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THURSDAY JUNE 22, 2006

MINNESOTA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

Piano prodigy Colton Peltier takes a break from piano practice to play with his Shih Tzu puppy, Cinnamon. The sixth-grader straddles the worlds of adolescence and the classical music.



JOHN DOMAN, PIONEER PRESS

THE KID CAN PLAY

Eleven-year-old Colton Peltier took his first piano lesson at 3. Last summer, he performed with the Minnesota Orchestra.

BY MATT PEIKEN
Pioneer Press

A mural of a Steinway piano covers the front wall in Colton Peltier's bedroom. Hanging from another wall are bronze-colored busts of Mozart and Beethoven, opposite a wall with a sculpted scroll of music and feather quill. To the left of the bed is a Yamaha Portable Grand keyboard, a few feet from a small tower filled with Mozart CDs and one from Twin Cities jazz artist Lorie Line.

Only a bedspread covered with about 20 stuffed animals and a small poster of the Ten Commandments for Kids gives away the fact that this bedroom belongs to an 11-year-old.

To hear his goofy laugh, to

watch him chew the corners of a throw pillow and to see the boy who needs a few years to grow into his long hands and feet, Colton Peltier isn't exactly the picture of a prodigy. But while his classmates at Hastings Middle School go off to after-school activities, Colton spends the next four hours in the front parlor of his family's home, walled off by red sound-baffling partitions, where he sits at a 7-foot Steinway grand and strengthens his play-by-memory performance of the piano classics.

Colton turned heads last summer, when he won the first "Minnesota Idol" competition and performed Beethoven's First Piano Concerto with the

PIANO PRODIGY, 11A

2 A St. Paul woman says she believes **two** teenage girls made up sex-slavery allegations against her family. **Local News, Page 1B**

3 Khamis al-Obeidi became the **third** defense lawyer for Saddam Hussein to be killed since the trial began. **World, Page 3A**

4 The NAACP president said he was concerned about the absence of any black stars in new comedies on the **four** major networks. **A&E Live, Page 13A**

5 **Five** albums by the Boredoms, who will play at the Turf Club this weekend, will be reissued this fall. **Ross Raihala's column, Weekend Life, Page 3G**

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Piano prodigy

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Minnesota Orchestra. He was 9 when he performed with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, making him the youngest musician ever to solo with the SPCO — and he has soloed with the Minnesota Opera and Voca-Essence.

Colton will appear again July 23 with the Minnesota Orchestra as a guest soloist for a Sommerfest family concert, and he is scheduled for a subscription series program with the orchestra in January. For those who can't wait until then to hear him, Colton will perform solo Friday with the Allegro Con Brio orchestra at Wayzata Community Church.

"I guess my brain works different than most kids," Colton says. "I like things that most kids don't."

His cultured tastes, which extend to crab legs, caviar and the music of Frank Sinatra, were evident before he could ride a bike. Seemingly bored with his Kindermusik program, Colton was 3 when he started piano lessons under the play-by-play Suzuki method. He giggles at the memory of his earliest lessons, when he tapped his fingers on a keyboard sketched on notebook paper. By 7, he had outgrown the program, and his teacher recommended private instruction.

"It (piano) was just something for his brain. We didn't think anything would come of it," says Colton's mother, Amy Peltier. "His dad played pro baseball, and he's our first son — he's supposed to be a sports kid, right? We have no idea where he got his genius."

Colton's father, Dan Peltier, is a financial consultant who played three seasons of Major League Baseball in the early 1990s. Other than the Steinway and the investment of regular lessons under elite instructor Paul Wirth, the Peltiers have detoured from the route taken by most parents of prodigies.

Colton, the eldest of three children, attends public school and has played sports. He enjoys playing in churches and nursing homes as much as professional concert halls. With the exception of this summer, when he will spend August at the prestigious Aspen Music Festival School, Colton has never traveled for advanced instruction.

"I'm not ready to lose him yet," his mother says. "He's too young. He's too green."

"What's green?" Colton asks.

"It means you're not experienced," she tells him. "We live in little Hastings. We've seen Juilliard — it's right in the middle of New York City, right next to Central Park. I'd be a nervous wreck if he were out there. I don't know — maybe in a couple of years."

Colton says he never gets nervous before or during performances, and his physical technique, simply to the eye, looks almost sloppy. As he ran through a "Rhapsody in Blue" that has long been burned into his muscle memory, Colton's long fingers glided over the keys rather than struck at them, and he played with a nonchalance that belied the frenzy of the faster passages. He stumbled once, eliciting the exclamation, "Crap," and a giggle.

Paul Wirth, his private instructor, says the nonchalance Colton brings to his daily life disappears during performances. In his 25 years of teaching, primarily with pre-college-age students, Wirth says he's seen none with more potential than Colton.

"He has the whole package. He's extremely musically gifted and has a technique to burn, and he has a jaw-dropping charisma that pulls audiences in like no student I've ever seen," Wirth says. "He loves being on the stage. He has this little flip he does with his tuxedo and tails and he just has a great time, and I think people appreciate that."

His prospects of forging a career as a concert soloist are strong, Wirth says, noting a resume already dotted with performances with both of the Twin Cities' major orchestras. Surviving adolescence, he adds, will be the greater challenge.

"Every time I've heard him, he sounds like an accomplished pianist in everything he's played. There are still things he needs to work on — he's only 11 — but compared to people his own age and where he's at in his development, nobody has what he has. He's just a very special young man."

Colton shrugs at the idea of spending his life at the piano bench — a concept he can't yet grasp at his age.

"If I could stay in the room and practice for an hour straight, maybe," he says. "I get bored. I just don't like sitting."

But I like the music."

"I always tell him, 'You better make so much money, kid, because you're going to need it to afford this lifestyle,'" his mother says. "I mean caviar — at his age? C'mon."

"I like it," Colton says. "But it's too salty."

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