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Music connects two autistic children to the world

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Benjamin, now 8, and a second-grader at Boulder Community School of Integrated Studies and Hannah, 10, a fourth-grader at High Peaks Elementary will perform today in Boulder Youth Symphony Orchestras Season Finale. Benjamin will be playing in the Chamber Orchestra; Hannah will play in the Junior Youth Symphony.

Neither can sustain a meaningful conversation. Like many autistic children, Benjamin likes to ask the same questions and hear the same answers over and over. Hannah likes to repeat what someone tells her.

The two communicate best through their music, their parents say.

"It's the language she understands the best," Paul Rowinski says of Hannah.

Musical bond

On a recent Tuesday, Benjamin and his mother sit side by side at Boulder's First Baptist Church, while Benjamin rehearses with a group of about 25 other musicians for the youth symphony concert. Benjamin's deep blue eyes follow the music — Serenade No. 1 in D Major by Brahms — his eyes lighting up as he looks to the conductor. His mother holds her violin and plays, her eyes fixed on him, whispering directions, helping him to follow the conductor's cues for when it's time to play and when it's time to stop.

"He loves it," Tarasewicz says. "He glows. You can just feel it."

His lips move silently, counting the rhythms. Periodically he shakes his head and scrunches his face, sometimes to the beat of the music. Sometimes he does it three times in a row. His mother taps his head, and he stops for the moment. The ticks are new, not typical of autism.

Benjamin whispers about the time. He's preoccupied with it. Often during breaks he'll check that the church clocks are synchronized. His mother points to the conductor, and he refocuses.

Paige Vickery, Boulder Youth Symphony Orchestras' music director and conductor, says staying on task is a challenge for these kids.

"But that's OK, it's part of his process. I understand the busy mind," says Vickery, who has Tourette Syndrome. The disorder sometimes causes her to jerk her head and blink repetitively.



JONATHAN CASTNER / For the Camera

Music Director and Conductor Paige Vickery says staying on task is a challenge for Hannah and Benjamin.

For the audition, mother and son played the Bach Double Concerto in D Minor. "To watch those two play was very emotional," Vickery says. "They would once in a while make eye contact, and he would smile. He just nailed the music."

When asked if he enjoys playing violin, Benjamin, who plays very advanced pieces of music, answers with great joy,

"Oh, yes!" It's difficult to get him to say much else. But his mother is persistent. She interviews him, patiently asking him questions repeatedly and in different ways focusing on emotional responses. She records his answers in what she calls a diary. It gives her and others personal insight into his world.

"The orchestra sounds chiming — like joy," Benjamin says in the diary from April 5. "It

could be that I'm like an angel playing because it makes love and joy in me."

At the same time, downstairs in the church Hannah Rowinski rehearses Farandole, by Georges Bizet with the Boulder Junior Youth Symphony.

When conductor Emily Bowman stops, all the children except Hannah, run into the hallway for their break. Hannah continues playing. She's smiling.

"It's something she really enjoys and does well," says her mother Carolyn Rowinski, also an accomplished violinist.

Playing the music is no problem for Hannah, who is finishing Book 4 in the Suzuki program, her mother says. But body cues are a challenge. Hannah used to keep playing after the conductor signaled to stop, but now she mostly understands those cues. She also has problems changing seats quickly when the kids in the orchestra rotate parts. It takes her longer to understand what is happening, and she doesn't recognize the need to move quickly.

After the break, Bowman puts her hands up and Hannah independently raises her violin in preparation to play. She plays the whole piece, watching the music and the conductor, sometimes squinting in concentration. Her smile never leaves her face.



JON HATCH / Daily Camera

Malva Tarasewicz checks her son Benjamin's posture as they rehearse the violin.

A long road

Early on, Tarasewicz noticed something seemed wrong with her only child. At 6 months old, Benjamin flapped his hands excitedly. He would periodically tense his whole body, pointing his toes and making little circles.

But she and her son were a close-knit unit: He was the "happiest, sweetest, cuddly baby," Tarasewicz says.

At 14 months, he said his first words: "Book" and "violin." Shortly after, Tarasewicz noticed he wouldn't look at her. By 18 months he fell silent, except for laughing and crying sounds.

"He was disappearing before my eyes," Tarasewicz says.

There were other things. He was easily frustrated. He was acutely sensitive to sound. Once she played a tune on her recorder. He looked at her and screamed, held his ears and shook with fear.

After the diagnosis, Tarasewicz moved from San Diego to Boulder to be close to her family. Her husband, who was in the Navy, stayed in Washington where he was stationed.

Tarasewicz became Benjamin's full-time therapist, using music to get his attention and to facilitate language. To get him to talk, she'd sing. If he repeated the sound, she threw a pillow at him — which he loved — as a reward.

"(Music) is a bond," Tarasewicz says. "We've had this incredible, deep, spiritual bond that goes way back. I feel like I have known him forever. There is a depth of understanding between us that is really unusual. People always comment on it."

When Benjamin was 5, he taught himself to read music and difficult and obscure music theory. She first noticed his musical talent on the piano, before he could talk.

"It wasn't banging, it was music right off," Tarasewicz says. "There was a beauty and a logic to it." She wanted Benjamin to feel music instead of learning it by rote. She started with Kindermusik, a program that stresses moving to music. She would sing, "Benjamin... Come here, We're going for a walk." To get him dressed, she would sing a song about underwear.

"I knew the music would draw his attention because it would draw his heart," Tarasewicz says. "It's natural to him. When it comes to expressing himself in language or drawings, it's really hard work. With music, the impediments are washed away."

He became her star pupil. Because of attention issues, he has many five-minute lessons every day.

"It's not just autism," Tarasewicz says. "It's obsessive compulsive, attention deficit, autism and Tourette (Syndrome). He has to filter through all that to produce (music)."

"It's been a touchstone for him, even when things have been really crummy. The one salvaging grace would be the time we were going to practice."

At home

It's 7:30 a.m. and Paul Rowinski is doing his morning routine, getting Hannah to brush her teeth after breakfast, so they have time for a half-hour lesson before school.

"OK Sweetie," he says, as they begin playing in his home studio.

Father and daughter play Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, a piece for Rowinski's advanced chamber orchestra. He gives her a subtle nod, and they play more softly as the piece requires.

"Good, really, good," Rowinski says. A smile creeps across Hannah's face.

Violin has increased her ability to understand language, because of all of the oral instructions. It also has brought her family closer together. She and her parents often play three parts of a quartet.

Sometimes during the lesson Hannah's father demands she stop playing to get her attention. Other times he asks her to point with her bow to the music to show she understands where they are in the piece. And when she counts too loudly, he tells her to count softly.

Rowinski admits he always has doubted whether Hannah could master each new violin skill. But Hannah eventually progressed faster than most of her peers, despite not only autism, but low muscle tone which makes it more difficult for her to hold up her violin. She can play a song the first time she hears it. She also creates her own songs.

"I know better than anyone how hard the violin is," Rowinski says. "I've always told myself, if she can do this ... what can't she do?"

Rowinski says Hannah's musical talents have impressed her peers and teachers because they know her as someone who's behind at academics and is not coordinated in sports. Then she picks up the violin, and they are amazed.

"She certainly has limitations," Rowinski says. "But this is the one place I don't see limitations. The sky's the limit."

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JON HATCH / Daily Camera

Malva Tarasewicz and her son Benjamin Tarasewicz, 8, play with their cat Mocha during a break from rehearsing violin.