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Little Bird Music Students to Visit San Francisco Opera

On September 29, Little Bird Music students and their families will experience Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) live at the San Francisco Opera. Singers onstage, accompanied by a full orchestra, will perform the story of Tosca, a beautiful opera singer who becomes lured into the evil web of the Roman police chief, Scarpia. The hero of the opera is the artist-painter Cavaradossi, Tosca's lover, whose imprisonment by Scarpia drives Tosca to perform acts of passion and sacrifice. Listen to Tosca's climactic aria in concert version [here](#).

"The opera house is a magical place," said Alice Cotter, who worked at the San Francisco Opera when she was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley. "You step into the majestic theater and become lost in stunning imagery, sound, and drama. There's nothing like it."

Puccini's orchestral score combines the full symphonic soundscape with "real world" sounds—bells, cannon blasts, liturgical chants—to paint a musical portrait of Rome during the Napoleonic Wars. Each character has his or her own musical signature, called a leitmotif, to help the audience recognize situations and plot development.

The Power of Curiosity

Albert Einstein spoke often about curiosity. "The important thing is to not stop asking questions," he said. "One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day."

Learning an instrument is hard. It requires endless hours of work to refine skills, to learn to listen and play with expression. And that can be frustrating, especially since we live in a culture that often emphasizes immediate gratification.

But if we learn to ask questions (why does this piece of music give me goosebumps?) and to tackle problems with curiosity (I keep tripping up there...I wonder why the melody goes up instead of down), we open ourselves to a creative process that is uniquely our own.

It can take months or years to conquer a difficult piece, but if we approach it with curiosity, it becomes possible to transform frustration into meaningful and joyful learning.

Scarpia's theme, for instance, has three ominous chords (B-flat, A-flat, and E) that return throughout the opera to mark his villainous presence in different contexts. The orchestra provides the emotional backdrop for the characters whose songs arise seamlessly out of the surrounding orchestral texture, then disappear back into it.

Another Little Bird field trip to San Francisco, likely to Davies Symphony Hall, is in the works for the spring.



Little Bird Student Profile

Michael Sullivan, age 77, started playing the piano eight months ago. He is an avid skier, hiker, golfer, and world traveler. Below he reflects on learning a new instrument and his love of music.

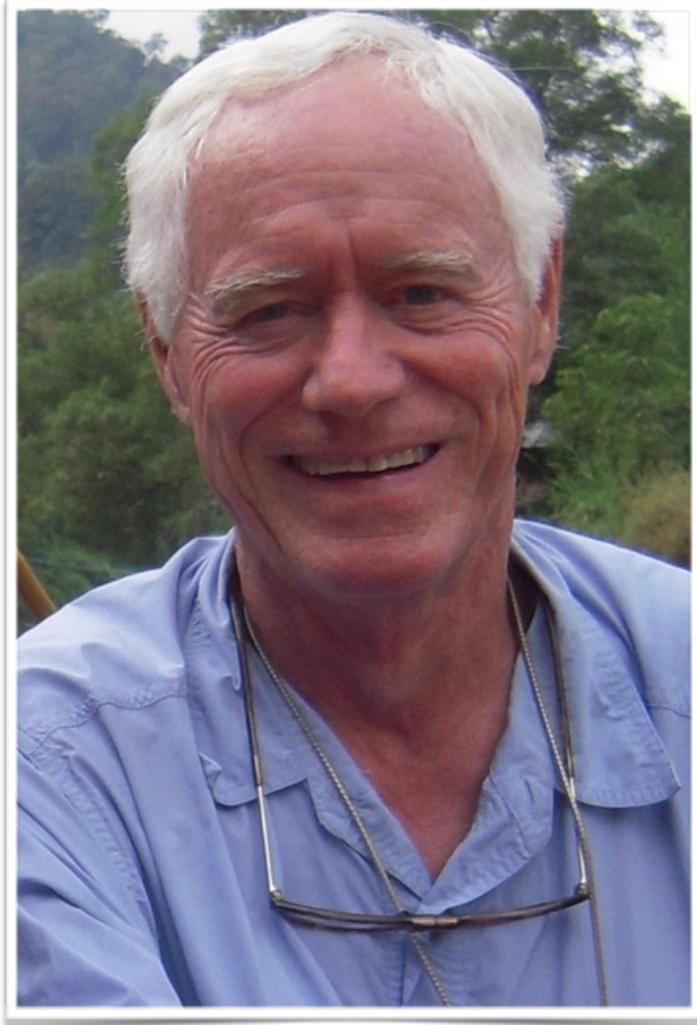
As a child, I always wanted to play piano but the cost was prohibitive for my family. In high school, I was recruited to play stand-up bass in the orchestra, I think because no one else wanted to do it. I had to memorize all the pieces because I never learned to read music.

