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Daniel Hsu is the Richard A. Doran Fellow.
PHOTO: CHRIS MCGUIRE

Family Values

HAVING GROWN UP AT CURTIS, DANIEL HSU'S TIME HAS COME.

BY MATTHEW BARKER

“That thing that we can’t name, he has it,” remarks Curtis piano faculty Eleanor Sokoloff of her student Daniel Hsu. For the past eight years she’s helped cultivate Daniel’s “it” factor, which is fast becoming widely known. Last year he was announced as one of two Gilmore Young Artist Award winners (the other was also a Curtis student pianist, Micah McLaurin). He captured the top prize at the 2015 Concert Artists Guild Victor Elmaleh Competition in New York, and then the bronze medal at the Hamamatsu International Piano Competition in Japan. (He was the youngest finalist in both events.) It was a major year that signaled not only the arrival of a significant artist, but also the long-expected fulfillment of potential from a pupil who only recently turned eighteen.

Modest, articulate, and bright, Daniel is also exceptional in coming across as utterly normal. When he’s not probing the depths of late Schubert, he writes and develops computer apps, hangs out with friends, binge-watches TV shows, and explores Philadelphia. His recent accomplishments have done nothing to inflate his ego. This authenticity endeared him to Curtis, and vice versa, from his first visit to the school. “I want to be here,” a ten-year-old Daniel earnestly said to his father in 2008 upon entering the warm environment of the Graffman Common Room. “He was laughing at me because the thought of it was impossible,” recalls Daniel—although the faculty had other ideas. “You could hear, there was a spark,” recalls Mrs. Sokoloff of her soon-to-be pupil’s demeanor and playing.

That year both Daniel and his older brother, Andrew, then just thirteen years old, were accepted and entered Curtis. In 2010 their sister, Ashley, joined them, marking the first time

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Hear and see Daniel Hsu playing Schubert at
www.curtis.edu/CurtisPerforms

WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Daniel Hsu

“First, I think the faculty is unparalleled. Second, it’s a performance experience you can’t find anywhere else. You want to play, you sign up and play. Every single musician here is great. [You’re] swimming in music the entire week, all the time, with all the faculty, and classes, and rehearsals.”

PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA





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since the early 1930s that three siblings attended Curtis concurrently, and the first time in the school's history that all three played the same instrument. The Hsu parents divided their time between northern California and the east coast before settling in Philadelphia to support their gifted children. "I feel very fortunate to have had my family here because, being the age I was, I don't think I could have figured things out," says Daniel. His siblings have now entered graduate programs in New York, but he still sees them several times a month.

Attending a small school with a fluid age range, from single digits up to as high as 30 years old, can be a challenge—academically, musically, and socially. "I don't think I quite understood what was happening, where I was studying, the talent around me, and what was expected of me," recalls Daniel of his earliest years at Curtis. He received private lessons in piano and musical studies, but faced obstacles trying to socialize and express himself. "I observed and learned a lot and maybe didn't know how to apply it in the first couple of years, but now I'm starting to feel more comfortable in myself," he says. "It's different for me now, of course, because everybody is much closer in age to me. There are more friends, and chamber music is more fun."

Violinist Marié Rossano first collaborated with Daniel three years ago, and the two continue to perform together. "We immediately 'clicked', both in the music-making and as friends," says Marié. "There was a depth to his sound and a raw honesty in his music-making, unexplainable in words," she recalls. "I had never heard the energy of a bubbly fifteen-year-old boy so intertwined within an innate musical understanding that isn't usually internalized until adulthood."

NURTURING NATURE

It can take anywhere from five to ten years for pre-teen enrollees to complete their course of study at Curtis, and during that time students like Daniel are encouraged to explore their potential in as many ways as possible. "Being in a place like Curtis, he's among people like him," notes Gary Graffman, Daniel's other piano teacher. "That doesn't exist in many places." Mr. Graffman himself attended Curtis from age seven to seventeen, and along with Mrs. Sokoloff instructs most of the school's younger pianists. They each understand how to cultivate extraordinary gifts in young players. "We are flexible," remarks Mrs. Sokoloff. "We don't put them in a box." Guiding youngsters at that tender age also requires patience, as the students go through a developmentally fragile period in both their personal and artistic lives. Both teachers knew great things were possible for Daniel, but saw a noticeable leap in his playing a few years back. "He was always a big talent," says Mr. Graffman, "and in these past two years he did what would normally [take] four or five years." Mrs. Sokoloff adds, "It was at that point when he turned around and really became something else. He really got serious and the music began to pour out of him."

Daniel's connection to both Mr. Graffman and Mrs. Sokoloff goes beyond the standard student-teacher relationship. "She's like my grandmother," he says of Mrs. Sokoloff, adding that the bond they share truly informs his approach to music. "There's a difference in teaching when you feel like the teacher cares about you and what you are doing, and it's not just your playing but you personally," remarks Daniel. "Because music is so tied to who you are as a person and what's going on in your life, it really makes a big difference." Mrs. Sokoloff agrees. "I give as much time as I can possibly give to him," she says, noting that they often talk about subjects beyond music. "He's got something that very few people have," she says. "I love him, I really do. He has a special place in my heart."

Even after eight years at Curtis, Daniel isn't anxious to move on. "It honestly never crosses my mind, because every lesson is something different and I keep learning." When asked about his graduation plan, he speculates that he might leave in two years—"maybe," he adds demurely. Either way, he wants to make the most of his time at Curtis. "It's very hard to live up to ten years of studying with Mr. Graffman and Mrs. Sokoloff," says Daniel. "I don't know where I'm going to find something comparable. Nothing's going to be close." ♦

Matthew Barker is the director of recitals and master classes at Curtis.

Photos on opposite page (clockwise from top left):

Daniel and his sister, Ashley Hsu PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Daniel practices in the Horszowski Room at Curtis. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Daniel (right) with Ashley and Andrew Hsu, who graduated from Curtis in 2015. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

Sideline in Tech

Like any Curtis piano student, Daniel Hsu spends hours practicing each day. But computer programming has become a big part of his life as well. "It's a very good contrast to music and I enjoy doing it a lot," he notes—quickly adding that music always comes first.

Inspired by the intricate calendar system that governs schedules at Curtis, Daniel connected a couple of years ago with two app developers, and started to learn programming on his own. His most notable app to date allows Curtis students to navigate their complicated lesson and class schedules through their smartphones.

Looking ahead, Daniel believes that understanding technology will help him connect with 21st-century audiences. That interest has also put him behind a video camera for a number of the school's video shoots, guided by Greg Sharrow, who holds the Field/McFadden Chair in Audio Visual Arts. He describes Daniel as "focused, dedicated, imaginative, and passionate" when working behind the camera or in front of it.

—M. B.



Taking a Music and Technology course three years ago, Daniel Hsu learned to capture Curtis performances using the latest broadcast-quality video cameras. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA