

The New York Times

June 27, 2002

How Do You Get to Camp? Practice, Of Course

Teenagers Who Play Music, Not Tennis

By ROBERT LIPSYTE and LOIS B. MORRIS

When shopping for a new car, Lois Paley always lugs along two empty cello cases. If they fit, she then considers how much room is left for her three athletic sons: Gregory, 17; Bennett, 14, with his violin; and Todd, 11. Dad and the dog can always follow in their own car.

Uma Shankar routinely drives the four-hour round trip from her home outside New Haven to New York three or four times a week for 16-year-old Maya's auditions, rehearsals, recitals and lessons. She has also flown to Los Angeles on short notice, abandoning her husband and three older children over the Thanksgiving holiday so that the conductor Zubin Mehta could hear Maya play the violin for 30 minutes.

Music moms' seasons are far longer than those of soccer moms. Their financial payoffs are far smaller and more elusive than those of tennis moms. But they are every bit as competitive, protective, ambitious and self-sacrificing. Jung-

NOTES FROM MUSIC CAMP

The Sacrifices and Preparation for a Coveted Bunk

soon Kim, wife of a South Korean diplomat, has sometimes lived half a world away from him so that Yoon-je, their 17-year-old daughter, can continue her piano studies in New York.

"First priority is Yoon-je," Mrs. Kim said bluntly as Yoon-je, sitting next to her at the dining room table of their Scarsdale home, smiled and cringed.

No wonder Yoon-je was looking forward to five weeks of camp with 36 other string and piano students just like her at the Perlman Music Program on Shelter Island, at the east end of Long



Above, campers at the Perlman Music Program on Shelter Island; below left, Yoon-je Kim practicing, as her mother, Jung-soon Kim, listens; below right, Gregory, left, and Bennett Kramer pack their instruments as the family looks on.



Teenagers Playing Music, Not Tennis: How Do You Get to Camp? Practice

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Island. Now it was Mrs. Kim's turn to cringe. "I expected when she came home last summer, she would say, 'I missed you, Mom,'" she said. "Instead it was all the time, 'I want to go back.'"

At a time when sales of classical CD's are down, classical radio programming is disappearing, public schools are dropping music courses, and high school talent shows feature Britney lip-syners instead of Brahms interpreters, it is these educated, middle-class roadies who keep the truly golden oldies alive. They have stifled their own careers and altered the course of their families' lives. They have busted their budgets to buy better instruments. (A good-enough but not great violin for an advanced student can cost about \$30,000, a just-O.K. bow \$1,000.) They have schemed to get their children onto elite tracks like the Juilliard School precollege program and the Perlman Music Program, which is for string and piano students ages 11 to 18.

The Perlman program was created eight years ago by Toby Perlman as a humane counterpoint to her own often painful violin childhood. In those days, she says, no one was nice. The P.M.P., as it is often called, features a nice world-class faculty built around Toby's husband of 33 years, the virtuoso violinist Itzhak Perlman.

Dr. Paley's two older sons attend the Perlman's summer camp, which opened on Saturday. All three boys have been involved in program's year-round works-in-progress recitals at the Perlman's Manhattan townhouse. (Yet another drive into the city from the Paleys' home in Port Jefferson, N.Y.)

Notes From Music Camp

This is the first in a series of articles following the experiences of gifted students at a summer camp.

Dr. Paley, a clinical psychologist whose career is on hold, became a music mom with a local Suzuki string program when Gregory was 4½. She and her husband, Robert Kramer, an obstetrician, wanted their children to appreciate classical music and performance, as they had. That was the extent of their ambition, they say. They claim no musical genius here; the boys are gifted, yes, but not prodigies.

"You get sucked into it, piece by piece," Dr. Kramer said, coming home from a late afternoon delivery. "Every step of the way, we had doubts." Their friends and families had even more misgivings. "Even now, some of my friends tell me I made a mistake taking the boys out of sports, particularly basketball, that I was forfeiting their real futures," he added.

Dr. Paley was required to attend the Suzuki classes with her sons and sit with them through their daily practice sessions at home. Summer vacations were spent in intensive Suzuki camps, also requiring parental involvement. Eventually, all three boys were accepted into the Juilliard precollege program, which meets every Saturday during the school year and can last as long as 12 hours. The daily practice hour became three or four.

"Sometimes it feels like I'm living next to an airport," said Dr. Kramer, groaning for effect, as he sat down in the family room, where the sound-proof door his wife installed for him shuts out the sound of strings. "I can hear them practicing in my sleep."

