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## Meet Lebanon County piano virtuoso Max Ludwig



by **James Mentzer**

August 24, 2020 7 min read



Ludwig's music instructors rave about his raw talent and ability to adapt to multiple musical styles. The local pianist has built up an impressive professional resume for a 17-year-old. (Provided photo)

Max Ludwig first played the national anthem on the sax after listening to a singer perform it on Opening Day for the Philadelphia Phillies.

He did so without having sheet music in front of him. He had never attempted to play that song before. He didn't miss a single note, nailing what some consider to be one of the most difficult tunes to play.

And, he accomplished this amazing feat when he was only 10 years old.

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Now 17, Ludwig has used the past seven years to hone his God-given gift by practicing and turning his talent into something of a cash cow, a transition witnessed firsthand by this reporter, who's a friend of the family.

Not only does he get paid to play gigs in a two-man band called Indigo Cosmos, but he's also the church pianist at Zoar Lutheran Church, located on the 500 block of Freeport Road in Mount Zion.

It was during his confirmation project at his home church, Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jonestown, that he had a revelation.

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“I can do this for a job, I can really put what I do to use,” Ludwig said. “So I offered to the church to be a substitute [pianist].”

Following his confirmation project, which included selecting hymns for the service and then writing an essay as to why he selected that particular music, his grandmother Elaine Ludwig, who had connections at Zoar Lutheran Church, got him a full-time job.

When he’s not tickling the ivories on a Sunday morning during the worship service, he spends time composing music for Indigo Cosmos. The band released their first single, “With Me,” last year and their debut album Quarantine Blues dropped in May on Spotify and other internet music channels like [YouTube](#).

Max Ludwig



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In addition to his raw talent, Ludwig also possesses absolute, or perfect, pitch.

Perfect pitch is the rare ability of a person to identify or recreate a given musical note without the benefit of a reference tone. It may be demonstrated by using linguistic labeling, associating mental imagery with the note, or sensorimotor responses.

"I started off with relative pitch, which is where if you play a note, I can tell you what note it is. I can hear it and it registers in my mind as an A flat or F sharp or whatever it is," Ludwig said. "Over the last couple of years, I've developed more of a perfect pitch, which is when you can pull a note out of nowhere and identify it is an A flat or F sharp or whatever."



Ludwig has played “The Star-Spangled Banner” several times on Opening Day for his baseball teams.  
(Photo provided)

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While musical experts are divided on whether perfect pitch occurs via nature, nurture or is a combination of both, one thing is certain: it benefits Ludwig’s craft.

“It’s pretty rare,” Ludwig said. “I haven’t done a lot of research on it but my choir teacher says that less than one percent of the people in the world have the ability and most people don’t even know that they have it. They might be able to do it, but if they weren’t raised by parents who encourage music in their lives, it is hard for them to understand something that they have that’s a completely different language.”

Max’s mother, Nancy Ludwig, who listens to music constantly and attends many live shows with her husband, Travis – including one by the band Cracker when she was overdue to deliver her firstborn child – believes perfect pitch is a combination of nurture and nature.

“I think it is probably a little bit of both, because he doesn’t feel like he’s always had perfect pitch, but it is something that he’s been able to develop over time and come to realize that he has it,” Nancy said. “As parents, we’ve

always encouraged him [to play music and take lessons]. And our church is a very nurturing place, too.”

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She said Joel and Maryann Guldin, who are the musical directors at Zion Lutheran Church, have played an instrumental role in the musical development of not only Max but of all the children who worship there.

“They really encourage the youth to get involved in the music,” Nancy said. “And I believe the children feel like they can perform in a safe and welcoming environment without being judged by others like they would in other public places, and I believe that is a huge benefit to the kids.”

After his impromptu performance in the living room, Max played “The Star-Spangled Banner” several times on Opening Day for his baseball teams. Ludwig’s first public performance in a band was in 2017 at St. Thomas Roasters in Linglestown, with a trio called T & T. Besides composing some original pieces for the group, he also crafted some melody mash-ups of popular tunes from such bands as The Beatles and The Doors during his time in the band.

Ludwig has “perfect pitch,” which is the ability to identify or recreate any given note without reference.  
(Photo provided)



Soon after he joined the group, the trio landed a semi-regular gig performing on Friday evenings at Crave restaurant near Harrisburg.

