

# Music builds bridges for 10-year-old Dixon trumpet prodigy

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DIXON, Ill. (AP) — Maxwell DeForest's world used to be a lonely place. A 10-year-old prodigy trumpeter from Dixon, his unique talents didn't always lend to a lot of social interaction.

While most of his classmates at St. Anne School in Dixon clutch basketballs and footballs, there isn't another brass buff in sight.

His parents had a hard time finding him a local teacher when he started playing at age 7.

And even when he earned a spot on the Rockford Symphony Youth Orchestra at age 9, about 7 years shy of the ensemble's median age?

"It was very lonely," the soft-spoken savant said. "But then I realized it's kind of fun, being the only one my age."

In his first rehearsal with the group, he dived into "Swan Lake," and ventured into "Academic Festival," both as challenging as they are gorgeous. Maxwell, who'd never followed a director's baton, let alone been part of an ensemble, experienced the sound of 68 musicians, including him, and the camaraderie that can emanate from beautiful music.

He thinks about that day and smiles. His eyes glisten as he talks about the rehearsals that followed, and moments of bonding before those rehearsals, after them, and in between the pieces.

"I started talking to the trumpet players and the trombones," he said. "I made a lot more friends there. I feel good there."

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A talent realized

David DeForest had been burned before. His and Carla's oldest kids, Alex and Elizabeth, gave up on the drums and flute pretty quickly, he said.

"It didn't stick, and they dropped it," David said. "So when Max kept insisting that he wanted to play the trumpet, and Carla bought him one, I figured, 'All right, we'll be dropping this in about 3 months.'"

The first challenge was finding a teacher. After several failed inquiries, a "friend of a friend of a friend" as Carla describes, suggested she ask Jim Green, then the Faith Christian band director and a trumpet player himself.

As Maxwell's lessons lengthened, David was worried he'd get burned out. They started at a half-hour. Then an hour. They ballooned up to 3 hours, and

Maxwell, instead, burned right through the three books in the Essential Elements series.

"Jim said, 'There aren't any more books. I think I'm done,'" Carla said.

So she brought Maxwell to Sterling High School band director Mike McCoy. One listen, and the veteran maestro told Carla to get Maxwell to Rockford.

"I asked him, 'What's in Rockford?' and he told me, 'The Rockford Symphony Youth Orchestra,'" Carla said.

Three days later, with no piece prepared, Maxwell auditioned.

"I think he played 'Danny Boy' or something," Carla said, laughing.

The next day, he got a congratulatory email.

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Meet the brass

The Rockford Symphony Orchestra's principal trumpet, Mark Baldin, took Maxwell on as a student about a year and a half ago. "He really took to Maxwell," Carla said.

"He's kind of become Max's practice buddy," she said. "An ordinary kid who has band at school is able to practice with their peers. He's isolated in his own Maxwell world."

The instruction is invaluable, but so are the laughs.

"After a little bit, we'll just sort of talk about things," Maxwell said. "One time we got talking about what's a good place to live. What states. How expensive they are."

"He comes home with the most off-the-wall stuff," Carla said.

Shortly after beginning his work with Baldin, Maxwell was taken on by another teacher - and a very different one: Mark Ponzio, owner of a doctorate of musical arts degree from the esteemed Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. He also holds a performer's certificate.

While laughs abound with Baldin, it's all business studying under Ponzio. But that works out well for Maxwell, who's all but attached to his trumpet - actually, his six trumpets. He and Baldin frequently chat about their collections, and other trumpets they've got their eyes on.

Each week, Maxwell has one lesson with Baldin and two with Ponzio. With homework waiting at home, he enjoys a baked potato from Arthur's on the way home from DeKalb.

He also is a member of the Rockford Symphony Youth Chamber Orchestra, as well as a sub-ensemble, the brass choir.

"It's hard for a kid his age, but he's a good kid and he's eager to get better," Ponzio said. "We do listening in every lesson, and he wants to sound like the recording. He's very focused for a person his age."

And very destined, Carla said.

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Looking back, forward

Many call music its own language, and Maxwell is fluent in it.

One thing Green did before he stopped giving Maxwell lessons was steer him down the road of composition. They'd spend the last 10 minutes of each lesson working with Finale, a music composition computer program.

So when Maxwell isn't filming himself, analyzing the recording and making corrections, he's writing. It took him 6 months to complete his first work, a brass quintet titled "Silver."

"He'd like to be the next John Williams," Carla said. "He just loves to hear the music."

But before he spoke music so eloquently, Maxwell went through a period in which he was unable to speak - period.

When he was 2, E. coli food contamination damaged his blood vessels and caused significant kidney failure. He was in the hospital, critical at one point, for 3 months while Carla was pregnant with her youngest child, Zachary.

Maxwell had nine surgeries in 3 months and stopped talking altogether. He didn't start talking again until he was 4.

"His first language was sign language," Carla said. "Today, we kind of look at music as, God has a purpose for Max in life."

Whereas Alex and Elizabeth were both athletic, Zachary plays the cello. Maxwell hopes to compose pieces they can enjoy together.

He plays a 4-plus-minute piece, "Andante et Allegro," that he'll use for an audition video for the International Trumpet Guild Junior Competition and the National Trumpet Competition.

It's tough to tell whether Maxwell slips up at all. Not just because his tone is so pure, but because his focus is impenetrable.

Suffice to say, all is wonderful in Maxwell's world.