

FILM

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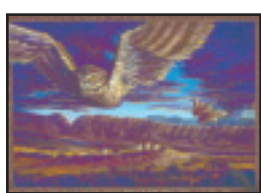
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UTAH LIVING

The Salt Lake Tribune

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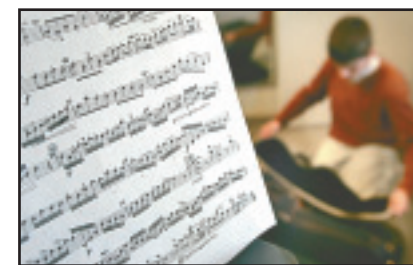
SUNDAY
FEBRUARY 19, 2006

THE ARTS

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TRIALS OF A PRODIGY



Four solo appearances with the Utah Symphony. Weekly trips to Los Angeles to study under a world-renowned instructor, at one of America's foremost conservatories. Frequent, painful finger pricks to keep tabs on his diabetes. Yet Will Hagen, 13, insists: "I'm not like a geek or anything."

By JENNIFER BARRETT
The Salt Lake Tribune

Will Hagen strides onto the stage at Abravanel Hall, every bit as confident and cool as the professional musicians seated behind him. He wedges a violin under his chin and, with a nod to the conductor, he's ready to rip. His bow jolts into action, moving in fierce arcs and ricocheting off the strings.

It's the Utah Symphony's annual Halloween concert, and Will is dressed as a cowboy from the old Southwest for his performance of the fiery "Danse espagnole." The audience loves the spectacle, erupting in cheers. Will bows and then snatches the 10-gallon sombrero from his head, flinging it into the crowd. It's a showy gesture not often seen on the staid concert stage, but Will is not your average performer.

Will Hagen is a prodigy. At age 13, he has already made four solo appearances with the Utah Symphony and this summer he will headline at the Deer Valley Music Festival with conductor Keith Lockhart. Every Thursday, See TRIALS OF A PRODIGY, D10



PHOTOS BY J. EMILIO FLORES

Inside

● Another violin prodigy plays in Utah this week. See Page D6

Will Hagen, 13, above, performs in front of college-aged students at the Colburn School, a music conservatory in Los Angeles. Will, top left, checks his blood sugar level after his performance. The young violinist, top right, prepares for his return flight to Utah.

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Illustration: Trent O'Hara, Covert

• Continued from D1

he flies to Los Angeles for lessons with one of the finest instructors in the world, at one of the nation's premier conservatories.

Despite his gift, Will is a regular kid who hangs out with friends, cheers for the Utes and belts baseballs out of the park. "I'm not like a geek or anything," he says.

One more thing: Will has diabetes, a condition that can impair his playing if his blood sugar is not carefully regulated. If gone untreated, it could end his playing.

Good ear from the start: When he was 3, Will saw three young violinists play at his church and was captivated. Loree and Scott Hagen weren't sure a toddler could even play the instrument, but after weeks of Will's nagging, they gave in and bought him a violin for his fourth birthday. When the Salt Lake City boy was diagnosed with diabetes and admitted to the hospital a year later, the violin went with him.

Will had a good ear from the beginning. Loree recalls the day Will played a simple piece, his eyes brimming with tears. "It's so beautiful," he told her. Another time he announced he had figured out "Mozart and those guys. They just wrote feelings, and I can feel it."

The stories now embarrass the seventh-grader, who smacks his forehead and says, "I was such a geek!"

Natalie Reed, his first teacher, said Will's technique wasn't instantly remarkable. "He was a wild horse. He was bouncing off the walls. He was like a rocket exploding," she said. But when he focused on the violin, he was just as intense.

After studying with Reed and Debbie Moench, Will took first place in his division at the Utah State Fair in 2001, 2003 and 2005 (contest rules require him to take a year off between competitions). He debuted with the Utah Symphony at age 9.

Ralph Matson, concertmaster for the orchestra, did a double-take the first time he heard Will. "There are a lot of really good young players in Utah. In Will's case, there's something extra there. There's something compelling, something of depth," he says. "To hear that out of a 9-year-old is very unusual."

Encouraged by his teachers, the Hagens made an appointment to play for Robert Lipsett in California when Will was 10. At the time, they thought they were attending a master class.

Will stood before Lipsett, raised his instrument and began to play, but was soon stopped by the world-renowned teacher. He started another piece, but again was cut off. Then Lipsett asked Will to turn his back, and the teacher played a single key on the piano. "Do you know what note this is?" he asked. To Loree's astonishment, Will did. Lipsett played two notes simultaneously, and Will called out the names. Three keys, and Will quickly identified each. Lipsett asked Will to leave the room. "Can your family move to Los Angeles?" he asked Loree.

