

Musicians in the making



PHOTOS BY DIANE SPERANDIO

Pianist George Li and the Lexington Symphony Orchestra bring classical music to a young audience...

By Jane Whitehead

On the afternoon of Super Bowl Sunday, February 7, Cary Hall vibrated with the sound of trumpets, the clash of cymbals and the thud of basses as Lexington Symphony Orchestra (LSO) hosted its biennial Kids' Workshop and Concert.

The two-part program featured hands-on informal music workshops followed by a child-friendly concert starring Lexington-based pianist George Li. Li, 14, has appeared on PBS's *From the Top* at Carnegie Hall, and performed with major orchestras including the Boston Philharmonic, the Miami Symphony, and on a recent European tour, the Nordic Chamber Orchestra. On the previous night, Li had received a standing ovation from a packed Cary Hall for his performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 in C with the LSO under Music Director Jonathan McPhee.

Before the kids' concert, LSO musicians showed off their instruments, gave impromptu lessons and answered questions from parents and children at workshops on

both levels at Cary Hall. A long line snaked on to the stage, where Minna Abalian, 7, of Lexington, waited for a chance to conduct a string quartet, under the eye of McPhee. Minna plays piano, and "likes to conduct music in the car with a pencil," according to her dad, Varujan Abalian.

Emilie LaPointe, 4, conducted with aplomb before being lifted down from the stage by her mother Ana-Maria LaPointe. Emilie paused in her post-performance twirling long enough to tell a journalist that she has already started violin lessons. If she sticks with it, she will be the sixth generation in her family to play, said her mother, an LSO violinist.

Down in the basement, the air vibrated with the bellows and moans of brass and woodwinds. Getting a sound out of Peter Charig's trombone "made my head feel like it was going to burst," said Kierthan Lathrop, 8, of Carlisle. His sister Annika, 6, who plays piano and said she likes to make up her own



music, was impatient to join the long line to try out the harp. Others had come from further afield: according to violinist Rebecca Hawkins, one family had made the trip from Rindge, NH, attracted by publicity on the LSO website (www.lexingtonsymphony.org).

"We wanted to give our kids more exposure to music," said Sandra Faillace of Lexington. "Let's see how this experiment goes," she added, eyeing her 6-year-old twin

sons Nicolas and Stefano as they took their seats in the balcony for the concert part of the program.

"How many people here are 6?" asked McPhee, stepping up to the microphone to introduce soloist George Li. Many hands shot up. "Mozart was famous at the age of 6," said McPhee. The most prodigious of prodigies played for the crowned heads of Europe on a three-year tour that he began at that age. By 14, Mozart was internationally known as a performer and composer, said McPhee, which makes his music an ideal fit for young stars like Li.

When Li came on stage, a short, stocky figure in a tuxedo, looking even younger than his 14 years, the audience grew quiet and expectant. He played the last movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major with the mature artistry that led the music critic of the Worcester Telegram and Gazette

to call him "a piano virtuoso with a talent and technique somewhat larger than this solar system," after a recent performance of the Saint-Saens Piano Concerto No. 2.

After the performance, McPhee held a short question and answer session with Li. The audience learned that he started playing at age 4 and a half, that he practices three hours a day on schooldays, and seven hours a day on weekends, that he likes to play baseball, and that though he usually enjoys playing, even he hits patches when it's not fun, and that's when he most needs the support of his parents and teachers.

The most talented musicians get stuck at times, said McPhee. Sometimes progress is quick and easy, "but when you hit a plateau, you feel discouraged," he said. At such times, parents need to get involved and be actively encouraging, he said. He also reminded the largely Lexington-based audience that George Li's talent was first nurtured by the stellar Lexington public school elementary music program. "This is what you get," he said, to enthusiastic applause.

Principal LSO violist and Arlington-based music teacher Lisa Kempkie summed up her player's eye-view impressions of the afternoon: "It's exciting to look out and see a sea of kids as young as these," she said. "I see a lot of enthusiasm and curiosity and inspiration." And as Jonathan McPhee pointed out earlier, "music is part of all our lives," and has the power to kindle enthusiasm, curiosity and inspiration in people of all ages.