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La Plata High School's Lewis plays tuba with Capitol Symphonic Youth Orchestra

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By Sara K. Taylor Staff Writer

Like many teens, Joshua Lewis' phone is brimming with music.

He figures he has about 500 songs, and save for the occasional gospel, rap, the random French song — it helps with his foreign language class — most of the music is classical.

Like some teens, his first love was sports — basketball to be specific, and he was good at it, called up to the varsity when he was a freshman at La Plata High School.

"He was a heck of a basketball player," said Susan Eckerle, an instrumental music teacher at La Plata.

But the siren song of the tuba — that large, low-pitched brass instrument — lured him off the court and into band practice.

Joshua, 17, a junior who is at the top of his class with a 4.6 GPA, started out in school bands playing the trumpet.

Look around a band room and you'll see plenty of trumpets. Joshua wanted to be unique.

He switched to the tuba in sixth grade.

"I was willing to give it a try," he said. "I sounded so bad. ... I didn't like it but I thought 'I'm not going to give it up.'"

In time, "band started to be my favorite class," Joshua said.



Staff photo by SARA K. TAYLOR

Joshua Lewis, 17, of La Plata gave up basketball to devote more time to studying the tuba.





He counts the late Arnold Jacobs and Gene Pokorny, both of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Mike Roylance of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Stephen Dumaine of the National Symphony Orchestra among his "heroes."

"I was just in awe of how well they played," Joshua said.

"This music has touched me in a way where I want to do that for people."

In addition to playing in La Plata's concert band and wind ensemble, Joshua joined the Capitol Symphonic Youth Orchestra, which practices each Monday in Fairfax, Va., and plays concerts in the metropolitan area.

Cheri Collins, the orchestra's artistic music director and principal conductor, said after hearing his audition it will be Joshua's focus and dedication to the tuba that will take him far in his musical pursuits.

"Once he played, there is no doubt that whatever he sets his sights on, he'll achieve it. He has the dedication, determination and ability," Collins said. "I can see him in a major symphony."

The tuba player serves as a sort of anchor or foundation for an orchestra, Collins explained.

"They provide that bass line," Collins said. "Everyone tunes to him, everyone stays with him."

Joshua knows tubas are stereotypically viewed as oversized, maybe unyielding instruments, but he thinks it can make beautiful music just as much as the cello or violin can.

Tuba parts can be transcribed from cello or flute parts. A musician can play the frantic-paced "Flight of the Bumblebee" on the tuba, he said.

"The tuba is there for the foundation, but it can do a lot more," Joshua said. "The tuba can really be a beautiful instrument."

Yeah, the tuba weighs about 50 pounds — Joshua keeps his, a Christmas present from his grandmother, in the band room at La Plata during the week instead of lugging it back and forth between school and home.

It does come home on weekends where Joshua practices a couple of hours a day. He also takes lessons with Willie Clark, a tubist with Ceremonial Brass of the U.S. Air Force Band.

The instrument isn't "sexy" and takes a lot of air to play, but Joshua plans on studying it in college where he plans to also pursue a music education degree.

His ultimate goal is to play in an orchestra.

He's been visiting universities to check out music programs, but hasn't decided on where he's going.

He spent spring break meeting with tubist Fritz A. Kaenzig of the University of Michigan and David Zerkel, professor of tuba and euphonium at the University of Georgia.

Joshua also is looking at the University of Maryland, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, the New England Conservatory in Boston and the Colburn School in Los Angeles.

When he isn't practicing or performing, he tutors elementary and middle school students, is a member of La Plata's Key Club and Best Buddies and is in the National Honor Society.

Recently, he and his friend Elliott Burgess, a euphonium player, performed a duet at Body of Christ Church in Waldorf.

In the audience

Joshua's older brother, D.J., 20, is an engineering student at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Their younger sister London, 12, is a seventh-grader at Milton M. Somers Middle School.

Neither of them is very musical, Joshua said.

Nor are their parents, Darrell and Cecelia, although London, like their mother is a singer.

Cecelia said the family usually could be found on soccer fields, basketball courts and London is still an athlete playing soccer and participating in track.

"Josh exposed us to a different genre of activities," she said of her son's musical leanings. "He has broadened our perspective to the path that kids can take."

For his 16th birthday, he didn't ask for a car, he wanted tickets to see the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

He spends extra money on tickets to see the National Symphony Orchestra at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in the District.

Before Josh found the tuba, the family weren't classical music fans. Now, Cecelia finds herself listening to it even when her middle child isn't around.

Even though they are new to the world of classical music, Joshua's enthusiasm and dedication make it easy for his parents to support.

"With anything that your child is doing productively and positively you have to support," Cecelia said.

Collins said Joshua has formed friendships with other musicians in the Capitol Symphonic Youth Orchestra.

"One of the wonderful things Josh adds to the group is that he has fun the whole time," she said. "He's helping raise the standard of the entire group."

Joshua likes being that person.

"There is usually only one tuba in an orchestra," he said. "I'm all alone up there. I like being that guy."

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