

# Virtuosos in training

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Eun-Mee Jeong, a 16-year-old high school junior, does not sleep late on Saturday mornings. She rises at 5 a.m., dresses, grabs her violin, heads for the airport and boards a 7 a.m. flight from Chattanooga, Tenn., to Cincinnati. At 10 a.m. she joins other members of the renowned Starling Preparatory String Project for a full day of musical training, rehearsal and practice at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

She arrives back home at 11 that night.

"It's a long weekend, but it's worth it," said Miss Jeong. "It's a very healthy way to be raised if you want to be in music. I love the camaraderie."

Eun-Mee and the 24 other members of the Starling Chamber Orchestra live outside the realm of most adolescents and teens. These young artists have little time for television or chit-chatting on the Internet. The typical Starling performer practices two to three hours a day while shouldering an academic course load that often includes one or more Advanced Placement classes.

"They're kids who have learned to manage their time very well," said Director Kurt Sassmannshaus, founder of the Starling program and conductor of the chamber orchestra. "There's a statistic out there that the average American teenager watches two to three hours of television a day. So if you turn off the box and practice instead, you're done."

The Starling Chamber Orchestra will give its final concert of the 1998-99 season at 7 p.m. Sunday at the Aronoff Center for the Arts. Among the highlights:

Alyssa Park, a Starling alumna and international soloist, will perform Mozart's violin concerto No. 3 in G Major, with Jesus Lopez-Cobes of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra conducting.

Miss Jeong will perform Alan Ridout's "Ferdinand," with narration by Henry Meyer.

Seven-year-old Eric Pan, a member of the Starling Kids program and a second-grader at Vermont Elementary School in Wyoming, will perform the first movement of Vivaldi's Violin Concerto in A Minor.

Ms. Park is a former student of Sassmannshaus (pronounced SZUHS-manns-house). Miss Jeong and Eric are among his current students.

Many of the Starling musicians are already as technically advanced as professionals, and about 75 percent of them will actually become professional musicians. They range in age from 11 to 18 and some already have several concertos in their repertoire. Jessica Park, a 15-year-old freshman at Summit Country Day, has learned the concertos of Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky and is at work on the Brahms concerto.

Most Starling musicians began music at a very young age. Eric Pan, who plays on a child-sized violin, began at 4 and already performs like a veteran. During a rehearsal last Saturday, he breezed through the first movement of his Vivaldi concerto, playing with admirable technique - and by memory.

Afterward, he said he felt comfortable performing. But he added,

"I might get nervous at the Aronoff Center, a crowd standing in front of me."

As inherently bright as Eric is, it is unlikely that his talent would have unfolded as it has without the presence and encouragement of his parents, Yong Pan, a scientist at Procter & Gamble, and Amy Zhang, an information technologist at General Electric. While Eric rehearsed with the orchestra, his father stood off to the side with a metronome, monitoring the tempo.

Eric's parents, who came to the United States from China 13 years ago, make sure that Eric practices an hour a day. Afterward, he receives a coveted reward: a game of chess with his father.

The Starling program always has included a significant percentage of Asians and Asian-Americans. That is more a reflection of family values than a genetic aptitude for music, Sassmannshaus believes.

"To me, it's never a question of heritage or race; it's a question of family priorities and education," he said. "And when a parent practices with a young child regularly for an hour a day, that's almost a definition of talent. Because it happens versus it does not happen. It depends on the family's commitment and the family's willingness to schedule time for the activity and for an adult to supervise."

Although some young children will practice alone, Sassmannshaus said the typical child "will practice in a more concentrated way if the parent can manage to spend an hour a day with the child." An hour a day, he added, "is not that much."

The Starling program, while demanding time, exacts a financial commitment as well. Annual tuition is \$4,800, although most of the students receive some scholarship assistance. The performers

pay some of their travel expenses, including \$500 for the orchestra's upcoming tour of China.

Those who come from out of town also incur travel expenses. Eun-Mee Jeong and her mother, who travel weekly from Chattanooga, maintain an apartment in Clifton in the event they cannot fly home on Saturday night.

Eun-Mee's mother, Kyoung-Hee Jeong, said the family made a commitment to the Starling program after Isaac Stern, the internationally acclaimed violinist, recommended it for Eun-Mee. "We thought we had to do it," Mrs. Jeong said. "We felt we had no choice."

But "the most difficult expense," Sassmannshaus said, is the instrument itself. Starling performers play on instruments valued at \$15,000 to \$100,000 or more.

Starling performers do not see themselves as deprived or overworked. Nor do they appear to be fiercely competitive with each other.

"We learn together and we play together," said Jessica Park. "We get close from tours and traveling together and taking lessons from the same teachers. I have a lot of friends in Starling because we have a lot of the same interests."

Said Eun-Mee Jeong: "We're like one big family. We do everything together on weekends."

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