

No pop music for tween violinist Sophia Fang

The 11-year-old won the top prize at the Andrea Postacchini International Violin Competition in Fermo, Italy, in May

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Unlike most of her peers, Sophia Fang dislikes pop music.

The 11-year-old is instead a fan of classical music and has also picked up the old-school hobby of crocheting.

“I find it calming and relaxing,” she says of the latter pursuit, words which the reserved and soft-spoken tween also uses to describe her chosen instrument of the violin.

The Nanyang Primary School pupil has been playing the violin since she was 3½, and in May won the top prize at the Andrea Postacchini International Violin Competition in Fermo, Italy.

The prestigious competition, which was first held in 1994, draws musicians from around the world and has developed a reputation as a talent-spotting event for young prodigies.

Singapore’s Chloe Chua, now an artist-in-residence with Singapore Symphony Orchestra, won Category A (eight to 11 years old) of the competition when she was 10 in 2017.

In addition to winning the same category, Sophia beat 98 other international participants, who were aged nine to 38, to be named overall winner of the 2023 contest.

While she used a three-quartersized loaned violin for the competition, she won her first full-sized violin – an instrument specially made for the competition by luthier Giovanni Lazzaro.

Her other prizes included a Medal of the Senate of the Italian Republic and €1,400

(S\$2,040) in cash.

Sophia flew to Fermo for the competition after her mid-year examinations in May, and was accompanied by her mother, a marketing manager in her early 40s, and her violin teacher Lynette Lim, who is in her 50s.

Her father, a doctor in his early 40s, stayed in Singapore with her three younger sisters aged three, six and eight, two of whom also play the violin.

Participants in her age category were required to play two unaccompanied etudes – short pieces meant to focus on specific techniques – and one main piece accompanied by an Italian pianist.

They were judged by an international, seven-member jury of accomplished violinists.

“Leading up to the competition, I took extra lessons with Ms Lim and practised extra hard, occasionally up to four to five hours a day. I usually practise two hours a day on most days, for six days a week,” says Sophia, who picked up the violin after seeing an older friend playing it.

She came under the tutelage of Ms Lim – who trained under renowned Russia-born American classical violinist Josef Gingold – in 2020.

Ms Lim, who has been teaching the instrument for more than 30 years, says of her student: “She has extremely fast, articulate fingers and is very co-ordinated. After just under two years of working with me, she won the first prize in the violin junior category at the National Piano & Violin Competition 2021.”

Sophia was taken by complete surprise on being named overall winner of the competition in Fermo.

“I did not really believe it, and felt a bit like I was in a dream when the jury members congratulated me and the violin-maker introduced the violin to us,” she says.

She has been making good use of the instrument since her return to Singapore.

“I want to participate in more international competitions and, eventually, I would like to play with an orchestra.”

Playing the violin on stage is the place where she feels most comfortable, she adds.

“On the day of the Postacchini competition, I was very anxious before my turn. But the moment I walked on stage and started to play, I calmed down.

“When I am on stage playing the violin, any initial nervousness I feel always disappears,” she says.