“We would play from 6 until 9 and people would enjoy their dinner and listen to our music,” Max said. “We were under 18 and Crave did not have a liquor license, so that was a great place to play. The people really loved having us at Crave. We got paid to play and we were allowed to put out a tip jar as well.”

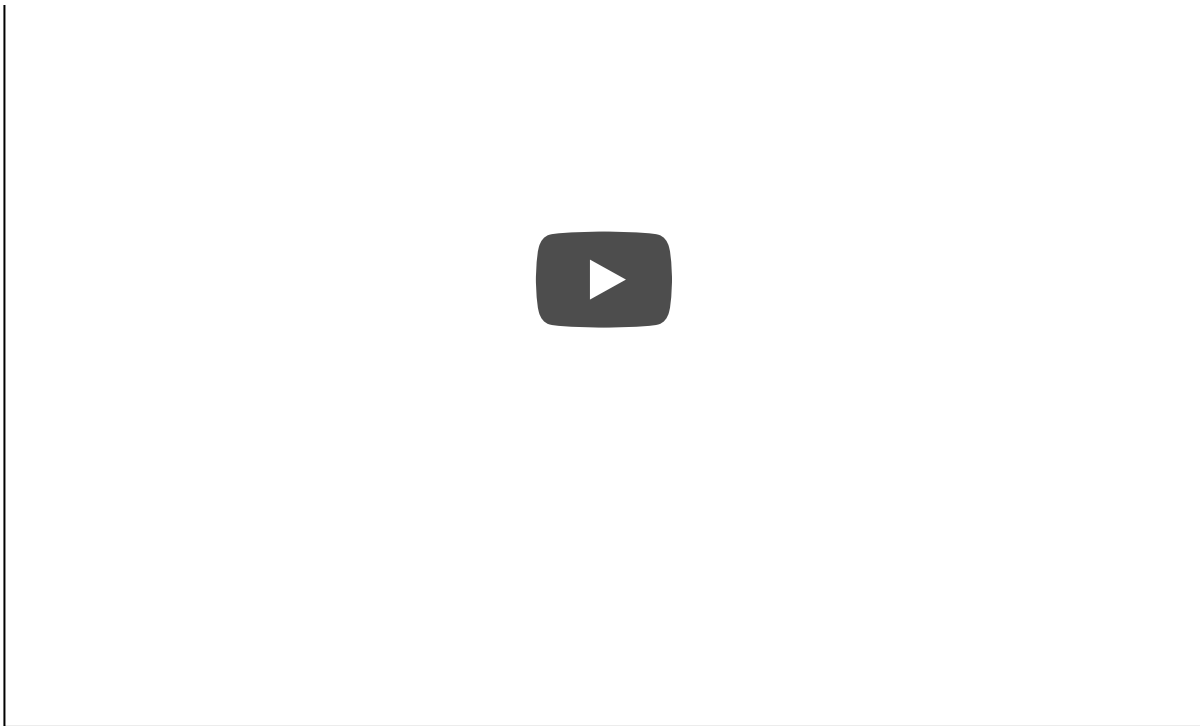
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Ludwig’s musical journey began in the 4th grade when he started playing both the sax and piano. It wasn’t long, however, before he pivoted to primarily playing the piano.

“What I realized about the piano is that it is kind of the basis of music,” Max said. “All of the notes that are on the staff, and you are reading both staves together and reading multiple notes at the same time, makes it the most complex form of an instrument there is. Well, that and the organ. Most instruments you only play one note at a time. Piano lays it all out in front of you and it feels like the keys are a code or a mathematical equation.”

Quarantine Blues (Intro)



Max has managed to craft an impressive resume in just seven years of his music career.

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He is a member of the Central Dauphin High School's CD Singers and Jazz Orchestra. He's been an accompanist for the school's choir since 2015, starting when he was in the 6th grade, which was a first for the school district, and he's been a member of the The Susquehanna Youth Chorale, a local

musical ensemble that is a part of the prestigious Susquehanna Chorale, since 2014. (His younger sister Grace is also a member of The Susquehanna Youth Chorale.)

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While Max has many other musical accomplishments, including winning several local classical music competitions, he loves the complex stylings of such classical composers as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. He's also a big fan of the improvisational style of jazz music, and has had the honor of performing at the Ellington Jazz Festival in Philadelphia.

His current piano teacher, Shelly Moorman-Stahlman, who is a professor of music at Lebanon Valley College, said Max is an exceptional student.

