

INTERNATIONAL  
**Herald Tribune**

Singapore piano prodigy, fresh from European tour, starts university, gives hometown recital

**The Associated Press**

Published 20 October 2006

Fourteen-year-old Abigail Sin doesn't so much play the piano as she makes it her own.

When her fingers traipse playfully across octaves, or crash through a boom of chords, her movements are so forceful that she nearly rises to her feet while the keys seem to be an extension of her arms.

Sin returned home this week from a seven-concert European tour and began studies in the bachelor of music program at the National University of Singapore. On Thursday night, she gave her first recital at home in more than two years, to a nearly sold-out audience at the historic Victoria Concert Hall.

"I hope they can hear how I've changed," Sin said a day before the recital, sitting shyly at a cafe in the university cultural center. "I've discovered so many new things and also discovered there is so much more to know."

Sin stumbled across her first piano — "an old, banged-up upright" — in her grandmother's basement at age 4 1/2 and asked for piano lessons soon after. Her parents encouraged, but did not push, her interest.

"We began exploring the musical interests of our children very early," said her father, Sin Lye Kuen. "As their interests took off, we just supported them. If it became a chore, we told them, 'don't do it.'"

Sin's twin brother and their younger brother, 11, do not play an instrument, nor do her parents.

As for Sin, she said she loved the piano from the first moment. She gave her debut solo recital at the age of 9, became a concert soloist at 10, and has performed solo and orchestra concerts in Europe and the United States.

This year, she became the youngest student at NUS's Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, where she entered the bachelor's program on a full scholarship.

Her days now adhere to a schedule that most teenagers would find grueling: she practices at least five hours a day, starting around 7 a.m., and takes courses that include more playing, ear training and musical history. She happily reports that she tested out of music theory this semester.

The long hours and repetitive song practice do not weigh on her.

"I never wake up thinking I don't want to play," Sin said. "I might wake up saying I don't want to practice this particular piece today, but then I can go on to something new, dissect it, tear it apart. I still have so much to learn."

Her teacher for the last two years, renowned American pianist Thomas Hecht, called Sin "a total sponge."

"Her desire to excel and to reach her potential is quite unusual. She has goals clearly in mind; for someone this young to have such a clear vision of what she wants to do as a performer is unique."

While Sin expresses interest in studying abroad after finishing her bachelor's degree and being a successful performer — "She already is!" Hecht says — she also smiles about the book of Ray Bradbury short stories she just finished and the marathon "Lord of the Rings" night she and her brothers have planned.

But it is the remembrance of her European tour that brings a broader smile to her face.

"It was awesome," she said of her time in Germany, Lithuania, Romania and Ukraine, where the local press gave her rave reviews and shouting fans welcomed her at some venues.

After Europe, Sin stopped over in Hong Kong for a concert that was recorded by a radio station there. "That was really cool," the teen said.

Later, in Hecht's office, she transformed into a performer, sitting comfortably at a Steinway piano rehearsing one of the pieces for the next night's recital.

"This is why she's so special," Hecht said as Sin leaned over the keyboard, dark hair in her face, expressively playing Robert Schumann's "Novellette, Op. 21, No. 2." "You don't see that maturity in someone so young."

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