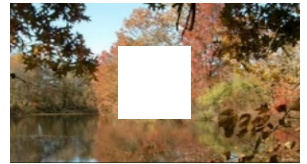




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Old Bridge boy finds keys to success early

Arjun Ayyangar, 10, dazzles with skill on six instruments

BY JESSICA SMITH Staff Writer

From the time he was a toddler, tapping out beats on anything he could get his hands on, to his ability at age 10 to play every national anthem in the world by memory, Arjun Ayyangar has never strayed from his love of music.



"I like music," Arjun said. "It feels good to my ears, and then I started to learn it."

The child prodigy started the learning process at the tender age of 2, when his parents, Vijay and Sudha Ayyangar, gave him a toy piano and a children's book of songs that showed the notes and their corresponding keys. He learned the songs quickly by following along with the book.

"When he was first tapping on objects, we thought, 'Oh, he's going to be a carpenter,'" Vijay said.

JEFF GRANIT staff Arjun Ayyangar, 10, of Old Bridge, demonstrates his ability on the piano, which he has been playing since he was 2 years old.

However, he and Sudha quickly caught on to their son's passion for music, and set up lessons to help foster it.

By the time he was 3, Arjun had taken great strides. Studying under instructor Antonio Gandia, he learned a number of songs, and performed in his first recital at the Old Bridge

Public Library.

Gandia discovered that the youngster had perfect pitch, meaning that he can hear a note played on the keyboard and is immediately able to identify it. As a result, he is able to hear music, and then play it on the piano.

"We are pretty amazed," Vijay said. "It's just ... how quickly he learns, that's what amazes us."



JEFF GRANIT staff Arjun Ayyangar performs at his family's home off Route 34 in Old Bridge last week. The youngster says he frequently composes musical pieces on the piano.

Also amazed by Arjun's abilities, Gandia referred him to Ray Landers, a worldrenowned educator in the Suzuki method, to pursue advanced piano studies. They began working together the following year.

At the age of 4, Arjun was the youngest among a select few chosen to perform in NBC's prime-time series, "America's Most Talented Kid." He left the show as a semifinalist. By the time he was 5, he was performing with the orchestra at the International Music Festival in Ohio, where he continues to play annually. In 2005, he took master classes with Leon Bates, one of the country's leading pianists, at the festival.

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"Sometimes I compose," Arjun said. "Actually, I compose a lot of pieces on piano."

Of the six instruments he plays, piano is Arjun's favorite, he said. Aside from the exceptional musical talent he was born with, a razor-sharp memory also assists Arjun in his instrumental undertakings.

He wowed his parents and others at age 2, when he was able to name every U.S. president, as well as every country in the world, including their flags and capitals. After learning how to play Japan's national anthem for a Japanese television show on which his remarkable memory was to be highlighted, Arjun began learning the anthems of other countries in 2006. He was soon honored in the Limca Book of Records for being able to play those of 109 countries from memory.

Today, Arjun has memorized and can play the national anthems of every country in the world.

"Right now, what he does is, he listens to 20 national anthems every day," Vijay said. "Since he likes music, this was not a big deal for him to just listen to the anthem and play."

Arjun's extraordinary feat won him a feature in the "Ripley's Believe it or Not" comic strip Sept. 17.

Arjun's career highlights thus far have been both numerous and noteworthy. He has performed at venues most adult musicians only dream about. Crowds of thousands watched the small wonder as he tickled the ivories during basketball halftime shows at both Madison Square Garden and the Continental Airlines Arena. He has also performed at the Kimmel Center in Pennsylvania; the War Memorial auditorium in Trenton, during a fundraiser for UNICEF sponsored by Steinway and Sons; Merkin Hall, New York City; German Cultural Center, New York City; and the James Armstrong Theater in Torrance, Calif.

A special honor came in 2005, when Arjun received a standing ovation initiated by the legendary opera diva, Licia Albanese, during a charity benefit concert. He is featured in the Kids Hall of Fame. Along with other television spots, Arjun appeared on Animal Planet's "The Most Extreme: Tough Babies" episode.

"It feels wonderful," Arjun said of his accomplishments and recognition. "Maybe one day I could play Carnegie Hall."

By the looks of things, the young virtuoso's goal is realistic.

While Arjun is quick to say the piano is his favorite instrument, that has not stopped him from learning others. He also plays the harp and organ, as well as the veena and santur, instruments from India, where the family hails from. In addition, Arjun plays the tombak, a Persian drum.

"His love of music is just so strong," Vijay said. "Over the years, it's just grown. We knew that he was capable of doing much more than he's already doing."

Playing the veena, a stringed instrument, came about by Arjun's aunt teaching him a little of what she knows. When the Ayyangars posted a video of Arjun playing it on the YouTube Web site, instructor Gopal Kumar saw it and contacted the family, saying he wanted to teach Arjun. Since then, the two have been meeting once a month in Maryland for lessons.

"When the veena came along, we said, 'Why not branch out to other cultures too?' And that's when the santur came in," Vijay said.

Arjun practices his instruments for an hour and a half each day, something of which he never grows tired, he said. While many children his age might be consumed by things like video games or TV, Arjun has an unending enthusiasm for music.

"Music is on his mind all the time, so he doesn't have to be coaxed into doing it or anything like that," Vijay said. "It's just a natural part of his life."

At the Old Bridge library, where his first piano recital took place, Arjun played his first harp recital Nov. 15. His harp playing also won him a full scholarship to a weeklong camp with the North Jersey Chapter of the American Harp Society this year.

Playing veena, Arjun took home third prize in the intermediate level instrumental division at the Carnatic Music Competition Dec. 6 in Bridgewater. The feat came after only a year of playing the instrument. According to Vijay, it would typically take five or six years of playing to get to that level of skill.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Arjun said he would also like to learn guitar, flute and trumpet.

Music is not the only area in which Arjun is ahead of the curve. In his homeschooling curriculum, he is at seventh grade level in all of his academic subjects except math, his favorite. Following a curriculum from Indiana University for math, Arjun is at a ninth-grade level. Homeschooling not only allows him to learn at his advanced pace, but also permits flexibility for times when a big performance is approaching, Vijay said.

In addition to his regular academic subjects, Arjun is beginning classes to learn Chinese, and he already holds Hindi, Tamil and Urdu under his belt as known foreign languages. He is currently learning Farsi as well.

In his spare time, Arjun has a passion for doing sudoku puzzles, and solving the Rubik's Cube. He also helps his sister Aparna, 6, learn piano and harp. His favorite music is classical, and Haydn is his favorite composer, he said.

Though he is still young, Arjun has a good idea of what he would like to do when he grows up — teach music. While Vijay and Sudha encourage their son's musical dreams, Vijay said it will ultimately be Arjun's choice whether he wants to pursue music as a career.

"I can't see him doing anything else," Vijay said.

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For those who wish to witness Arjun's talents for themselves, there are plenty of upcoming opportunities. On Dec. 18, Arjun will perform on the piano and harp as part of the Junior Volunteer Creative Arts and Healing Program at Atlanticare Regional Medical Center in Pomona.

Arjun will head to Maryland Dec. 20 for a piano and santur performance at the Yalda Festival Celebration, and on the same day, will also play a harp recital in Bridgewater.

On Dec. 21, he will play in a piano students recital in Princeton.

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