

MIND, MUSIC, MYSTERY

An autistic Bellevue girl's talent underscores the intricate dance among melody, harmony and the brain.

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Busy holiday shoppers mostly ignored the young piano students performing at the Baker's Supermarket in Bellevue last month. But few could overlook Celeste Pierre.

While the other students from Bellevue piano teacher Janita Pavelka's studio seemed nervous and fidgety, Celeste exuded confidence and charisma.

A vibrant natural musician, she happily tossed off her little songs, playing with some polish and a whole lot of feeling. Her memorable rendition of "Danny Boy," with its sweet sentiment, forced shoppers to pause. They smiled, applauded and gave the Bellevue seventh-grader thumbs up.

It was deserved recognition. Yet the real wonder of her accomplishment was apparent only when she stopped playing.

At the end of her set, Celeste seemed oblivious to the applause. People offered compliments, but instead of acknowledging them she merely repeated their words. "Good work, good work" and "Nice job, nice job." She never made eye contact.

Celeste has a form of autism called "pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified." The condition has seriously impaired her ability to communicate. Last year, however, she discovered another form of language—music.

"Because of her autistic traits, Celeste has a hard time expressing herself in words," said Deanna Pierre, Celeste's mother. "But she has no trouble expressing herself at the piano. She can really make the instrument talk, make it sing."

Exactly how Celeste is able to play her music is something of a mystery.

Scientists know some basic facts about autism — that it impedes speech, that it is most likely inherited and that it is frightfully common. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in every 150 children

See Celeste: Page 2



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Above, Celeste Pierre, 13, plays for shoppers at Baker's Supermarket in Bellevue as part of the Salvation Army's annual fundraising. Below, Celeste and her piano teacher, Janita Pavelka, kid around after a lesson.



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WHAT IS AUTISM?

A brain developmental disorder that impairs communication and social interaction. Often, people with this disorder engage in certain repetitive behaviors—a classic example is a child incessantly spinning the wheels of a toy car.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in 150 American children may have some kind of autism spectrum disorder.

As many as 1,600 Nebraska children between the ages of 1 and 9 may have some kind of autism, according to the Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Celeste: Music frees autistic girl's beautiful soul

Continued from Page 1

in America may suffer from some sort of autism spectrum disorder. In Nebraska, as many as 1,600 youngsters between the ages of 1 and 9 may have some form of it.

But experts still don't understand the subtleties and specifics of how the autistic brain works.

"The autism spectrum has an incredibly wide range of skill levels," said Wayne Fisher, a psychologist and director of the Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. "We know that there are some people with autism who have exceptional memories. Some are good at math, and some are gifted at music. We just can't tell you why they have these abilities."

Celeste's parents are equally at a loss to explain their daughter's gifts, especially since she showed few signs of musical talent in early childhood.

Born in Ohio in 1994, Celeste spent the first half of her life moving from place to place as an Air Force brat — her father, Lloyd, retires from the service this week after 20 years as a doctor and flight surgeon. Celeste moved to Germany not long after her first birthday. About a year later she was diagnosed with autism.

"At first we just thought she was going to be a late speaker," said Deanna, her mother. "But in the end her speech just never came."

The family returned to the states when Celeste was 4, lived in Bellevue for a few years and then moved to Utah. While there, Deanna decided to enroll Celeste in Suzuki piano lessons.

Suzuki emphasizes ear playing and technical polish at first, with students learning to read music later. But Celeste, who was about 9 at the time, couldn't adjust to Suzuki.

"The Suzuki teacher said, 'I can't teach her because she can't follow instructions,'" Deanna said. "So I thought that was it for piano."

But in 2004, the Pierre family — Celeste is the second of five children — moved from Utah back to Bellevue, and it wasn't long after that that Celeste began showing sure signs of creative talent. At 10 she began using the computer to draw cartoonlike pictures. She has since used these imaginative renderings to create a storybook journal.

Then she discovered her true



Piano teacher Janita Pavelka, left, works with Celeste Pierre on keyboard technique.

JAMES R. BURNETT
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gift for piano.

About a year ago, Deanna heard about Pavelka, who was using an unorthodox teaching approach. Her method, which was first developed in Australia, is similar to Suzuki in that it delays note reading.

