



Chen Xinyu, eight, performing a pipa solo at the prize winners' concert and prize presentation ceremony. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Pint-sized pipa player

Walter Sim

Looking calm and composed, eight-year-old Chen Xinyu took the stage of the Singapore Conference Hall solo on Sunday.

In her arms was the instrument she has come to love after three years of playing it – the pipa.

Gently, she plucked her first note and by the time she had finished Spring In Tianshan, she had wowed the 630-strong audience.

Xinyu was performing at the prize winners' concert and prize presentation ceremony of the eighth biennial National Chinese Music Competition.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was the guest of honour and Mr Lawrence Wong, Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, also attended the performance.

The pupil at Hong Wen Primary had beaten 26 others to emerge tops in the junior pipa category in the competition. It had started with preliminary rounds on Nov 27.

Xinyu, who was the competition's youngest participant, said: "I am happy and surprised, because I think the other participants in my category also played quite well."

This is her second pipa competition. She had also taken part in China's Liaoyuan International Pipa Competition in July.

She said she let her nerves get in the

way then, facing off against 107 others in the final round of the junior category, and only managed to clinch a bronze award.

"That experience taught me to not be so nervous and to perform with more confidence," she said. "My mother also told me to just enjoy my music."

Since the school holidays, Xinyu, who goes for pipa lessons at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, has been practising the four-string lute six to eight hours a day.

The daughter of a private tutor mother and IT project manager father, both Chinese immigrants who are now Singapore citizens, she also counts among her other interests the Chinese chess game weiqi, calligraphy and the piano.

An avid reader, she has also taken an interest in her 14-year-old brother's textbooks.

Said her mother Li Haiying, 40: "We did not want her to forget her roots, and so are trying to expose her to Chinese culture from young."

For her win, Xinyu takes home \$500, a trophy and a certificate.

Organised by the National Arts Council and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, the competition awards outstanding solo players who excel in any of eight instruments – dizi, erhu, guzheng, pipa, sheng, suona, yangqin and zhongruan.

The solo section is divided into three age groups – junior for those 12 and younger, youth for 18 and younger and open for 30 and younger.

There is also an ensemble section for instrumental and percussion groups.

This year, there were 389 participants, up from 353 in 2010, the last time the competition was held.

"The standards in Singapore exceeded my expectations – I did not expect so many outstanding youngsters at the competition," said Ms Wang Chang Yuan, director of the New York Overseas Chinese Orchestra, one of the judges.

"As more youngsters pick up Chinese instruments, the art continues to live on."

Singapore Chinese Orchestra erhu associate principal Ling Hock Siang, who has been a judge in the last three competitions, said that the standards have become higher among the participants.

"Chinese orchestras are in schools of all levels, and it is heartening to see more young people being motivated enough to gain competition experience."

Other participants included Lee Wen Di, 17, who came in tops in the youth suona category. She competed against her twin sister Wen Li.

Wen Di, who is older by four minutes, came in first, while her sister clinched third place.

Wen Li said: "Having my sister in the same competition is a good thing, as we can help each other out and provide feedback as we rehearse."

Wen Di added: "There wasn't any sibling rivalry, but more of healthy competition to inspire us to do better."