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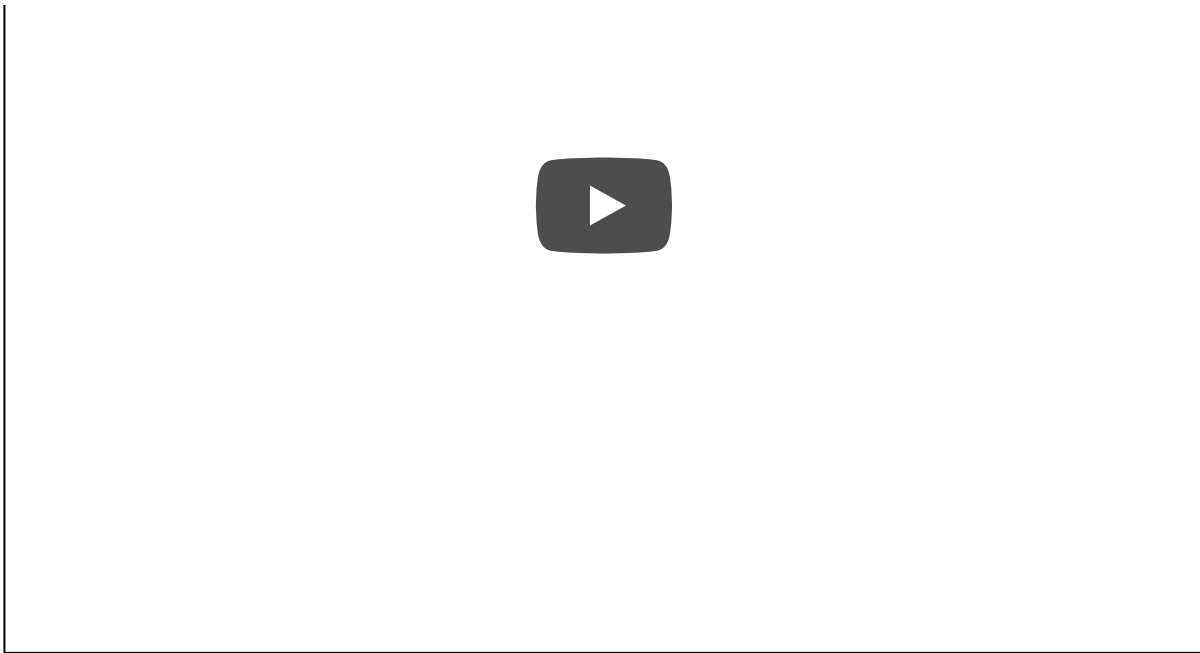
“He has an extremely good ear and what sets him aside from other students his age is that he is extremely musical and sensitive to the music; he’s able to play very expressively,” Moorman-Stahlman said. “He has a wide range of skills and interests. So, he can play something from the classic period all the way to the contemporary realm and adapt his technique to each. He also sight-reads really quickly and he can learn music very fast.”

“Man, that kid,” said George Diehl, director of the Susquehanna Youth Chorale. “He’s absolutely insane when it comes to music and I’ve heard he’s even stronger in his academics. The level of musicianship in that kid is well beyond his years. I didn’t even know he played music until he sat down at the piano one day and pounded out tune after tune. Man, it was impressive.”

Diehl said it didn’t take long to know Max had the gift of perfect pitch.

“His brain works in such ways that are way beyond the ability of many adults,” Diehl said. “I believe his perfect pitch has a ringer to it. It’s a nice supplement that when he realized it, it gave him another tool to use with his music.”

**With Me**



Diehl noted that ability, of course, is heightened by countless hours of practicing your trade.

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“It’s not only cognizant awareness, but all of the time he spends practicing, too,” Diehl said. “There’s the scale work, but you go beyond that to learn and see the patterns within the music. Whether it be jazz or classical, you’re learning patterns that are appropriate for the music of that time period.”

Diehl was quick to point out that, talent aside, Max is a grounded and well-rounded young man, too.

“He has no ego, no sense of ‘me first.’ He’s such a welcoming and open individual, which is great to see in the world today, and he’s a wonderful person as well,” Diehl said.

While he plans to major in electrical engineering and get a minor degree in jazz piano when he goes to college in the fall of 2021, Max demonstrates his humility when asked if he might tell his parents that he is skipping college to become a rock-n-roll star.

“I don’t think I’m ready for that,” Ludwig says, after chuckling at the audacity of that question. “I have a lot more practicing to do before I’m ready to be a music star.”

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