

Hudson, Wis.

## Will meets world

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Will Roberts could sing entire songs before he could speak sentences. Music has been a lifeline for the autistic teen. Tonight, he'll share his talents on a much larger stage.

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Willie Roberts, 13, left, practices with a echo mic with his music teacher Melissa Wenzell on the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at the MacPhail School of Music in downtown Minneapolis on Tuesday, April 24,2007. Roberts will sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at homeplate during the 7th inning of the Twins game tonight at the Metrodome.

(Photo: Sherri LaRose-Chiglo, Pioneer Press)

Will Roberts didn't learn to talk when the other kids did. But he sang. And tonight, Will, who is 13 and has autism, will perform for his largest audience ever - at the Metrodome. He's scheduled to sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," during the seventh-inning stretch at the Twins game.

Will is so excited, tonight couldn't come soon enough.

Rehearsing with his music teacher a week ago, he suggested, "Let's do it today."

"No, not today," said his teacher.

"Tomorrow, then," said Will.

He was chosen to perform after he submitted a tape of himself singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," which is one of his favorite songs. The youngest of seven children in a family of competitive swimmers, Will heard the national anthem at the start of every swim meet. He's confused when he attends a sports event that doesn't begin with the song.

He always sings it before he swims or goes out running. He grew up with his mother, Sue Roberts, a marathon runner, pushing him in a jogging stroller when she practiced. Now he pushes a one-eyed toy monkey in the stroller as he runs a six-mile circuit through his Hudson, Wis., neighborhood every day.

You can expect surprises with Will. While attending his older brother's wedding, he spotted a stream and mentioned swimming. Then he jumped in wearing his tuxedo. When the family dog died, he suggested a trip to the hardware store "to get something to fix him." Then he had another thought: "Or, we can sell him on eBay."

Will's autism was diagnosed when he was 3. Until then, his mother was still waiting for him to talk. "If you spoke to him, he wouldn't respond, but if you sang to him, he did," Roberts said. "He'd remember a whole song if you played a song for him, and yet he couldn't give you sentences." Communicating with him was "like a little opera."

Will can memorize song lyrics more quickly than anyone else in his family, and he frequently can sing a song after hearing it only once.

Researchers have discovered that Will and others with autism are able to communicate through singing more readily than speaking because music helps the brain weave connections that otherwise remain broken. The rhythms and other patterns in music helped Will to rearrange and express his disordered thoughts.

"Music is a whole-brain experience, with more neurons firing, more connections being made and therefore more opportunities for success since there are more areas holding the information," said Melissa Wenzell, Will's music therapy teacher at the MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis.

Will eventually learned to talk. He's a sixth-grader, swims well and rides a bicycle, in addition to running. He attends summer camp and likes it so much he has poster-size pictures of his counselors on the walls of his room, which he labeled with a sign: "Cabin One."

His friends include Jamie Lowell, who wrote a book about Will and his autism when they were third-graders. It was published under the title, "My Best Friend Will."

Like many kids with his disorder, Will can become fixated on certain subjects. He's been focused on refrigerators ever since his family got rid of one. He's filled the basement with foil-covered cardboard box "refrigerators." One of his favorite stores is Best Buy. When he meets someone for the first time, the first thing he's likely to ask is:

"What color is your refrigerator?" Then, he wants to know if it's a side-by-side.

Will thrives on routines and schedules. Tuesday is MacPhail day, which means music and Melissa (Wenzell, his teacher). He has taken music therapy lessons with Wenzell for three years. He sings and tries out instruments including drums, guitar, accordion, piano and trumpet. His siblings, who all play string instruments, studied at MacPhail as well.

About 60 percent of Wenzell's students were diagnosed with autism and related disorders. For them, music is a tool for accomplishing nonmusical goals. Some develop fine motor skills, for example, by picking up a drumstick or plucking guitar strings.

Will sometimes works at listening to certain sounds and filtering out others. This helps him focus on particular tasks at home and in the classroom. In addition, music is a subject he can talk about with other kids. He owns an iPod and downloads songs.

"Every day he surprises me," Wenzell said. "He is just an all-around impressive guy. I feel honored to work with him."

There is no artifice in Will's view of the world, and he remembers and notices details, such as Wenzell's hair being parted on a different side or the squeak of a door, that few others would.

"He picks up on things the rest of the world kind of goes by," she said.

Wenzell will accompany Will on guitar tonight. She's certain she'll be nervous playing in front of a crowd, but those who know Will anticipate he'll do just fine.

"He'll just keep going. He's steady," Wenzell said.

Apparently, he's already getting ready for another engagement - a sister's wedding in the fall. He sang the Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" at another sister's wedding reception a few years ago. This time he's taking his cue from Frank Sinatra.

When Will's mother arrived at the music studio to take Will home after a recent lesson, Wenzell announced, "He sang 'The Way You Look Tonight.' "

His mother was surprised. "He did?" she said.

Will explained. "I heard the song on the radio one time."

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