

# See Nathan Play

When Nathan Chan flew to New York with his mother and his 1756 Italian Domenico Busan cello to record tracks for a Beatles tribute album, he was only 13 years old. The music was transporting, and one could almost forget the surroundings — except that Roberta Flack, who had invited him, was watching from the sound booth.

In 2006, after hearing Nathan play Camille Saint-Saens' "The Swan" in an HBO documentary profiling young musicians from around the country, the Grammy-winning singer tracked him down for her project. "Nathan is perhaps one of the most inspiring human beings that I've come across in the last two decades," Flack told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Having played these past two years with the San Francisco Youth Orchestra, Nathan will make his solo debut this December with the San Francisco Symphony, pouring his rich, uniquely silken tones into the Dvorak Cello Concerto.

What does Nathan think about it all? "Awesome," he said in a recent phone interview. Also awesome, as I found out after speaking with him for a few moments, are hip-hop group the Black Eyed Peas, video games, Daft Punk (French electronica) and sushi.

The tale begins in Hillsborough, Calif., where Nathan's ascent began as a 3-year-old in diapers standing in front of the stereo conducting a Chopin waltz with a chopstick.

When he was drawn to the deep tones of the double bass in the orchestra, Nathan, at age 5, began taking private cello lessons from acclaimed cellist and instructor Irene Sharp. He grew up in a household immersed in music. His mother, Rena Ling, is an accomplished concert pianist, and his father, Samuel Chan, is a cardiologist who plays violin with the Peninsula Symphony Orchestra. His 12-year-old sister, Clara, plays violin with the Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra.

Nathan is often called a prodigy by his admirers, but his mother finds this displeasing.

"We try not to throw that word, 'prodigy,' around with all its implications. My husband and I were amazed by how intuitive he was from an early age about music, but I'm not even sure that pigeonholing him as a musician is fair. He brings that joy to everything in life."

Last year 14-year-old cellist Nathan Chan was recruited by Roberta Flack to play on her tribute album to the Beatles. This December he'll make his solo debut with the San Francisco Symphony.

Aside from his audacious talent, Nathan's life is relatively normal. He's a tenth grader at Lick-Wilmerding High School. He enjoys his friends (some are musicians, some are not). "This summer I created a cello re-mix for the video game Mario and most people my age know me from that," he said.

He practices two hours a day (he now plays a Grubaugh & Seifert) but what he cares about most is the joy of direct contact with audience. "Once I get into the music I'm blind," Nathan said. "I'm in the music completely and I want to convey the message, and before you know it — boom! — it's over and then you're taking a bow."

Nathan is also interested in how classical music can renew itself with audiences of the future. "We cellists will have to do something radical. Like the way Ravi Shankar moved into rock with the Beatles."

What about his favorite composers? Bach? Beethoven? "A lot of people ask me that and it's hard to answer," he said. "The real magic about music is that you can try out all the composers."



Jon Meyer

**"Nathan is very special. He is an old musical soul."**

— Roberta Flack  
(*San Francisco Chronicle*  
Sept. 13, 2008)



Courtesy of NAMM

Nathan playing at the 2008 NAMM Show (originally the National Association of Music Merchants).



Courtesy of Rena Ling

Nathan Chan and his family

Picking a favorite is hard. Besides classical, I like hip-hop and rap. All music is interesting but you have to give it a chance."

Does he see himself playing the cello for many years into the future?

"For me it's like a pathway in my life. My cello is always going to be there but I want to keep all options open." — Leslie Dunn

Nathan will make his solo debut with *The San Francisco Symphony* Dec. 9 through 12. He also plays with the *San Francisco Youth Symphony* in *Peter and the Wolf* Dec. 13 and 14 (see the events page).

At press time, Nathan had just won a world search of young talented musicians sponsored by British company RDF Media — a documentary project in which they search for brilliant prodigies under the age of 15. Another prodigy, Alexander Prior will compose a quintuple concerto for these specially chosen kids to be performed in London in April 2009.