

PRODIGIES OF THE PIANO

Two young Katy boys, Arthur Zhou and Bryant Li, are striking a chord in the piano world, even at Carnegie Hall

Written by Marysabel Cardozo

Arthur Zhou, age 6, already has many accomplishments to add to his collection. He's been playing since he was 4 years old after his mom felt he needed to train his fingers. "He dropped everything in his hands. He liked to hold things by grabbing them with his hands instead of picking them up by his fingers," says Helen Zhou. Now, Arthur has won various international competitions for his solo playing and performed at Carnegie Hall.

Bryant Li, age 11, has been playing piano for five-and-a-half years. He has been awarded numerous times for his talent, including first place at the Clear Lake Symphony Youth Concerto Competition and the Rochelle Liebling Kahan Competition for Child Piano Prodigies.

TUNING THEIR TALENT

The talent, though natural, did not happen overnight. Li commits to two hours on weekdays and three hours on weekends. Li's mom, Jenny Guo, also credits the work he's done with his nationally famous piano teacher, John Weems, for his progress. Arthur practices on average 40 minutes per weekday and about two hours on the weekends.

As for what they play, Li enjoys all kinds of classical and modern tunes. These include, Franz Liszt's *The Nightingale*, Chopin's *Black Key Etude*, most of Mozart's sonatas, and Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 16*. Arthur's favorites include Chopin's *Waltz I* and *Waltz II*, which he is currently practicing. "It's a sad story but beautiful," says Arthur.

Six-year-old Arthur Zhou has performed at Carnegie Hall

"It came naturally for me, I think; I can feel the music and have my own story about the music in my head."

- Arthur Zhou, age 6

ENDING COMPETITIONS ON A HIGH NOTE

For Li, the Clear Lake competition holds the most memorable moments since it had a lot of his firsts, including his first piece over 10 minutes and his first concerto, a musical composition for a solo instrument accompanied by an orchestra. “Even though I played my absolute best, there was a slim chance that I would take home a victory,” says Li. He went on to take first place.

Although, Arthur doesn’t remember much of his first competitions, his mother thinks the American Protégé International Piano and Strings competition was the most surprising. The completion, which had about 1,000 participants, was open to school-aged students and adults; all nationalities, countries, and all instruments. A very challenging competition, it was also Arthur’s first. “We just wanted to let him try,” says Helen. “We never expected him to place first in two categories.”

A MOTHER’S SUPPORT IS KEY

Despite his accomplishments, Li admits he’s struggled with nervousness at competitions and just focuses on doing his best. He gets support from his mom, who accompanies him to all his competitions. “There are many talented kids out there, and I always let him know a musical competition is not like science and can be subjective to judges’ opinions. So all he can do is to relax and play his best, and I remind him I’ll always love him no matter what the result turns out to be,” says Guo.

Helen encourages her son to focus on enjoying the moment. She recalls how excited Arthur was when he saw Carnegie Hall. “We were staying across the street from Carnegie Hall and returned for his nap since he was only 5 years old at that time. When walking back to Carnegie Hall, Arthur was so happy and excited with a big smile on his face. For me, his happiness is most important,” says Helen.

Li commits to two hours on weekdays and three hours on weekends to practice the piano



“You can practice six to eight hours but if you don’t truly love what you’re doing, chances are, you’ll never reach your full potential.”

- Bryant Li, age 11

FINDING THEIR FUTURE TEMPO

Li hopes to one day use his musical talents to help patients with diseases related to neuroscience. “Neuroscience is actually pretty close to music, as both deal with interpretation of the brain, and also, music could provide a cure for mentally ill patients. I’m pretty excited about linking the two,” Li says.

As for Arthur, although he may be considered too young to know what he wants, he is set on making New York his future home. His mom says he wants to work on Wall Street and play at Carnegie Hall on the weekends. “I like the style of Carnegie Hall. The piano sounds great and the big crystal lights are cool,” says Arthur. **KM**

MARYSABEL CARDOZO is a UT Austin alum who loves to check in with her hometown.

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