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Steinway and Sound Program Resonates with Audience

Cathy Dausman



Holmes and Levitt in a musical duet Photo Cathy Dausman

Justin Levitt exploded a Steinway grand piano and the audience, all 130 of them, ate it up. Then Brian Holmes assembled a working trumpet from a garden hose and plastic funnel. The two were featured speakers January 24 at a Lafayette Library and Learning Center (LLLC) Foundation Science Cafe.

The event, The Science of Steinway and Sound, was a sold-out success. Of course Levitt didn't literally explode a grand piano—he just detailed how some of its 12,000 parts are assembled. The Steinway on display was the library's own model B. Its seven foot frame is built up from 16 laminations of hard rock maple (each layer 3/16" thick) that are bent continuously by hand. When complete, the downward pressure pulling the 240-some strings to pitch amounts to the weight of a gorilla (or another grand piano), standing on the soundboard. Levitt, store manager for Sherman Clay in Walnut Creek, likened the musical sound which travels along the wood grain to cars on a highway. Essentially, the music goes 'round and round and comes out here, and that would be the perfect intro for Brian Holmes and his portion of the presentation.

Holmes is a guest lecturer, musician (brass), composer and Professor of Physics at San Jose State University whose interests in science and music merge in the science of musical acoustics. Holmes began by shaking a 20-foot long slinky to demonstrate how sound waves form. Each wave travelled out, reached the end of the line and returned, inverted. Next Holmes enthusiastically assembled a trumpet, piece by piece, starting with a thin metal tube four and a half feet long. He added a mouthpiece, a bell, and presto! --- a modern day trumpet was born.

The program included solo and duet piano performances by Sue Hammond, David Glass and Levitt, and a piano and French Horn duet with Holmes on the horn. The program, scheduled to last an hour, ran 30 minutes over, but the audience sat enraptured. Foundation Executive Director Kathy Merchant was most pleased: "Little did we know when our trustee (Margaret Race) broached the idea of converting the Community Hall to a "science" cafe", we would be discussing everything from the science of art conservation to building Hoover Dam."

Science Cafe is a regularly scheduled presentation of the LLLC Foundation. Its next program, February 28th at 7 p.m., honors the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge. Science Cafe is held in the library's Community Hall. Cost is \$5 per person; reservations can be made at reserve@LLLCF.org or call (925) 283-6513, ext. 102, with questions.



From left, front: Kathy Merchant, Marinda Wu; back: Brian Holmes, Sue Hammond, David Glass and Justin Levitt
Photo Cathy Dausman

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[back](#)

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