

# THE DAILY TIMES

FARMINGTON NEW MEXICO

## Farmington boy one of the best young pianists in the world

— By Alysa Landry — The Daily Times

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FARMINGTON — Gregory Martin's long white fingers danced over the keys of a grand piano Wednesday, alternately caressing and hammering the keys, coaxing or demanding each chord.

His body, sternly aligned, swayed steadily forward and backward, his eyes focused first on the black and white keyboard, then turned softly inward. He played for a tiny audience at home this week, a relaxed recreation of his performance in November that earned a top title among pianists.

The contest, which drew instrumentalists from all over the world, honored some of the best musicians on strings, piano and woodwinds. All competitors were age 14 or younger.

"I did good," Gregory said with a grin after performing an etude by Alexander Scriabin.

An only child, Gregory practices the piano for at least three hours per day, filling his family's house on Fawn Drive with haunting classical melodies and ebullient contemporary pieces.

From his perch on a cushioned piano bench in the family's living room, Gregory talked Wednesday about music and his philosophies about life, balancing the thin line between serious musician and affable child.

His voice and mannerisms are at once articulate yet boyish; his feet, clad in red-, white and blue-striped socks, dangled inches above a plush rug.

"I like music because it lifts everyone's souls," he said. "I also read somewhere that it makes you smarter."

Martin began improvising melodies on the piano as soon as he could sit on the bench, he said. His mother, Svetlana Martin, teaches music at San Juan College and gives private lessons in her home.

Gregory started pestering his mother for lessons long before she thought he was ready, Svetlana said.

"I kept telling him to wait until he was 6," she said. "Finally, I had to start teaching him when he was 4."

Gregory said he was envious of the students who frequented the family's home and he couldn't wait to start learning for himself.

"I would look at the students and say, I want to do that," he said. "I could see that it changed people's souls."

Gregory went on to take piano lessons from other area teachers, including family friend Natalia Kruse, but his mother, a Moscow native and accomplished musician herself, always was in the background, listening to her son play and becoming something of a muse.

Ten years and nearly 10,000 hours of practice later, Gregory earned a solid token of his passion and dedication to the piano. He returned from Moscow with a bronze nutcracker and recognition as the third-best young pianist in the world.

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First- and second-place prizes went, respectively, to Russia and Austria, according to data provided by VGTRK, the Russian television and radio company that hosted the contest.

The competition pits the best young musicians against each other in four separate contests. The first round consists of recorded performances sent via DVD to the judges, who select 16 contestants per category: piano, strings and woodwinds.

The 48 musicians invited to compete in Russia then progress through two rounds of solo performances. Finalists perform with a full orchestra.

"It was a very hard competition, especially on the piano," Svetlana said. "There were lots of cameras on him, lots of broadcasting and interviewing."

Gregory said the contest was a good experience in more than public performance. He had to exhibit a range of skills on the piano, from slow pieces to fast ones, and the ability to play with an orchestra.

The musician practiced his songs ahead of time, however, by playing three times during the fall with the San Juan College orchestra.

"You just learn not to be nervous," he said. "Before getting on stage, I get nervous, but when I get up there, it goes away. You step on the stage and you just know what you're doing."

Musicians also are expected to play by memory, he said, a skill he demonstrates as often as possible at home by folding the music and seeing the daunting black clusters of notes only in his head.

"If you put the music up, even though it's the same

old piece, you'll forget it by memory," he said. "Competition requires you to play it by memory, so that's how I practice it."

Svetlana attributes her son's ease on the stage to the hours he practices at home.

"We were very happy," she said of the competition. "He played extremely well and he deserved it."

Gregory has aspirations to be a concert pianist and possibly conduct an orchestra. If he has time, he said he also wants to compose music.

When he isn't practicing, performing or talking technically about the piano, Gregory studies for his home school lessons and plays soccer with the competitive club Venom.

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Watch him play

See Gregory Martin perform at noon Thursday at the Rotary Club of Farmington's meeting at the San Juan Country Club.