



Article written about the Gorin School of Music by Philip Hubbard, a Stanford Professor

In a modest strip mall off El Camino in Mountain View lies a hidden gem of the world of children's music education in California. The Gorin School of Music, or GSM, occupies just a dozen rooms, including a performance hall, office, reception area, and nine small classrooms, each named for a different composer whose picture gazes at students and their instructors as they go about their tasks. The spirits of Beethoven, Brahms, Bach and others in the classical pantheon create an ambiance at once serious and playful. For parents who want their children to experience more than a recreational acquaintance with their instruments, this is the place to be.

Ranjani Narasimhan has been coming to the school for about four years. Her son Rohan studies flute there. They transferred to GSM from another school at the suggestion of his teacher, who offers lessons at both places, because of the broader and deeper educational opportunities available. Narasimhan notes that the Gorin School had "more of what I wanted in terms of evaluation, his technical skills are improving." An educator herself in Indian classical music, she judges the school and its curriculum favorably with her professional eye.

"Every time I come here for a performance, it's so inspiring," Narasimhan observes. She notes that her son is evaluated several times a year, with three to four performances and two technical evaluations, plus the opportunity for outside performances and competitions. She sees the evaluations as a key motivator for the students. "Because of the evaluations, they try to do better and better every time."

Phoebe Wise has similar praise for GSM. Her daughter Meredith, now in college, had been playing the violin for a number of years when "she decided in eighth grade that she wanted to get serious about her music. A friend told me about the Gorin School." Although starting late as a serious violinist, she caught up quickly, taking private theory lessons at GSM in addition to her instrumental training there. She got into the El Camino Youth Symphony at 16 and entered their highest group, the senior symphony, nine months later. "You really can't do something like that unless you have good private instruction," says Wise. "I know music will always be a part of her life."

Her younger daughter Laura has had similar success with piano, training at the school. "In sixth grade, when she saw her sister making great strides, she wanted to get in too. The difference for her was quite remarkable," notes her mother. "She made a great deal of progress in a short time." While her daughters started relatively late, she advises other parents to have their children begin at an institution like GSM earlier if they can. "If they get training when they're young, it's important for it to be high quality. Otherwise they may pick up bad habits."

The Gorin School of Music is the creation of its musical director, Rufina Gorin. Trained as a classical musician in Ukraine, she was a piano teacher at the prestigious Special Children's Music School in Kiev, where she also served as piano faculty chair. After immigrating to the US, she taught at schools in southern California before setting herself up as a private



teacher in the Bay Area. Recognizing the value in offering the more rigorous Russian-style of music education, she founded GSM in 1991.

Despite the dual requirements of running a business and administering a school curriculum, she has continued teaching herself. Edward Chao, now a student at UCLA, was a pupil of hers from early elementary through early high school. He has fond memories of Gorin and his time at GSM. "Mrs. Gorin pushes you, and she's very serious about her music. You learn how to motivate and discipline yourself, not just in music, but in other things." Thanks to the strong foundation in piano from her and music theory from the school, he has found it natural to continue and even expand his playing. "Because I was classically trained, I was able to make the move to improve and jazz. I also learned guitar." His performance experience from the school was helpful too: he is in a Christian band and still plays guitar and piano for services at his church.

Nathaniel Rothrock is another of Gorin's students. His mother Meredith is delighted with both the individual and group instruction he has received over the past five years at GSM. She tried the school initially on the advice of friends because she was dissatisfied with the lack of seriousness in other programs. "It's just been extraordinary since then," she says. Each week Nathaniel takes a theory class, a flute lesson and a piano with Gorin. She's extraordinarily committed to her students. She's firm but kind; he likes her a great deal." Rothrock is particularly pleased with the opportunities for performance the program gives. Nathaniel attends two or three recitals a year at the school and around ten outside the school with Gorin's support. "He appreciates the fact that he gets to appear in public, he feels very confident now. She emphasizes that to excel requires a serious commitment. You need to be willing to step up to the plate and put a lot of energy and effort into it."

Gorin has dedicated herself to the challenge of translating the Russian form of music education into one that works for the busy lifestyles of Bay Area families, a challenge that has apparently met with success. A prime example of this successful adaptation to California is the comprehensive musicianship class. This weekly group lesson combines elements that were individual classes in the more extensive European tradition. The course includes music history, music theory, ear training, rhythmic training, and solfege. Solfege, or solfeggio, is a particularly important skill often missing from students' music training. In simple terms it involves learning to sight read music by singing the appropriate notes of the "do-re-mi" scale. Although it sounds easy, it is a skill that requires expert teaching and many hours of practice to master in the various major and minor keys.

Students who enter the program early enough can get the extended education needed for such mastery. GSM offers the comprehensive musicianship course to both primary and secondary students across nine levels plus advanced. While this provides an excellent foundation for students who want to continue with music in college, it is also a valuable base on which those who choose not to continue at the university level can build a lifelong appreciation of music. "Even those who don't major in music, they have good skills," notes Gorin. An added bonus for students is membership in the GSM choir and the chance to focus on chamber music and creative activities once a month.

Besides the comprehensive course, GSM offers an introduction to musicianship and introduction to classical guitar as group courses. There is also a preparatory music program



for very young children and serious adult-level courses for music majors and music professionals in piano, composition, and jazz.

The school has a faculty of over 20 instructors which Gorin has selected with great care. They come from a number of countries, including the US, but all are dedicated to providing instruction consistent with the Russian-based GSM philosophy. Individual lessons are available for piano, accordion, various woodwind and string instruments, and voice. As another reflection of the seriousness of the program, weekly lessons are 45 or 60 minutes long rather than the typical 30: half-hour lessons are only available to those who take two a week.

The group courses and individual lessons are the weekly fare for GSM students, but there are two other key elements of the school's overall program. The first is the jury evaluations of the students' instrumental performance that take place three times a year. GSM is unusual in conducting its own rigorous evaluations rather than relying on external organizations to do them. The comprehensive musicianship courses similarly have two evaluations each year. The GSM facility provides a supportive educational setting for both types of evaluations, and the juries of GSM faculty use these sessions to give constructive feedback to the students that serves to increase their motivation.

The GSM music festivals are the other key element of the program. In these performances held three times a year in the school's Bach Auditorium, students have the opportunity to play for their friends, family, and the wider community, building their confidence in performing on their instrument and providing further motivation to practice and excel. The more serious students at GSM are well supported in extending their experience to a variety of external programs including the MTAC (Music Teachers of California) Certificate of Merit and Branch Recitals and the National Guild Program. The most accomplished GSM students also participate in competitions, such as the US Open and Junior Bach festivals. It is worth noting that members of GSM faculty, including Gorin herself, have served on the juries for many of these.

Parents who just want their children to learn to play an instrument recreationally have a lot of options to choose from, including GSM, but this school clearly offers so much more. "We look for particular types of students and parents who want to go beyond the recreational level, who are interested in music education," says Gorin. Meredith Rothrock agrees. "If you're looking for a real opportunity for your children to excel musically and you want them to succeed, this is a great place." She emphasizes that the rewards go beyond the music. Her son Nathaniel now, "understands the connection between really hard work and success at the end. This is one of the biggest positive things in his life."

Families and individuals in search of such a rich program are encouraged to have a look for themselves. The Gorin School of Music is located at 2290 West El Camino in Mountain View. More information is available by calling (650) 961-4910 or visiting the website at www.gsm-music.com.