On bad days, after successive nights of baby deliveries, "I'd accuse Lois of being this tyrant who was encouraging these musical careers," he said. On better days, Dr. Kramer, though nostalgic for the father-son bonding at Madison Square Garden sports events, is in awe of their accomplishment and dedication. "I certainly appreciate what they're doing, and they know it," he said.

With the older boys at the Perlman camp on Shelter Island and the youngest at a cello program at the University of Indiana, the couple think they may actually have some quiet time. In August, when the Perlman group decamps for three weeks with Chinese counterparts at the



Nicole Bengivene/The New York Times

Maya Shankar, with her mother, Uma. She can't attend music camp this year because of an injury to her hand.

Shanghai Conservatory of Music, they think they may take a rare vacation.

The Kramer boys will be among 37 campers, string players except for six pianists. Tuition for the usual six-week season is \$4,200 (many are on scholarship). This year is unusual, with five weeks at camp and three in China. Not unusual is the Shelter Island schedule: much of the day is spent practicing, often in cabins with water views. Snacks are delivered. Swimming and art are optional.

Jung-soon Kim said she was planning to drive from Scarsdale to Shelter Island every weekend to take Yoon-jee containers of Korean food. "Many of my friends and relatives say to me, you sacrifice too much for her, but I want to support her," she said in the family's rented house, whose only memorable furnishing is a large grand piano.

Born in Seoul, Yoon-jee preferred her toy piano to her dolls. The defin-

ing moment came one day when she was 2½, and the family was invited to a reception at the ambassador's house. "She played on his piano, and we applauded," Mrs. Kim said. "She wouldn't come down. After she came home, she said, 'I want real piano, not toy piano.'"

Mrs. Kim has made sure that Yoon-jee always has a real piano. She agreed to join her husband, Bong-hyun Kim, at diplomatic postings in Russia and Japan only after he assured her that a real piano and a high-level teacher would be available. Soon after Mr. Kim was assigned to the United Nations in 1996, Yoon-jee began studying with a private teacher, Miyoko Lotto, and entered the Juilliard program.

Three years later, when Mr. Kim was recalled to Seoul, Mrs. Kim matriculated at Manhattanville College, applied for a student visa and stayed to attend to her "first priority." Mr. Kim is now back at the United Na-

tions, but an assignment to Pakistan looms. Mrs. Kim, who is on the board of both the parents' association and the Korean parents' association of the Juilliard precollege program (approximately one-third of its students are Korean) will stay in the New York area again. A younger daughter, Hyun-jee, 14, plays the flute for fun.

A recurring problem for all the young music students is the lack of an easy social life in their schools. Yoon-jee's classmates at Scarsdale High School and most of her teachers, she said, are neither interested in nor knowledgeable about classical music and unsympathetic to its demands on her time.

"I told this guy that I practice four hours a day, and he says, 'I practice my guitar maybe 30 minutes a week, and everybody says I play incredibly,'" Yoon-jee said, rolling her eyes. "All my friends are music friends, at Juilliard and P.M.P.

Camp is wonderful; it's really exciting to have people around who are similar to me."

Maya Shankar will not get to camp this summer. The result of that Mehta audition was an invitation to a chamber music festival last January in Bombay, a great honor at her age. But it also worsened an injury to her left hand, sustained while practicing. Until a cast was applied in mid-June, Maya was able to take lessons with Mr. Perlman, concentrating only on her bow technique.

Mrs. Shankar worries now that the Bombay trip was a mistake. The trips to doctors trying to determine what was wrong with Maya's hand, the back-and-forths to New York (listening to rock 'n' roll, she confessed guiltily), as well as the resumption of her own career (she manages Yale University's business policies), have all led to severe stomach pains and doctor visits of her own.

"They said I should do less running around," she said. "Ha!"

Years ago she made a conscious decision with her husband, Ramamurti Shankar, now chairman of the physics department at Yale, that each of their children take up an instrument, play a sport and participate in community service.

"I had an image in my mind of these well-rounded children," she said. "The joke is that if you do music, it really does curb your other interests."

In the fall, Maya, as well as Gregory Kramer and Yoon-jee Kim, will be high school seniors facing a critical choice: college or conservatory. Toby Perlman, who often finds herself tempering parents' ambitions, thinks it is a choice as much about life as it is about music. Conservatory is an intense preparation for a musical career. College, Mrs. Perlman says, is a chance even for future performers to feed the intellect, open themselves to unconsidered possibilities and, if need be, develop something else to fall back on.

Dr. Paley recalls last summer's rapt Shelter Island audiences under the Perlman's concert tent. "They loved the kids," she said. "But will they love them when they are in their 20's and not so cute anymore?"