A regular kid: In many respects, Will's life is ordinary. The Hagens want to keep it that way, and that's part of the reason they didn't move. Will loves the Utes and Red Sox. He likes Lemony Snicket books, surfs the Internet to look at cars and has started skiing. Nineteen home-run balls line his bookshelf, and blue ribbons and trophies sit on the dresser. There's also the 2005 Nicholas Green Distinguished Student Award, given to one gifted student statewide each year. "It was mainly because of violin," he says modestly. "I'm not the brightest kid in the state, not by a long shot."

His days begin about 5:45 a.m. with a quick shower, breakfast and 20 to 30 minutes of violin practice. He catches a carpool to West High, where he attends classes for a half-day. Back home, he practices for two more hours before putting a leash on the family dog, Tango, and retrieving his little brother, 9-year-old Nathaniel, from school. Evenings are spent on homework, baseball practice, family dinners and "chillin'." If he's lucky, he gets to play a little football on the family's PlayStation 2.

Thursdays in Los Angeles are a blur: up at 5, on a plane, stuck in traffic, then school. He often has two lessons in a day. Loree keeps a stash of energy bars in her bag in case they can't grab lunch when Will's blood sugar runs low. They often arrive back home in Salt Lake after mid-

night.

Skateboarding is banned, as is notoriously vicious ward-ketball at his LDS church. "It's the only thing I've been glad to miss" because of violin, he says. Some people might marvel that the Hagens allow Will to play baseball. But they are adamant that as long as he wants to, he'll play.

"I don't think he'd be the same musician if he didn't have baseball in his life," says dad Scott. Or, as older brother Nicholas, 16, puts it, "There's no need to be a pansy."

The Hagen boys are close, but still behave like brothers. Asked if Will is a normal kid, Nicholas says, "No! He's a diabetic violinist! Other than that,

he's the craziest kid ever." But they also seem supportive of one another. One of Will's goals for 2006: "Try not to annoy my brothers."

Will's Super League baseball coach, Dave Spatafore, calls his shortstop "an extraordinary, ordinary kid." The competition team has rallied around Will, choosing him as captain last year because the other players

respect his confidence, his "picture-perfect" swing and his determination to play with all his heart, despite his disease. "They see him checking his blood sugar and giving himself injections between innings, and they're glad it's not them."

Diabetes has imposed a rigid schedule on Will: drawing blood, injecting insulin, carefully managing his diet. For

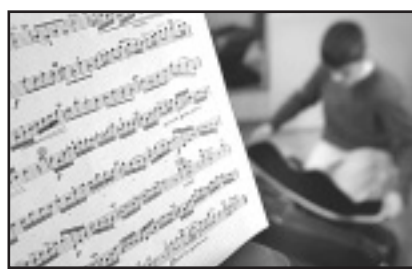
hours leading up to his concerts, Will becomes what his family calls "perforation boy." Every 10 or 15 minutes before he goes onstage, he pricks a finger on his bowing hand to test his blood sugar.

"Oh, argh!" he groans, lowering his violin in frustration before a recent performance. Will is scheduled to play in 90 minutes, but his blood sugar is down. His meter reads in the low 50s; ideally, he should be around 130. He slumps to the floor and chugs some juice in an attempt to "shock and awe" his numbers upward. How does he feel? "Awful. Dizzy. Weak," he says. "Stupid," he adds after accidentally knocking over the juice.

Under the watchful eyes of his parents, Will is vigilant about his diabetes. He should live to be an elderly man if he continues to take proper care of himself through the teen years, a time when some juvenile diabetics tire of the constant maintenance and ignore their health. But he understands the potential consequences. "The first thing that goes is your nerve endings," says Will. "I wouldn't be able to feel a baseball or the strings of a violin. Then you go blind."

Will says he's not afraid that will happen to him, although he blacked out once from dangerously low blood sugar. "It's

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TRIALS OF A PRODIGY



PHOTOS BY J. EMILIO FLORES

With his mother, Loree, standing by, violinist Will Hagen groans in frustration as he realizes his blood sugar levels have dropped to an "awful" level, only 90 minutes before he is scheduled to play in a recent performance (top). He monitors the levels every 10 to 15 minutes on performance days to keep his diabetes in check. Will travels to the Colburn School in Los Angeles for weekly lessons under the watchful eye of world-renowned teacher Robert Lipsett (above). Although he is only 13, Will is accomplished enough to perform showcase pieces for college students at the Colburn School (left.)



PHOTOS BY DANNY CHAN LA/The Salt Lake Tribune

After he practices violin for several hours after school, Will Hagen, 13, walks to Bonneville Elementary with family dog Tango to pick up his brother Nathaniel, 9 (left). Will, 13, is considered a prodigy violinist and has made four solo appearances with the Utah Symphony. After discussing homework with Nathaniel, Will takes an insulin shot to help keep his diabetes under control (middle). He insists he's a normal kid, as he shoots some backyard hoops with his brother Nicholas, 16 (right).

