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Students Get an Earful From Celebrated Musician

By Cathy Tyson



Photo Cathy Tyson

As part of San Francisco Performances' outreach program, Dr. Vijay Iyer, renowned musician, dropped in on two Stanley Band classes last week. The students were on their best behavior to meet Dr. Iyer- he's a famous Jazz Pianist with undergraduate degrees in Math and Physics from Yale, a Master of Science degree in Physics from UC Berkeley and a Doctorate in Technology and the Arts, also from UC Berkeley. He started playing the violin at age three.

All grown up now, he's currently a New York based jazz pianist, composer and producer and is also a faculty member at the Manhattan School of Music, New York University and The New School.

The Stanley students were just happy he was in their classroom. Dr. Iyer's advice: "Play rhythmically, don't worry about the notes, they'll come." When asked by teacher Bob Athayde about his unique combination of a background in math and science and the messiness of jazz, Iyer replied, "There's uncertainty in science - there's always a degree of flexibility and noise - so I embrace that as part of the musical process." Students also got the scoop on improvising, "look for what's close at hand and put it to

use."

Although clearly academically gifted, and one of the top jazz pianists of a generation, mastering electronic music and acoustic jazz, Iyer was very plainspoken with the students, suggesting that improvisation is all about, "Putting it together in small chunks that sound good."

He's released fifteen albums; the latest, in 2011 is "Tirtha," the debut of a trio with guitarist -composer who goes by a single name, Prasanna and tabla player Nitin Mitta. A tabla is an Indian percussion instrument used in Hindustani classical music.

The visit was sponsored by San Francisco Performances Arts Education Program that is supported by foundations, corporations and individual donors. They work with artists and schools to bring internationally acclaimed artists to audiences of all ages throughout the Bay Area. While the kids were packing up as class ended, they were giddy, exclaiming it was "so fun," "a 'ten'" and "awesome." It's fair to say the program's goal of opening student's minds to the beauty and power of music was exceeded.

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