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Marimba Missionary

School of Music student wins young artist award.



Matthew Stiens, a sophomore marimba player, won a 2013 Naftzger Young Artists Auditions April 27 at Wichita State University. Photo by Nicholas Benner.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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Matthew Stiens almost didn't win an award at the 2013 Naftzger Young Artists Auditions April 27 at Wichita State University. The sophomore marimba player,

from St. Charles, Mo., rolled his instrument to the stage for the first round of auditions and then went to a coffee shop to do homework and wait for a callback. The call never came.

“I packed up and got ready to drive home but decided to stop by the school to just make sure I didn’t get it,” Stiens says.

He superficially checked the list once, twice, three times before he finally gave the list a good hard look.

“My name was right there on the finals list,” he says, incredulously. “I was totally shaking. My knees were falling out from under me.”

Stiens took home the top prize for the instrumental division and a \$2,000 check. His winning performance included a Bach sonata.

For Stiens, a percussion performance major, playing the marimba has been a frustrating experience at times.

The modern marimba was developed based on a similar but smaller instrument played in Africa and South America. It wasn’t until the early 1900s that the marimba was popularized by Clair Omar Musser who organized large marimba orchestras — his largest group was an orchestra of 300 marimbas at the Chicago Railroad Fair in 1950. Solo marimba playing didn’t become popular until the 1970s.

“It’s cool to be a part of something new,” Stiens says.
“But the best composers didn’t write for the marimba. It would be nice to have that literature. That’s something we missed out on.”

However it allows for some exciting opportunities, too. For instance, at the annual Percussive Arts Society International Convention, Stiens will rub elbows with world-renowned marimba players Kevin Bobo and Leigh Howard Stevens,

“It’s like being able to see the Founding Fathers,” Stiens says.

Being surrounded by famous conductors and musicians isn’t entirely new to Stiens. During summer 2012, he attended the eight-week Aspen Music Festival and School in Colorado, going to master classes and playing in orchestras. While there, Stiens became the first percussionist in 28 years to win the concerto competition.

This summer, Stiens is participating in the Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program through the College of Arts and Sciences. Along with Julia Gaines, associate professor of percussion in the School of Music, Stiens will research a two-mallet matrix for the marimba. Gaines has already developed a four-mallet grading matrix where she grades pieces of a scale from one to 10, one being easy to play and 10 being very difficult.

“Pianists and violinists have had forever to grade their

pieces and figure out what the progression is from easy to hard,” Stiens says. “The marimba, not so much.

“It’s cool being able to play new literature and get it out there, be a missionary for the instrument and solo marimba playing,” he says. “People don’t realize the possibilities it has.”

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