"If you make it big time, you get to play whatever you want. You get to see the world."

WILL HAGEN

Continued from previous page

mostly just annoying and tedious," he says. "It's not even close to as bad as cancer or something like that."
Surprisingly, his mother says the rigors of managing his diabetes may have made him a more disciplined violinist.

Costly choice: As Scott, an attorney, and Loree, a full-time mom, debated the pros and cons of lessons in L.A., one of their concerns was how the decision would affect Nicholas and Nat. They worried about spending money that could be used to put all the boys through college.

The Hagens are reluctant to talk about finances, but Will's music must be expensive: airfare for two each week (although they sometimes use frequent-flier miles to get free seats), a rental car, a budget hotel room for the occasional overnighter, sheet music, strings, bow repairs and tuxedos. There's the six-week string school that Will attends in Ohio over the summer, and the apartment the family rents so Nat and Tango can come, too.

And then there's his instrument. The Hagens won't discuss the value of Will's 129-year-old French violin, but say it cost much less than the \$100,000 to \$200,000 they were encouraged to spend. Fortunately, Will's instruction is free, as it is for all students at the conservatory at The Colburn School in L.A., which some call the Juilliard of the West.

Scott's parents pitch in to help at home on Thursdays, when Loree and Will are away. In fact, it's the best day of the week, say Nicholas and Nat, who are also talented musicians and athletes. (Nicholas plays piano and is on the East High baseball team; Nat plays violin, baseball and touch football.) "We get fast food and don't have to practice as much," says Nicholas. Neither brother would trade places with Will: Staying at school with friends is preferable to three hours of music practice each day.

They might not like the lessons much, either.

"Let's try to keep some kind of rhythm going here," Robert Lipsett tells Will at a recent lesson. Their time together is all business, no chit-chat. Dressed in a suit and towering above Will, Lipsett is in near-constant motion. He prowls around Will, sits and stares intently, then hops up again and guides Will's elbow through a passage. Like a living metronome, he peppers the teen with rapid-fire comments throughout the lesson.

"Don't hit the bow. Don't hit the bow at all! . . . You're in trouble here. You just have a tiny bit of bow left. . . . Violin up, please. . . . Interesting rhythm. . . . You don't look like a gypsy, but you sure play like one."

Lipsett acknowledges that he's "very, very hard" on Will, but knows that the teen can take it. "He has amazing self-confidence. He's not one that I have to worry will have his self-confidence cracked or damaged. He's like a rock. In fact, if I wasn't tough on him, I don't think he'd like it."

He might be surprised to know that it took time for Will to get used to his style. "I used

to be more scared of lessons with Mr. Lipsett than I was of playing in front of hundreds of people," says Will.

Lipsett has produced many world-class violinists, with several becoming concertmasters at leading orchestras around the nation. He almost never accepts new students, adding perhaps one or two in the past three years. "When Will came to play for me the first time, that was about the farthest thing from my mind," says Lipsett, who holds the Jascha Heifetz Distinguished Violin Chair at Colburn and also teaches at the University of Southern California. "He

made a very deep impression upon me. He was raw, but his gifts came through in a very big way. They were just right there in my face."

Their lessons take place in the studio once used by Heifetz, arguably the greatest violinist of the 20th century. The intimate space, designed by the son of Frank Lloyd Wright, has phenomenal acoustics and despite Lipsett's criticisms, Will sounds fantastic in this room steeped with history.

"I'm living in a dreamworld," Will says about his studies with Lipsett. If the fantasy continues, he'll end up a concert soloist,

based in Deer Valley, with a fancy car to get him to the airport.

"If you make it big time, you get to play whatever you want. You get to see the world," he said. He knows it's a long shot. What if he doesn't make it? "I'm just trying my hardest right now. I don't really think about that."

He can't imagine ever putting down the violin, though. "It would be a really big letdown and I would probably not be as patient a person. I think music does a lot psychologically to a person," he says.

Lipsett has seen his share of

prodigies and knows the dangers they face. Some are propelled by ambitious parents. Others have technique, but no passion. Still others rest on their "God-given talents" and don't do the work to get to the next level. None of these apply to Will, who in fact has something that Lipsett says often can't be taught.

"When it's all said and done, Will is a performer. He's able to

do breathtaking things, magical things. He gets it, at a very young age, that it's about the connection he makes between himself and the audience. It's just innate in him. He gets it."

Contact Jennifer Barrett at 801-257-8611 or jbarrett@sltrib.com. Send comments about this story to livingeditor@sltrib.com.



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