian displayed such musicality that she “trusted her instinct” and accepted him as a student.

For the first three months, Ian did not play music at all. His lessons consisted of sitting still on a tiny chair while practicing his “bow hold” on a big pencil, since his hands were still too small to hold a real bow. Six months later, he finally held his first cello and plucked just two strings—A and D—which drew a rousing applause at his debut performance in the JCC Eric Brown Theater.

From that humble first performance, Ian progressed at an unexpected pace. He learned to hold a bow before he learned to write, and read music before he could read words. In the nurturing environment of the JCC Thurnauer School of Music, Ian quickly advanced from a beginner to a winner in local, national and international competitions. Passionate to expand his musical horizons, Ian added piano to his Thurnauer musical curriculum at age five and more recently he added trumpet to the list of instruments he plays.

“The Thurnauer School has offered Ian unlimited performance opportunities, the chance to play with other talented young musicians, and the ability to attend master classes led by some of the finest musicians in the world,” says Ian’s father, Peter. “Ian has received instruction and inspiration from world-renowned cellists such as Colin Carr, Jonathan Spitz, Steven Doane and Bonnie Hampton, as well as pianists Victor Rosenbaum and Boris Berman. These experiences, which he would never have had if he studied music elsewhere, helped shape him into the musician he is.”

“Ian has always been surrounded by music,” adds his mother, Felicia Zekauskas. “While still in his crib, he would listen to his five-year-old brother, working his way through his Suzuki books, from Twinkle to Bach. We knew we eventually wanted to start Ian on an instrument as well, and to avoid sibling competition and comparisons, we decided on the cello.”

Ian has grown up at Thurnauer, participating in music and movement classes, cello groups, chamber music, orchestra, composition, weekly private lessons and even chamber music camps. He has also performed at the school’s annual Gift of Music Benefit concerts, which feature internationally-acclaimed guest artists, who are joined by the school’s most talented musicians.

“Working with Ian is a joy,” says his cello teacher, Madeleine. “He loves his instrument and his accomplishments are the result of his hard work and dedication, the atmosphere for achievement that the music school provides, and the incredible support and encouragement that he receives from his family. It is a pleasure to witness him transition from a talented student to a more mature artist, who is developing his own voice and point of view.”

Just this year, Ian won the New York Chamber Players Concerto Competition, placed first in the American Protégé International Competition of Romantic Music, was the Grand Winner in the National League of Performing Arts Concerto Competition, and was the winner of the Thurnauer Symphony Orchestra Concerto Competition, where he performed Camille Saint-Saens’ Cello Concerto.

“My life would be very different if I didn’t study music,” says Ian. “And if I didn’t study music at the JCC, I would never have gotten to go to music camp or play at Steinway Hall. Music means a lot to me, beginning with the group classes I took at Thurnauer when I was very young. I remember looking at my peers and trying to imitate the ones that did best. It was a great way to learn and experience music.”
Looking for a way to mark a special occasion such as a wedding, anniversary, bar/bat mitzvah, or a birth of a child, or to honor someone’s memory? Make a donation to an individual endowment fund in their honor! All gifts over $18 are recognized with a card to the recipient and listed in this publication. For more info or to make a tribute please contact Fran Koszer at 201.408.1404 or jccotp.org and click “Donate.”

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