

Cultivating Our Next Composers

BY MIKE MCLEOD

A professional orchestra will perform the 2016 National Young Composers Challenge's winning compositions during a special event for the public at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts.

The first time her parents knew that Isabella Dussias had a gift for music was the Christmas when she looked at them and announced: "I can play 'Do You Hear What I Hear?.'" Then she marched over to a piano and performed it flawlessly.

Not bad for a 4 year old.

By the time she was 9, Isabella was not only playing the piano, but also had added the violin, the clarinet and the notoriously difficult French horn to her instrumental repertoire. She was also composing music of her own.

"I remember hearing her play something, classical stuff of some sort," says her father, Peter Dussias. "It sounded to me like Beethoven. I asked her whose music it was. She said, 'Nobody's. I'm just making it up.'"

She still is. At 13, Isabella is one of the winners of the 2016 National Young Composers Challenge. The Hillsboro, New Jersey, protégé will join 10 other winners from all over the country in Orlando on Nov. 13, when they travel to Orlando to hear their winning compositions — hers is a waltz, entitled "Colors of Spring" — rehearsed, then played by a full orchestra in the Walt Disney Theater at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. The winners, ages 13 to 18, also receive a recording and a cash prize, ranging from \$500 to \$1,000.

The annual event, which is free and open to the public, was created in 2005 by Winter Park philanthropist Steve Goldman. A retired, world-recognized pioneer in computer storage technology, Goldman was a composer himself as a teenager, and never forgot either the pleasure of creating music or the loneliness that accompanied it. He wondered if there was a way he could help young people who, like himself, were musically inclined and in need of encouragement and feedback.

"What I realized is that there's a lot of attention in the educational system that goes out to kids who are struggling, and that's important, no question," Goldman says. "But no one was addressing the need at the other end of the spectrum, with these high-func-



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The National Young Composers Challenge is open to young musicians ages 13 to 18 who are U.S. residents.

tioning but isolated kids. It's a national resource that should be cultivated. This is the next generation of great composers."

Selected from more than 80 entries, this year's winners are from all over the United States, from Greenwich, Connecticut, to Huntington Beach, California. All of them submitted both sheet music and computer-generated recordings of their compositions, which were judged by a panel of professional composers.

For most of the winners, it will be their first experience of seeing one of their compositions performed by a professional orchestra, as they sit on stage in a place of honor while former Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra conductor Christopher Wilkins works with various sections of a hand-picked orchestra to refine the compositions.

It's essentially a fantasy camp for the young protégés. It's also an opportunity just as rare for an audience, which gets an insider's view of how an orchestra refines a piece of music — and a chance to see what a national resource that should be cultivated looks like.

The National Young Composers Challenge "Composium" will take place at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts from 12:30 to 5 p.m., Nov. 13. A reception for the young composers will be held afterward in the lobby from 5 to 6 p.m. Both events are free and open to the public. For more information, visit drphillipscenter.org.

Mike McLeod teaches writing at Rollins College and writes about the arts for several publications.