

Meet Child Composer Jahan Raymond



**Jahan Raymond,
11, Child Composer**

Jahan Raymond, 11, discovered the joy of piano when he was seven years old, beginning his study of the great masters such as Chopin, Mozart and Bach.

By age eight he was composing his own music, and at 10 was asked to perform one of his pieces, “Running With Wolves,” alongside multiple Grammy-nominated guitarist Stanley Jordan. In April 2013, Jahan performed some of his original compositions at his first international show, a gala event in Hong Kong to benefit the Hong Kong Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. On the same trip, he also played at a standing-room-only event at the exclusive Kee Club.

Although Jahan continues his study and appreciation of classical music, his forte lies in his rare talent for composing and improvising contemporary, fully formed melodies virtually on the spot. He is currently studying under Mike Garson, long-time pianist for David Bowie and a master improviser, and Chopin Conservatory alumnus and concert pianist Roza Yoder. He lives just outside Los Angeles with his parents and younger brother.

In His Own Words

When people hear me play, often the first thing they ask is: “Who’s your teacher?”

I think there is something more important than just having the right teacher. Each one of us has a unique talent and the best teachers are those that bring it out of us.

My dad was my first teacher. He played on a digital grand piano, which he bought for himself. I loved to bang around on it and he didn’t mind. He taught me little pieces like “Baa Baa Black Sheep” on it, but I wasn’t very good.

When I was four or five my mom and dad decided to give me piano lessons. My first teacher was a lady who taught piano by the numbers. She numbered each of my fingers and had me say “1-2-3-4-5” and “5-4-3-2-1.” Within five minutes I was completely bored.

The next teacher we tried was another lady who taught four or five people at a time. She did this by getting five little keyboards and placing them around the room. She assigned each student a keyboard and a music book and pretty much set them to their own devices. Again we left after one or two lessons.

After this we gave my piano learning efforts a break for three years. Then my mom took me to the grocery store. We passed a sign that advertised piano lessons with a guy called “Johnny Keys.” He taught piano in a little cubicle above a store that sold musical instruments.

My first classical piece was “Solfeggietto.” I loved it because it was fast and a blast to play. I learned it because I wanted to surprise my mom.

Johnny made it really fun. We played games and he did funny accents and pretty soon I loved the piano. That was how I got into it.

Even though Johnny’s passion was rock and roll, and he had me playing in a rock and roll band, I came away with a growing interest in classical music. Don’t know why.

I have three current teachers. Mike Garson played with David Bowie for twenty years, and is incredible at improvising. Roza Yoder is an excellent teacher but very strict and demanding. She tries to get me to make the notes “sing,” to use her words. She teaches me to play exactly the way the composer would have wanted it. My third teacher is a young guy called Ben Crippin-Taylor who comes over once a week to give me notation lessons. He’s really fun and we always play ping-pong afterwards.

I think the reason I enjoy piano is that my parents, especially my dad, the musical one, allowed me to develop at my own pace. I was free to do what I wanted. Certain teachers could tell me, you can’t play this, you can’t play that. My dad never limited me like that.

Now I practice two or three hours a day and I like it most of the time. My dad helps me with everything. Though I play a lot of pieces, my favorite thing to do is improvise. It’s more fun to just sit down and make something up than have to play exactly what a composer wrote centuries ago.

The problem is that whenever I improvise something I can never remember it.

So my parents bought a Tascam digital recorder and I record all my improvisations on that. We download them to my computer and by now I must have thousands of them. Then, if I like it, I'll transcribe it from the recording. This is my least favorite thing to do; I tell my dad that it's mental torture. But Ben works with me on a computer notation program called Sibelius which is more fun, and easy to use. In any case, it has to be done. Because then I can play the same piece over and over again in the same way.

I started composing when I was around eight. Composing is different from improvising because you don't just make up something on the spot, you actually think about what you're going to write and how you're going to write it. I have a lot of compositions by now and I'm still making them.

My favorite composer is Chopin. I play a lot of pieces by him. I also play tons of other composers. When I grow up I want to write music for films. I admire a lot of film composers. I also play concerts here and there and get paid for them. I have a CD as well with a few of my first compositions on it.

Here is a story I've heard my dad tell. When I was first learning classical pieces, my dad would painstakingly figure out the notes and then I would memorize them and play them. One day, he wanted me to sight-read. He asked me to connect the notes I was playing with the written music on the page. He said I hated it and my eyes glazed over.

Thankfully, he realized I wasn't ready and he let it go. A year later I was sight-reading perfectly. I think it's different for everyone, and kids should go at their own pace and find something about learning music that they love.

I really want more kids to start playing instruments and I hope that by watching me improvise and play my compositions, more young people will be inspired to do that.

About "Star Chaser"

When I was about nine, I was messing around on the piano when this piece came out. My mom was in the kitchen and she rushed out to tell me to keep going with it.

I wasn't quite sure what the fuss was all about, since the piece seemed pretty ordinary to me, but I went with it anyway.

After a little while of playing around with it, I showed my dad. He was quite impressed with it.

Over time, I notated it and finalized the details. To me, the piece sounds a bit patriotic. When I first played it I thought it sounded like some sort of national anthem or something like that.

Anyway, I added a middle section and now it sounds pretty nice. My dad called it "Star Chaser," and the name stuck.

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