But the Australian method — "Simply Music" — takes a visual approach, rejecting Suzuki's emphasis on technical polish. Students learn the keyboard by visualizing shapes, patterns and sequences.

Celeste, who had already shown a gift for the visual arts, grasped that method.

"The problem with traditional piano methods is that they require students to process too much information at once," Pavelka said. "They're trying to focus on notation, rhythm, dynamics and technique all at once, and their brains are like pinball machines at tilt. With 'Simply Music' we're focusing on just one thing, which is playing."

Neil Moore, the Australian who invented the "Simply Music" approach, said he didn't create his method with autistic people in mind. But he thinks he knows why it might work for some autistic musicians.

"Traditional music education is very analytical and left-brain oriented, so it emphasizes such things as reading and note values," said Moore, who now lives in California. "My method moves music education to the right hemisphere of the brain, to the creative side where I think music really belongs. In the very least, it opens music up to people like Celeste, whose natural strengths may be more right-brain oriented."

Though perhaps it's too early to say, Celeste's family and teachers think the pianist's recent and intense right-brain activities may be having a positive impact on her left brain's wiring.

By all accounts, she's thriving

at Bellevue Mission Middle School, where she receives special assistance in such subjects as math, reading and history. She's doing especially well in band.

"Because of her piano playing, Celeste was able to pick up some pretty complicated percussion instruments like the xylophone right way," says Mark Benson, Celeste's band director. "She's a real credit to our group and our school."

Deanna and her husband are glad — and relieved — to hear that. Early on, the couple decided to send Celeste to a traditional school instead of pursuing specialized therapy at home.

"It was the right decision, and now whenever I ask her whether she prefers being at home or school, she always says school," said Deanna, who home schools her other children.

Celeste also flourishes at home. She enjoys riding her bike and goes skating with her family. And she's become increasingly self-sufficient — she now makes her own oatmeal for breakfast.

"Just recently she's started coming downstairs in the morning and will look me in the eye and say, 'Hi, Dad,'" Lloyd Pierre said. "It may just be a coincidence, but before the piano she never used to do that."

Above all, Celeste loves her piano. She received a new Yamaha electric piano for Christmas, and she now spends two or three hours a day playing it.

Her hard work and love of music were apparent at a recent lesson.

Seated at the piano, Celeste effortlessly played her easy student pieces in various classical, jazz, blues and contemporary styles. She often sings as she performs — she has a very soft, sweet voice. And she has a natural finger technique, which allows her to play with facility.

Celeste is still far from a per-

Noted people with autism spectrum disorders

Temple Grandin, author and champion of humane livestock practices.

Vernon Smith, Nobel laureate in economics.

Craig Nicholls, frontman of the Australian garage rock band the Vines.

Heather Kuzmich, fashion model and contestant on reality show "America's Next Top Model."

Richard Borcherds, British mathematician and winner of the Fields Medal.

Tim Page, Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic and author of more than a dozen books.

Jason McElwain, high school basketball player.

Peter Howson, British painter.

Alonzo Clemons, American clay sculptor.

Luke Jackson, author of books about Asperger's syndrome.

Historical figures speculated to have had autism

Albert Einstein, physicist; Glenn Gould, Canadian pianist and famed Bach interpreter; Hans Christian Andersen, author; Bela Bartok, 20th century Hungarian composer; Charles Darwin, naturalist associated with the theory of evolution; James Joyce, author of "Ulysses"; Wolfgang Mozart, 18th century Austrian composer; George Orwell, author; Andy Warhol, American visual artist; W.B. Yeats, poet and dramatist.

fect pianist, since among other things she tends to drench her playing with too much sustaining pedal. When corrected, she exclaims, "Details, details!"

"She's definitely got that seventh-grade teenage attitude," Pavelka said.

Still, Celeste has a remarkable ear, which she readily demonstrated by transposing some of her songs from major to minor.

"I had no idea she could do that," said Lloyd.

Celeste's mother, however, was less surprised.

"For the longest time, Celeste's true personality seemed to be locked up inside of her," she said. "Now it's coming out, and thanks to the piano we see that Celeste's true personality boasts a beautiful soul."