

Virtuosos in the making

More Chinese parents are sending their children to music classes. **Chen Nan** discovers that some are jumping on the bandwagon for the wrong reasons.

While some children are playing at a park near Fangzhuang area of Fengtai district in Beijing, Wang Jinghan's fingers are fiddling vigorously on her violin.

At 11 years old, she is one of the brightest stars at the Middle School attached to the Central Conservatory of Music, located just opposite the park. The school has been churning out virtuosos in recent years.

"Like many students who impress us here, she is great, self-disciplined, hardworking and passionate," Russian violinist Nazar Kozhukhar says. "Before I came to China, I was told that the future of classical music is here. Now I believe so."

Kozhukhar has chosen Wang to give a solo performance at a concert in the school to celebrate the completion of two weeks of master classes conducted by nine Russian musicians.

"I will perform Bach, my favorite," says Wang, who came from Zhengzhou, Henan province. "But I still need more practice."

Wang was born into a family of musicians — her father, aunt and grandfather are all professional violinists, working with singing and dancing troupes. Following in her father's footsteps, Wang started learning violin at 3 and was enrolled at the school four years ago, paying a tuition fee of 20,000 yuan (\$3,138) a year.

Her mother quit her job in their hometown to accompany Wang to Beijing. They rent a house near the school.

Wang describes her early days of learning violin as "a nightmare" because of the hours spent practicing. She did not have time for other forms of entertainment, not even to watch television.

"Now that I've grown up and I am able to play much better, I love the sound of the violin. I am willing to spend time on it," she says.

The successful stories of pianists such as Lang Lang, Li Yundi and Chen Sa have encouraged more parents to enroll their children in the music classes.



Wang Jinghan prepares backstage for a concert at the Middle School attached to the Central Conservatory of Music, where she has studied violin for four years.

"My mother often tells me stories about Lang Lang to encourage me. She says that by playing music, I can one day be as rich as Lang Lang," Wang says. "And she would say 'you are just one of the 30 million children learning music, so don't complain.'"

Unlike Wang, 17-year-old Mai Tianlong from Beihai, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, does not come from a family with a musical background. Mai's parents run a business and they want their son to learn a musical instrument like his peers.

Though they were unfamiliar with classical music, they bought lots of CDs and DVDs to cultivate their son's musical interest. They have enrolled their son in violin classes since he was 4 years old, driving three to four hours to get to the music teacher's house every weekend for a two-hour lesson.

"I enjoy playing football more.

But I have to dedicate many hours to stay home to practice the violin," Mai shares.

Like Mai, many children in China start music classes when they are young because their parents want to expose them to music in the hope that they will one day turn professional.

"Many parents are pretty ignorant about music classes," says pianist Li Yanbing, who has been teaching piano for more than 20 years.

"Some parents want their children to learn so that they can play a song at their grandma's birthday, some want to show off at an uncle's wedding party. Attending music classes are always the parents' decision, and sometimes they put learning an instrument on their children's agenda just because their colleagues' or neighbors' kids are doing it."

Li estimates about 80 percent of her students stay with piano until they

reach middle school, after which parents decide whether they should still continue with music or concentrate

on schoolwork. "For many parents, their goal is that their children complete the 10th grade piano exams. Once the kids have reached that, they stop the music lessons," she says. "Such thinking is misguided."

Li says parents nowadays have more money to spend on music lessons, but many are just jumping on the bandwagon without appreciating the real goals of music, such as bringing happiness and relaxation. Many instead treat music as a tool that brings benefits such as that extra bonus to enter top schools.

Cellist Li Yang, 38, who studied under celebrated Russian musician Rostropovich for years, says Chinese children today have a hectic after-school schedule and many parents are too preoccupied with raising another Lang Lang. He says it was different when he was a child — his father, who was a cellist with China National Symphony Orchestra, didn't plan to have his son follow his footsteps.

"My experience with music was a relaxing one. I didn't have to practice for hours," he recalls, adding that he grew up loving music in that free environment.

"One day, I heard the sound of the cello and I fell in love with it. I told my father that I wanted to become a cellist and since then, playing cello has been a joy," he says. "I believe that if a kid loves music, he or she will do it, just like playing a toy or having ice cream."

Li points out that parents believe that hours of practice will lead to success, which is also a wrong idea.

"Usually Chinese children's techniques are better than children in the West because they spend more time practicing. That's why many Chinese kids win at international competitions," Li says. "But as they grow up, they fall behind because music requires more than technique, such as understanding of the music pieces and a personalized style."

Contact the writer at chennan@chinadaily.com.cn.

what's new

Celebrating the Party

The Ministry of Culture will present more than 230 shows in August to celebrate the coming 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

These shows will be performed by more than 85 art troupes from around the country and include Peking Opera, children's shows, musicals and dancing, at venues such as the National Center for Performing Arts, Chang'an Grand Theater and Capital Theater.

More than 200,000 people are expected to watch the shows. Established and young artists will share the stages.

More than half the tickets will be priced lower than 100 yuan (\$16).

A Green Odyssey



Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey, an eco-friendly documentary with actress Michelle Yeoh as executive producer premiered in Beijing on July 25.

The documentary charts a 40 km trek undertaken by 700 people, led by Indian-born Buddhist spiritual guru Gyalwang Drukpa, across one of the most challenging global terrains — the Himalayas. The documentary highlights the damage on one of the most important water sources on the planet, to an international audience.

Yatra is a Sanskrit term, meaning "journey" or "procession." And Pad Yatra generally refers to a pilgrimage to sacred sites.

