

Virtuous Virtuoso

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BY Simone Ellin

Piano prodigy to open Gordon Center's 19th Season

Ethan Bortnick is short in stature, but tall on talent. The 12-year-old musician will wow audiences at the Gordon Center For Performing Arts, when he opens the venue's fall 2013 season — its 19th — on Oct. 12. Although his father and manager, Gene Bortnick, said the family doesn't think of Ethan as a prodigy, he admits that he and his wife, Hannah Bortnick, both Ukrainian immigrants, are "beyond overwhelmed" by what their son can do.

"When I was 3 years old," Ethan said, "I asked my parents for piano lessons." Since he was still a preschooler, the Bortnicks didn't arrange for lessons, but instead purchased a toy piano for Ethan. They soon realized that when it came to the piano, Ethan was no ordinary 3-year-old, as he was able to reproduce every melody he heard. His first piano teacher declared after only two months that Ethan needed a more advanced instructor. By the time he was 6, he was performing on "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno.

"When the producer from Jay Leno called, my father hung up on her, because he thought it was his sister pranking him," said Ethan. "Then she called back and said, 'It's really us.'"

Since then, Ethan has traveled the world, sharing stages, recording studios and television production sets with celebrities such as Barbra Streisand, the Black Eyed Peas, Justin Bieber, Tony Bennett, Beyoncé and Elton John. He even composed and performed a song for Muhammad Ali. In 2010, Ethan became the youngest musician to create and host his own award-winning, nationally televised concert special on PBS. Ethan holds a Guinness World Record for being the youngest musician to host a solo concert tour. He twice has appeared on "Oprah," where he was named one of Oprah's All-Time Smartest, Most Talented Kids, and he recently completed shooting of a full-length film, "Anything is Possible." Not only does Ethan headline the movie, which costars Lacey Chabert and Jonathan Bennett, he also co-wrote all the songs and scored the background music. A holiday-themed story, "Anything is Possible," is scheduled for release in December.

When Ethan and his family aren't traveling, they make their home in Hollywood, Fla. There, Ethan attends seventh grade and plays sports with his brother and friends.

"I'm just a regular kid," he insisted. "Even seconds before I go on stage I'm playing with my father's [Nintendo] DSi."

While on the road, Ethan attends classes virtually by skyping into his classrooms.

Although he hobnobs with all sorts of celebrities — even interviewing the notoriously interview-shy Celine Dion on his PBS show — Ethan denies having a favorite A-lister.

"They are all very nice people," he said.

Ethan is equally diplomatic when it comes to music genres and academic subjects.

"I like them all," he said.

Ethan is not only a remarkable talent, he is also a true mensch. When he was 5, Ethan's younger brother, Nathan, was born with a serious heart defect. His brother's medical challenges have inspired Ethan to help others in difficult circumstances.



Ethan Bortnick has traveled the world. He will be at the Gordon Center next month.

“I remember he [Nathan] was sent by helicopter to a hospital, and when I visited him, I saw other kids suffering and it made me feel bad,” he recalled. “Based on my experiences traveling, I see how a lot of people aren’t as fortunate as others. It’s really important to help as many as we can.”

So far, the young artist has helped to raise more than \$30 million for a variety of organizations including Miami Children’s Hospital, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the Starkey Hearing Foundation, ONEXONE and Children’s Miracle Network Hospitals.

For tickets to see Ethan Bortnick in concert on Saturday, Oct. 12, at 8:30 p.m., visit gordoncenter.com or call 1-800-518-2819.

More Music at the Gordon Center

This fall, the Gordon Center also will present bluegrass group Seldom Scene on Nov. 2 and Israeli recording star David Broza on Nov. 21. On Oct. 20, award-winning performer and music educator ShirLaLa will play rock and roll for Baltimore’s youngest music fans, and just in time for Chanukah on Dec. 1, children can rock out to The Mama Doni Band.

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