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**Pianist David Wolff** is careful around the ski slopes.

# A virtuoso in the making

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What were you doing when you were, say, 16, 17, 18 years old?

Worrying about the prom? Dreaming of your first car? Wondering which college you might attend?

Chances are you weren't like David Wolff, an 18-year-old who is about to graduate from the University of Washington and move on to piano-performance graduate school at Juilliard. David has spent the past two years applying the accelerator pedal to his university career, practicing four or five hours a day, learning several foreign languages, and learning how to eat on the cheap from the Thai, Korean and Ethiopian restaurants just around the corner from his U District apartment.

Choosing a major wasn't hard. It was pretty obvious, from the time he was 8, that David Wolff wanted to be a concert pianist, and would spend the next decade in fairly single-minded pursuit of that goal.

But David is not the kind of super-achieving automaton who'll sneer if you

split an infinitive. He is a quiet-spoken, humorous guy who looks clean-cut but not particularly nerdy. He exudes a calm friendliness and enjoys a lot of normal teenage pursuits. On the weekends, he might see a movie, play tennis, or go to church, or go skiing.

Skiing?

With those delicate and highly skilled hands that might earn him fame and fortune in a few short years?

"Well, I'm sort of careful," David admits, with a grin. "But I'm not mental about it."

That's a good general description of this guy, who describes his self-taught progress in learning Korean and his self-directed home schooling with the same matter-of-fact air he might use in relaying the plot of "The Age of Innocence." It's not that he was pushed by his parents, or that he galloped through school in a race with the clock. It's just that the next stage of education was never quite challenging.

PLEASE SEE **Wolff** ON F 7

# From early on, he wanted to be a concert pianist

## Wolff

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enough.

David grew up in Lake Stevens with his parents — a building contractor and an English teacher — and three brothers. Their family appreciates music but doesn't boast any professional musicians. His mom played the piano, so young David asked for lessons when he was 6 and was advised to wait a year. At 7, he began and was "very interested right away." Nobody had to tell him to practice; they had to tell him to stop.

By the time he was 12, he was good enough to audition for concert pianist Robin McCabe, who immediately accepted him as a student and later helped arrange for his early entry at the UW.

David's schooling began traditionally enough with public school at Lake Stevens' Pilchuck Elementary, where he was in the gifted program. He skipped fourth grade, and by the time he got to middle school in seventh grade, he developed what he now calls "a great dislike for school."

What happened?

"In grade school, I had some wonderful teachers and an open environment," he explains. "We did a lot of extra things, and students could move forward at their own rate.

"In middle school, we just sat around in rows, listened to the teacher and went on to the next class. It seemed like a dark environment to me. I was very quiet in class. Every morning, I can remember not wanting to go. I knew I could do a lot more in less time."

That's exactly what he did.

David studied at home, devising

his own curriculum under the supervision of his parents. He corrected his own work from the teacher's editions of his schoolbooks, and added a course at the high school. By ninth grade, he added a few more high-school courses, and by 10th grade, he had entered Everett Community College as a 15-year-old in the "Running Start" program, through which the state sends the educational dollars to a college instead of the high school and the student gets simultaneous credit for both college and high-school courses.

He never did earn a high-school diploma. It wasn't really necessary when he passed several UW tests with ease and could essentially enter

as an upper classman. Taking a full academic load as well as practicing piano all those daily hours might sound like a lot, but David still has time to study additional subjects — such as the Korean language, which he's learning because "half the students at Juilliard are Korean, and it'll be fun to be able to talk to them. I hope to become fluent." Here's betting he will.

There is no TV set in the almost preternaturally clean apartment he shares with his brother Joshua. No Game Boy, either. David is clear about what his future will require: "To have a career, you usually have to win a competition. I may be starting that as soon as next year."

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*Two concerts in the next few days will mark more steps on David Wolff's ladder of preparation. On Saturday, there's an 8 p.m. recital (Bach, Chopin, Debussy and Prokofiev) in Everett Community Theater (\$7 and \$10, 1-206-259-8888). David's senior recital is set for Nov. 14 at 8 p.m. in Brechemin Auditorium of the UW Music Building (it's free).*