Gyalwang Drukpa is the head of the 1,000-year-old Drukpa Order of Buddhism, based in the Himalayas. He initiated the not-for-profit humanitarian organization Live to Love in 2007 and is lauded for promoting gender equality and awareness with environmental issues. He is also the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Award recipient.

Movies for children

China Central TV's (CCTV) Channel 6, which specializes in screening movies, will release more than 20 movies for children, who are on their summer holidays now.

At 9:30 am, from Aug 2 to 30, a children's movie is being broadcast on the channel, including both domestic and overseas productions such as *My Life as McDull*, *Garfield: The Movie* and the Japanese animation *Detective Conan*. CCTV-6 broadcasts about 1,000 children's movies annually, nearly one fourth of the films shown on the channel every year.

Encouraging kids

A national innovation competition held in Beijing on Aug 4 will give wings to the imagination of school kids. More than 1,000 youngsters from around the country will craft creative items like paintings and models of bridges and towers from recycled materials.

With the theme of "green and innovative", the competition aims to promote an eco-friendly lifestyle and to harness the creative and innovative spirit of youngsters. The one-day event also features miniature boats races — powered either by solar energy or the wind — all built by the young participants.

The event is organized by Asia Industrial Technological Innovation Association, Beijing Digital Culture Promotion Association and the Organizing Committee of National Innovation Competition of Primary and Secondary School Students.

Zhang Wenyu debuts

Zhang Wenyu, who won Tianjin Satellite TV's singing competition program, *King's Return*, in May, has released his debut album, *Wish*, in Beijing.

During the past six years, the singer has performed at Temple of Heaven in southern Beijing every morning and his singing is widely popular among the old folk who do morning exercises in the park. In 2007, he also held three concerts in communities near the park.

The album was sponsored by his fans, who collected nearly 200,000 yuan (\$31,378). The album puts together 11 songs, among which Zhang wrote the song, *I Love Temple of Heaven Park*, which is dedicated to his fans.

Designs on innovation

Beijing Institute of Architectural Design (BIAD), China's largest State-owned design consulting institution, cooperates with Ullens Center for Contemporary Art to hold the "China New Design Series: UCCA&BIAD China New Design Special Recruitment" project.

Containing three stages: selection, creation and exhibition, candidates will join in five workshops and four designers will be chosen to form a team and be sent on an overseas design trip. BIAD and UCCA will also supply a stage for people in the fields of architectural design, graphic design, performance art and graphic art to show off their talents.

Army officer prepares himself for the worst

By XU WEI in Kunming
xuwe@chinadaily.com.cn

For Senior Colonel Bian Xiaoming, 44, a sense of urgency is part of being a military officer and he needs this to prepare himself and his armored brigade for a possible conflict.

"If we do not have a sense of urgency in peacetime, the cost will be the soldiers' lives during wartime," he says.

In 2010, Bian was appointed commander of an armored brigade stationed in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, subordinate to the Chengdu Military Area Command.

He says the appointment was not an easy one. He had no experience of armored brigades as his training was as an artillery major at a military academy.

His first job at the brigade was to learn. He became the oldest student of Sergeant Guo Xinwen, 27, a veteran tank driver.

"I was so nervous," Guo recalls. "I was used to scolding soldiers if they failed to do the right thing. But I had never taught a senior colonel."

Guo says he was impressed by Bian's endurance.

"He was clearly motivated to learn," Guo says, adding that tank drivers have to endure dusty conditions and temperatures as high as 40 C.

"If I don't know how to drive a tank myself, how can I organize their training sessions or lead the fight?" Bian says.

It took Bian three months to become a competent tank driver and his vehicle was the first to fire on every major training session.

However, Bian's next job was even

more complicated than tank driving.

The challenge was to transform the armored brigade, which was not among the best-equipped in the People's Liberation Army, into a true emergency assault force.

There were many problems to tackle, such as a lack of preparedness in the logistics system and among the military officers.

"It took a long time and involved very complicated procedures to mobilize all the equipment," Bian says.

"And they (the soldiers) seemed to like training sessions being routines," Bian continues. "But in real fighting, there are no routines."

Prior to his arrival, the armored brigade had not conducted night session training for years and most soldiers in the tank and armored cavalry battalion did not have operating experience in rainy weather and night sessions.

"I asked the tank shooters to conduct tank shooting sessions in heavy rain and even the experienced shooters missed their targets," Bian says.

The first major change he implemented was to switch the brigade's weekly combat readiness exercise from every Thursday to a non-fixed schedule, even if the time was inconvenient or the weather inclement.

"The enemy is not going to tell you when they are going to attack," Bian explained to his soldiers.

He paid close attention to the US army's tactics in the Iraq War of 2003 when he was studying at National Defense University.

"The rules of winning a war have changed. It used to be the case that



Bian Xiaoming (middle) discusses drills during training.

a large army defeated a smaller one. Now the quicker defeats the slower."

In his brigade, Bian started experimenting with having a multi-component heavy brigade combat team, in which tank battalions and armored cavalry battalions trained and fought together, a move that breaks away from traditional modes of training.

"If the tank battalions are to fight together, they need to train together," Bian says.

However, the multi-component team was defeated by another infantry battalion, in a military exercise last April.

Bian was not discouraged, however, as he figured out that communication system difficulties were the reason for the defeat.

An upgrade of the communication facilities between battalions has proven effective.

Now his multi-component brigade

combat team is a proven force in military exercises.

Bian says the reason he became a soldier is to be close to the battlefield and this is the guiding force of his service — even during peacetime.

"The question I keep asking myself is, if a war breaks out tomorrow, am I ready? Is my brigade ready?" Bian says. "There's a drastic difference between being prepared and unprepared."

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY