

Musical prodigy highlights convention convened to explore rare syndrome

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BLOOMINGTON, Minn. (AP) - By all accounts, Alec Sweazy is an extraordinary pianist and an impressive accordion player as well.

The 13-year-old can play Rachmaninoff, but he still can't read music.

His mother, Lori Sweazy of Minnetonka, noticed his talent when he was 3 months old and he suddenly mimicked one of the notes she was playing on the piano. She played it again, and he mimicked it again.

"I just got chills," she said.

She learned about his talent well before learning that he suffered from a rare medical disability.

Some believe that Alex's talent is a legacy of a curious disorder called Williams Syndrome, a genetic ailment that carries some heartbreaking traits - low IQ, learning disabilities, health problems - and some joyous ones as well - outgoing personalities and a gift for language, and perhaps, music.

This week, Alec is Exhibit A at the annual convention here of the Williams Syndrome Association. It brings together scientists and parents to explore the apparent link between music and this rare condition. And Alec will be featured both as a subject in a new research study and a featured player at the convention's talent show Saturday night.

To many, he is a prodigy who shows just how much some people with the syndrome can accomplish.

"They have a musical intelligence we are just beginning to unlock," said Howard Lenhoff, a California researcher whose 43-year-old daughter, Gloria, can barely add, but can sing in 25 languages.

"Most of them can't make change from a dollar," Lenhoff said. "The fact that we have winners in this population is phenomenal."

People with Williams aren't like the autistic children who can play music but withdraw from the world. In fact, they thrive in social settings.

Many parents of children with Williams syndrome, which occurs in about 1 in 20,000 births, or about 12,000 Americans, have long suspected that their kids had a special knack for music. But there was little scientific evidence to back up their claims. So in the past few years, scientists have started studying their reactions to music, rhythm, singing, dancing and harmony.

So far they've found that many - though not all - have a special bond to music, if not an outright talent.

To watch Alec play the piano is to witness something extraordinary. He can hear a simple melody once and play it from memory. Or he'll work for months on a Rachmaninoff piece and suddenly vary the mood, the timing and nuance - without even realizing it.

"The way he interprets music is really extraordinary," said his piano teacher, Joanne Scully.

At her home last week, he rehearsed "L'Orage" (The Storm) by Friedrich Burmuller, a moody piece made even more haunting by his touch. It's the song he'll play Saturday.

"You know, every time I hear this piece it changes," Scully told him. "A lot of the things you're doing right now I like better. You're not changing on purpose, are you?" He shook his head. "Good work," she said, slapping his hands, and he laughed uproariously.

Scientists believe Williams syndrome is caused, at least in part, by a missing or defective gene, which is somehow responsible for the strange mix of symptoms.

Like Alec, people with it often have a telltale set of "pixielike" facial features, such as upturned nose, puffy eyes, wide mouth and small chin. They're also prone to developmental and health problems, such as IQs in the 60s or 70s, kidney problems, hernias and cardiovascular disorders.

Alec, however, is at the high end academically, his mother said. He'll enter the eighth grade this fall at Hopkins' North Junior High School, where he's been mainstreamed.

But he shares one of the most intriguing traits of the syndrome: an endearing personality. Williams kids can be charming to a fault; they love flowery language and are extremely polite.

"You can't teach them not to talk to strangers," said Ursula Bellugi, a neuroscientist at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif.

Right now, Lehoff and other researchers concede, there's no hard proof that innate musical talent is part of Williams syndrome.

"People ask us, 'Are they musical geniuses?' They're thinking of the 'Rainman' movie," said **Daniel Levitin**, a Stanford University music scholar. "There's no evidence they're musical geniuses."

If Alec has given much thought to a future in music, it doesn't show. His goal in life? "Maybe be a train operator," he said. "Or maybe a pizza place owner."

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