

Young Musical Prodigies Share Talents with Seniors and More

By Vanessa Orr

If you were only listening and not watching them perform live, you would think that you were hearing musically gifted adults who had devoted years of their lives to mastering the piano and guitar. While this would be impressive enough, the fact that both performers are only 14 is even more remarkable.

Twin brothers Ariel and Ben Chamis have been playing instruments since an early age; Ben since the age of 4, when he began playing piano by ear, and Ariel, who started guitar lessons at age 6. It's not surprising that they felt drawn to music—their father, Flavio, is a composer, musical event producer and former conductor, and also a Latin Grammy-nominated artist. Their mother, Tatjana, is the associate principal viola for the Pittsburgh Symphony, and their sister, Fabiana, also played viola after first starting with the piano.

"They really grew up with music everywhere," said Flavio Chamis, who serves as their 'manager,' adding laughingly that he also acts as roadie, copy boy and driver. "It's just one of our things."

Ben, the younger of the twins by 13 minutes, prefers playing jazz and Brazilian Bossa Nova music, though he is also classically trained. "I can play classical music, but it's not as fun as jazz," he said.

Ariel also prefers jazz and plays in a rock band called FeedBack with three friends.

Both boys, who are in the ninth grade at North Allegheny, sing in the ninth grade choir and honors chamber choir, and Ben often accompanies the choirs on piano. Outside of music, Ben plays ultimate Frisbee, soccer and basketball, and Ariel plays soccer, basketball and runs cross-country.

Both boys are seasoned performers, having played at the Latin American Festival at the University of Pittsburgh for the past four years, as well as at the William Penn, Shady Side Academy, Carnegie Library and at a couple of solo concerts at the Christine Frechard Art Gallery in Squirrel Hill. They have performed for



Ben and Ariel Chamis

audiences of up to 600 people, as well as on TV Cultura, the Brazilian equivalent of PBS.

"We're both usually nervous at first, but once we get into it, we calm down," said Ariel, adding that it takes about 10 minutes before the calm sets in. In addition to playing, the boys also talk about the songs and composers, developing public speaking skills that their father believes will be an asset later in life.

For the past few months, the twins have been playing at local nursing homes and retirement homes as part of their Bar Mitzvah project. "We get a lot of positive reactions and comments," said Ben. "Older people are really touched by the music; it's familiar to them. And most have never heard it played by young kids, so they think it's cute. Some sing along to *Girl from Ipanema*; and some even cry. It makes us happy when it makes them feel good."

"They usually ask us how old we are, and some try to push tips into our hands," added Ariel of the free performances. "And they thank us. A lot."

When Flavio first calls the facilities, he doesn't get quite the same reaction. "When I tell them that the boys would like to come and play, they think that it's going to be little kids going plink, plink, plink on a piano," he laughed. "Then I send them the videos, and they invariably call back." After performing, the boys are always asked to return as well.

To prepare for their concerts, Ariel and Ben practice about a half hour per day, six days a week. They also study with numerous instructors in classical, jazz and rock music, as well as Skype with their Brazilian teacher, who provided them instruction when they lived in Brazil for a year as part of their parents' sabbatical.

"I don't like practicing; but it feels good after the performance," Ben said.

As for the future, while neither boy wants to become a professional musician, they are not ready to put the instruments away just yet. "I may play for a couple more years, but I don't think that I'll have time for it in high school or college," said Ben, who wants to go into the nutrition field. "It's not a part of my plan."

"I'll probably keep playing electric guitar for fun," added Ariel, who wants to focus on a career in medicine.

According to Flavio, the decision is up to them. "Music is mandatory for now, but it's no problem if they don't want to go on to play," he said. "They'll do well in whatever they choose to do." ■

To watch the boys in action, visit us online at www.northhillsmnthly.com for links to past performances. To learn more, visit www.facebook.com/ArielandBen or email arielandben2016@gmail.com.

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