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# Questions for Prodigies

By RALPH GARDNER JR



Owen Hoffmann/Patrick McMullan

John Legend, 9-year-old Johnson Zhongxin Li, Lang Lang and a page turner at the Lang Lang and Friends concert.

Are musical prodigies just like normal kids, except that they play the violin or piano better? Or are they basically, well, extraterrestrials? The question occurred to me as I sat at Carnegie Hall on Monday night and listened to a benefit concert for the Lang Lang International Music Foundation. Started by the pianist Lang Lang—while I wasn't sufficiently acquainted with him, a

press release described him as an "international megastar"—its aim is to inspire the next generation of classical-music performers and lovers.

The concert featured Lang Lang and friends—including Joshua Bell, Renee Fleming, John Legend and six child prodigies whose musical studies his foundation is helping to underwrite.

For the record, I wasn't comparing the genius children on stage, whose hometowns include Boston and Shenzhen, China, to my own kids. In fact, I always thought it a waste of time and money when my wife fairly insisted they take piano lessons. She even bought a piano, which didn't do much except make the dining room, where it was situated, feel smaller.

I understand her impulse, though. While their kid may not become the next Lang Lang, what parent would object if their offspring blossomed into a mini-Cole Porter, the most popular guy at cocktail parties, belting out witty tunes as everyone gathers around the piano and marvels.

But I know from my own sobering experience as a piano student that that isn't in the cards for most of us. I'd say safely 99% of the population. I like to blame my ignominious pianistic failure on Miss McMillan, my aged second-grade piano teacher, who had a way of draining all spontaneity and joy from the experience.

But it's basically my own fault for not exhibiting the necessary discipline. Then again, how much hard work and discipline can you expect from a kid after a day at school, soccer practice, etc.?

Especially these days. Isn't the conventional wisdom that attention spans are getting shorter? That kids lose interest in anything that isn't delivered to them in less than 140 characters, or in 3-D?



Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal

Yasiff Francis, 11, performs at Craig Cogut's Park Avenue apartment.

So, as much as I enjoyed the concert, I made it my mission at the gala afterward to talk to a couple of the kids, and, if not with the personable Lang Lang himself (he seemed to have his hands full performing and socializing), perhaps with Joshua Bell, who'd impressed me during a previous encounter as being rather humble and accommodating.

My goal, as I said, was to discover whether these children were strange and will one day crack under the pressure, proving me right in going easy on my own kids and considering the piano a lost cause even before they started. On the other hand, maybe music taught

correctly is the answer—not just to my early question of how I was going to snag my kids a free ride through Princeton, but also to how to make them better, more well-rounded people.

By the way, this wasn't my first encounter with child virtuosos in recent weeks. I also attended a concert at the Park Avenue apartment of Craig Cogut, a philanthropist and chairman of the board of the Polyphony Foundation.

As if it's not challenging enough to learn a musical instrument, the Polyphony Foundation decided to up the ante by helping bring together Jewish and Arab kids to make music in Israel.

The foundation's music programs are based in Nazareth and reach more than 2,000 children. For many of the Jewish kids who study and play there with their Arab counterparts, it's the first time they've ventured into that part of the Galilee.

But to answer your question, or at least mine, the kids I spoke to at both events seemed depressingly bright, well-intentioned and normal. "Kids are artistic," Mr. Bell told me when I wondered aloud whether classical music wasn't in peril in our current cultural fast-food climate. "They're incredibly expressive and imaginative."

But aren't they swimming upstream? Mozart's piano sonata for four hands in D major, one of the pieces performed at Carnegie Hall—two of the hands belonging to Lang Lang, the other two to Johnson Zhongxin Li, a 9-year-old prodigy—simply doesn't translate well onto Twitter.

"That's precisely why we need music taught—it teaches them discipline as well," Mr. Bell insisted. "It's a great vehicle to teach them discipline and teamwork."

The experience of the Polyphony kids seems eloquently to prove Mr. Bell's point: Music appears to be bridging a divide that Jewish and Arab leaders for decades have failed miserably to overcome.

But now a word about Johnson Zhongxin Li: There's no way this kid is for real. Not only does he play the piano with subtlety and panache; he also knows how to schmooze reporters. "I think music is magic," he stated when I got down on my knees on the red carpet to interview him, putting myself at approximately his eye level. "It can get you from sad to happy. Music is my life."

When I was 9, [Nestlé's](#) Crunch bars were my life.

But isn't he destined for disappointment, playing Carnegie Hall at 9? "I like doing sports," he assured me, describing swimming as "relaxing."

More relatable, I found, was 15-year-old Derek Wang, who played two of Brahms's Hungarian Dances at the concert with different partners. He attends high school in Boston but travels to Juilliard on weekends for his musical studies. Mr. Wang said he believes the secret to sustaining his own generation's interest in classical music is to infuse it with showmanship, as Lang Lang does.

To say Lang Lang caresses the keys doesn't do him justice; he also caresses the air. "It's how you sound but also how you look," Mr. Wang explained. "You use whatever material you want to convey the message of the music."

The goals of Lang Lang's foundation and that of Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar, the co-founder and director of Polyphony, aren't dissimilar—to unite the world through music. "Jewish people and Arab people in the Galilee don't interact," Mr. Abboud-Ashkar stated flatly. "But at the same time, you meet someone like Hagit or her parents; there are large numbers of people who want to have

this communication, who want a better relationship with their Jewish neighbors, and Jews with Arabs."

He was referring to Hagit Bar Sella, an 18-year-old Jewish cellist who travels from her kibbutz to play with her Arab peers. She and violinist Yamen Saadi, a 16-year-old Arab boy, played Haydn's Piano Trio No. 39 in Mr. Cogut's living room, accompanied by pianist Ron Trachtman. The two have become good friends. "I really didn't expect it—to feel so connected to him," she said. "I live near a lot of Arab towns and I never get to meet them."

"The first time we brought Arab and Jewish kids in the same room to rehearse it was a very special moment," Mr. Abboud-Ashkar remembered, speaking of June 2011. "Today, it doesn't feel like we're doing something unusual: 'What's the next piece, and how well can we perform it?' That's the unique power of music."

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