In January of this year, I had the wild idea that the time was right to learn to play the piano. To my delight, I discovered Little Bird, and when Alice told me it takes ten years to play well, it confirmed my timing. If I am going to entertain the "Old-Folks" home by the time I'm ninety, I had better start now. (Actually, I have twelve years to learn.)

I don't have room for a piano, but nowadays electronic keyboards put out an acceptable sound, and the key pressure mimics the real thing. Alice was wonderful at showing me the basics, and she started me off with a simplified version of Beethoven's für Elise. I'm more of a jazz fan, but I like almost any kind of music, and the fact that I was familiar with the piece made it more fun because I knew what it was supposed to sound like.

While playing is an exercise in muscle memory, reading music is another matter. Finding middle C was easy, and I could play by the note names, but translating the staff to the keys was another matter. However, since in my life I have learned the Roman, Greek, Cyrillic and Katakana alphabets and at one time knew Morse code, I thought how hard can this be? Like the others, it's a matter of repetition, and since music is itself the universal language, learning this is worth the effort.

My keyboard is in a place that I walk past several times a day. It's like a magnet that draws me to it for 15 to 45 minutes each day. I practice scales and play the four simplified pieces that Alice has



Michael Sullivan on an adventure in Thailand.

Sullivan cont'd:

suggested, each time trying to remember the keystrokes without looking at the music and trying to “put more expression” into the play. I also bought a book of Beatles songs, as I am more familiar with them than the classical pieces. (Although I love Dvořák’s New World Symphony Theme.)

Learning to play piano has made me appreciate music even more, as I am now listening differently. When my hero Miles Davis goes into “his zone,” I listen with fascination to his structures and moves while still enjoying the music as I always have. I’m sure I’ll never play that unconsciously, but I know I will always enjoy whatever level I achieve.

—Michael Sullivan, August 2018

Upcoming Events

Mark your calendars! Below are just a few of the many cultural happenings in our area this fall:

Saturday, September 22 at 8:00pm

Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis at the Mondavi Center, UC Davis

Saturday, October 13 at 7:30pm and Sunday, October 14 at 2:00pm

Reno Chamber Orchestra: Scriabin’s Piano Concerto, Sibelius’ Symphony No. 5 at Nightingale Hall, UNR

Tuesday, November 6 at 7:30pm

Nobuntu, a quintet of female Zimbabwean singers, at Nightingale Hall, UNR

Saturday, November 17 at 4:30pm

Little Bird Music Recital at Truckee High School

Tuesday, November 27 at 7:00pm

Reno Youth Symphony Orchestra Fall Showcase featuring Little Bird students Jordy Guldman and Samantha Osborne at the Pioneer Center, Reno

Saturday, December 8 at 7:00pm and Sunday, December 9 at 2pm

Truckee Tahoe Community Chorus Holiday Concert at the Resort at Squaw Creek



“I like how you have to work at it to get to higher levels. Harder songs are way more fun to play.”

—Ella Nishimori, almost 9



“I really like playing power chords on the piano. They make me feel strong!”

—Carson Dubansky, age 5 1/2



“I love playing songs by Adele. I’m proud of myself for learning music I love.”

—Coco O’Dell, age 8