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16 pianos, 32 children, then rotate: It's 'wonderful, crazy' at Brookdale

It's 10 minutes before showtime and Beth S. Chen is bouncing up and down the steps of the Performing Arts Center at Brookdale Community College, with her purse swaying from her left arm, shaking hands with guests and calling out names from a mental Rolodex with just a hint of tension.

The names are of the pianists she will be guiding from a wooden box on the auditorium stage in about five minutes. The performers are seasoned but young; all can see over the pianos they will play, but for most of them, just barely.

Chen briefly disappears from the crowd and then reintroduces herself from the wooden box. She's traded the purse for a baton. Thirty-two children find their place at 16 pianos (two at a bench) and, in unison, finger the opening notes of "Spring," from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," and, *voila*, harmony is struck.

In less than a minute, Chen signals a stop and the children are ushered off the stage. A new set of players is summoned and begins another tune, the "Frere Jacques" theme from Mahler's First Symphony. And so on.

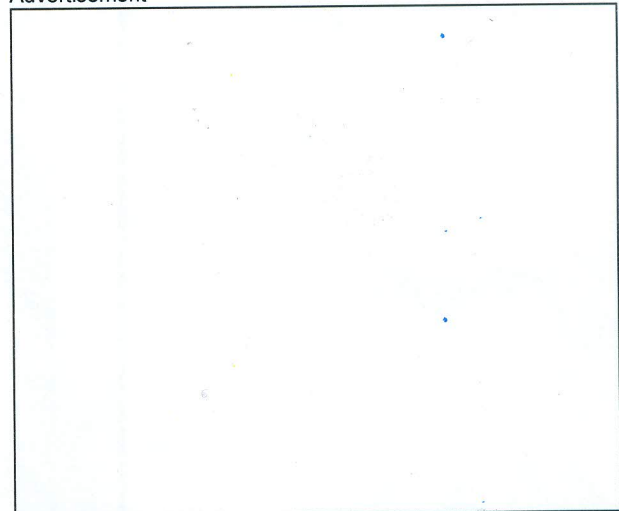
This is the measured chaos — or "wonderful crazy," Chen says — that she oversees once a year, in a sort of quick hit, musical chairs recital she dreamed up 14 years ago called the "Monster Concert."

It is an exercise in time management, patience and playing well with others, and Chen is the maestro who pulls — and keeps — it all together, said Michael Diehl, who loans the pianos for the annual concert from his store, Freehold Music Center.

It begins in living rooms and recital halls all across the state, with some 200 students practicing with their teachers the list of pieces to be played. The Saturday before the concert — it is always on a Sunday — they practice for the first time together, covering, in this year's case, 14 numbers in a 7-hour span, discovering the rough edges, smoothing them out and then refining the performance to an all-at-once staggered but seamless showcase.

"Very difficult," Chen said. "But it's all a

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concerted effort for success.”

When Chen, a member of the [Cecilian Music Club of Freehold](#), which puts on the show, pitched the idea to Diehl, of the [Freehold Music Center](#), he laughed. Pulling together a couple hundred kids from all over the state to play everything from the Baroque period to The Beatles era?

“I said, ‘Yeah, well I’d like to go to California,’” Diehl said.

But it has worked, and on Sunday, the students proved just as much, masterfully working their way through solemn folk songs (“Chinese Lullaby”), jaunty children’s tunes (“Bingo”), contemporary classics (“Yesterday”) and just about everything else in between (“Canon In D,” “Boogie For Two,” “Immortelle No. 2”).

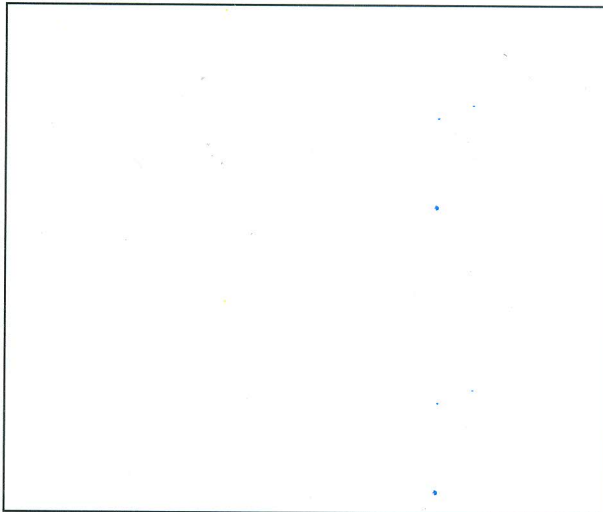
It appears as if months of practice went into the performance, but that is the work of Chen, who has waved her baton in front of students on stages in Shanghai, Italy, Manhattan and, of course, Lincroft.

“To put a program out like this, it’s simple, really,” Diehl, oozing sarcasm, said. “You just need somebody that’s a dynamo.”

Or, as Chen said in the harried moments before the show, a patient and skillful group of musicians to work with.

“It’s very inspiring, the feeling of camaraderie,” Chen said. “You get together and everybody is rooting for success.”

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