

# Hudson Valley Music Club joins ovation for teen cellist

By Julian Caldwell

Dobbs Ferry High School sophomore Sofia Checa recently added a Hudson Valley Music Club student award to her growing list of accolades, another notch in the belt of her eight-year cello career. During the competition earlier this month, Checa impressed the four judges — all professional musicians — with her technique and poise on stage, a credit to having spent half of her life with her instrument.

The 16-year-old was rewarded with a monetary honorarium and an invite to the awards concert next week to perform solos for an audience's entertainment, instead of the scrutiny of a panel. Checa will be performing "Tarantella" by David Popper and "Gigue" from the third Bach Cello Suite. She is the only cellist of the five winners.

Checa hadn't considered playing cello — or any instrument — until her teachers at Springhurst Elementary School presented her with the option to join the orchestra in third grade.

Checa's mother, Ellen Whalen, recounted a conversation with her decisive young daughter, who brought home a sheet from school detailing the second-grader's options to learn an instrument the next school year.

"Oh Sofia, do you want to start an instrument next year?" Whalen recalled asking her 8-year-old daughter and sitting next to her on a couch in the same room she has her cello lessons. "And she said, 'Yes, cello.'"

"It wasn't like I was waiting my entire childhood to get to third grade, but then I started and I was like, 'This is awesome,'" Checa said. "I knew I didn't want to play the violin because I knew that was what everybody else was going to do.



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Sofia Checa at the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club.

And then the three other options were viola, cello, bass. And I just knew I wanted to play the cello."

Her school orchestra teacher Greg Verheyn, who is no longer at Springhurst, also saw a strong interest during Checa's first few months on cello, and recommended she get private lessons from certified cello instructor Lila Ainsworth in the Melodicello Studio on the third floor of the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club, on Clinton Avenue.

"Sofia's success is her talent, but also her ability to analyze," said Ainsworth, who has continued to work with Checa. "Music is this intellectual process, it's a physical process and it's a creative process. And you have to put all these things together and spontaneously perform it at the moment."

Checa also challenges herself through karate, which she has practiced since the fourth grade. The third-degree black belt teaches karate to kids and adults at New York Goju Karate Association in Hastings several hours each week.

"You teach them something and then after you teach it they can do it," said Checa, who earned her first black belt in 2010. "It's just very rewarding. It's just a great feeling to be able to help others in that way and see how they grow."

Though Checa is modest, her mother describes her as a straight-A student, even while performing a balancing act with all of her responsibilities. A usually crowded schedule leaves Checa excited about the opportunity to attend a seven-week music program at the Meadowmount School of Music in upstate Westport this summer, where all of her attention will go to cello.

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"Everybody who goes there comes back really, really good," said Checa, whose several solo and group audition tapes earned her an invitation. "And so I'm hoping that'll be the case for me as well."

Last year Checa sharpened her skills at the Interlochen Summer Arts Camp in Michigan beside roughly 2,000 of the brightest young musicians from around the world.

According to her mother, the drive to improve has been inside Checa since she picked up the cello.

"One day I went into your room and you were practicing in the dark because you didn't want to look where your finger was," Whalen said as Checa nodded and smiled, indicating she remembered the story from when she was 8 years old. "You wanted to kind of force yourself to really listen to the sounds so you couldn't cheat looking at the strings."

Now, as her fingers effortlessly guide the music, Checa also guides her peers as principal cellist for the high school orchestra and for the New York Youth Symphony's chamber orchestra. Chamber is the symphony's smaller ensemble that on average includes around four or five musicians. As principal, Checa is the intermediary between the conductor and her group

or section, providing the right cues for everyone to stay in sync.

Checa says playing solo offers the thrill of the spotlight, while being part of a chamber group offers communication within a tight circle of musicians. But the experience of performing in an orchestra with as many as 100 musicians on stage is a thrill like no other.

"It's just this huge sound, and it just feels like you're part of something so big and important," Checa said of her concerts with the New York Youth Symphony Orchestra three times a year at Manhattan's legendary Carnegie Hall. "And everybody is just putting their everything into the music."

Although Checa boasts an impressive musical résumé, and hopes to achieve further success and to play cello wherever she attends college, she doesn't aspire to be a professional. While the bow may eventually leave her hands, she believes the melodies will never vanish from her mind.

"Music is always going to be a part of my life; I know it," she said. "I'm picturing myself when I'm old, listening to some concerto I played when I was in high school, and being like, 'I still remember every note.'"

Checa's Hudson Valley Music Club concert with the four other winners from throughout Westchester is Monday, April 28, at 1 p.m., at the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club, 54 Clinton Ave.