

BOCA RATON — His tiny hands glide across piano keys like skates on ice and the music he makes with them is music not even some seasoned pianists can play.

Mark Mayea is only 12 years old. Puberty hasn't hit him just yet. His mother still tucks him into bed at night. He loves chocolate-chip cookies with milk and playing with remote-controlled cars.

Though he isn't yet a grown man, Mark can play the piano even better than some who have been playing for years. His performances have brought people to tears and have moved some so much, he caught the attention of the Palm Beach Pops and the Steinway Piano Gallery in Boca Raton.

The two groups joined together to give Mark something that will help him reach his dream of becoming a concert pianist and conductor one day: a 7-foot Steinway sub-concert grand piano.

Only 350 of them are made in the United States each year and each costs about \$66,000.

Mark was accepted into the Palm Beach Pops Florida Stars program this year, and that included mentoring from Bob Lappin, the Pops' conductor and music director.

On Saturday, Lappin stood above Mark as Mark positioned himself behind a piano at the Steinway Piano Gallery, where Mark graciously accepted his gift.

Wearing a suit and blue paisley tie, he started to play. And everyone in the gallery couldn't help but watch.

As he performed the piece called *Danza Del Gaucho Matrero*, his dark brown eyes stared intently at the piano as his fingers chased the keys, as if they were diamonds he was trying to catch. He pressed his lips, hunched his back and created music that made Lappin applaud and smile.

"There are very few seasoned pianists who can play that," Lappin said of the piece. "It's so technical. He just started learning that four or five weeks ago. That's unbelievable. We're going to follow his career all the way through."

The Steinway piano is now in Mark's living room, in a condominium in Crystal Palms, Boca Raton, where he lives with his parents, Diana and Fred Mayea, and his older brother Alex. He told Lappin he would practice at least four hours a day.

When the soon-to-be seventh-grader at Omni Middle School was only 5, his parents bought him a toy keyboard.

He began to play theme songs from children's shows such as *Sesame Street*, and

he played them by memory, with perfect pitch. His parents placed him in a school for music, where he excelled quickly.

They wanted Mark eventually to have a piano of his own, but the Mayeas had no money. So they sold their minivan and bargained with the seller until they could afford to buy one.

Mark has decided to donate that piano to the Palm Beach County Substance Abuse Coalition group in Palm Beach Gardens.

No one else in the family plays the piano.

"It's no longer *Mary Had a Little Lamb*," Fred Mayea said. "It's real music. We sit and listen. It's amazing, for a little kid like him."

Mark has a gift, his parents said. He's blessed with a talent that allows him not only to create music, but also to communicate with the audience. He can make people feel what he's feeling. And that, Lappin said, is what the arts are all about. To make people feel.

"I can hear the music in my head. I feel the emotion of the piece. I feel sad, angry, happy," Mark said. "I just love it. Until the day I die, I will play the piano."