

# He's more than a musician

*Rex Lewis-Clack, 13, is a musical savant — he is also blind and autistic. Born with sound and touch aversions, noises such as running water used to make him scream. But after receiving a keyboard for his second birthday, Rex began exposing a dynamic musical gift where he can hear a classical piece of music once and then play it back note for note. Cathleen Lewis, Rex's mother, stands in awe of her son's gifts and says she has seen glimpses of God because of them.*

*Recently, she spoke with Managing Editor Kirk Noonan about her book, Rex: A Mother, Her Autistic Child, and the Music That Transformed Their Lives (2008, Thomas Nelson).*



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**tpe:** Rex has garnered a lot of attention because of his musical abilities — what else about him captivates you?

**LEWIS:** The most incredible thing about him is the inner joy that lights up his personality. I always tell people who want to hear his music that they need to see the boy first because the music is only one part of the boy.

**tpe:** You're a single mom determined to give your son as normal an upbringing as possible. How have you done that?

**LEWIS:** From the beginning I've gone to great lengths to take him into the world as much as possible. I also understood early on that he was not going to develop as a typical child, so I plunged into his world. By doing both we've been drawn closer. We're best friends who love each other and have so much fun together.

**tpe:** The end of your marriage to Rex's father nearly coincides with a spiritual awakening in you. Could you talk about that?

**LEWIS:** When my marriage fell apart, I was shattered and almost had a nervous breakdown. Back then, Rex didn't sleep for more than two hours at a stretch, which meant I didn't sleep for more than two hours at a time. I think I was running on pure adrenaline. But all of that brought me to a realization that I couldn't do it on my own.

**tpe:** What changed your situation?

**LEWIS:** I was falling apart and started thinking about spiritual things. A babysitter I had hired had spoken to me about church. I knew she went and she was very loving, but it wasn't until my brother visited that things really changed in my life.

**tpe:** What happened?

**LEWIS:** My daily existence was like being a prisoner who had to watch her son get tortured by everyday things like the turning on of a light or the sound of running water.

He was so sensitive to such things. I couldn't figure out why he would be obliged to live such a life, so at the end of my rope I blurted out, "What's all this for?"

My brother quickly responded, "It's to glorify God."

He then shared with me his new faith in Jesus Christ. There was a calm in his being, and he told me it would probably help me to go to church. So I did.

**tpe:** What happened at church?

**LEWIS:** At first I was terrified about going into a church because Rex would make strange sounds. But when I entered the church the usher told me not to worry because they were used to having kids there and could handle them. I remember that feeling of peace.

When we left the sanctuary after the service people were fellowshiping on the patio. The pastor's wife came over and introduced me to other people. I got the impression that there was no way I was going to get out of that facility until they were sure I was returning. That Sunday a woman told me about a Bible study she was holding at her house. I went and was immediately hooked.

**tpe:** How did learning about Jesus change your life?

**LEWIS:** The message of the gospel I was getting in church and at Bible study gave me a sense of calm and purpose. It was like the knots in my stomach were being undone.

**tpe:** When Rex first touched a keyboard, you say something extraordinary happened.

**LEWIS:** The minute he touched those keys his face had a look of wonder I had never seen from him.

**tpe:** Describe autism.

**LEWIS:** It's a brain that processes things in a rigid and selective manner that is not normal. Many people with autism are hyperfocused on some things and underfocused on other things.

**tpe:** How did you know Rex had autism?

**LEWIS:** One of his teachers said she thought he had it when he was 18 months old. I didn't accept it. I thought the defining criterion for autism was if the child could not have a close, social connection with others. But Rex and I had a strong connection. I have since come to find out that was just one of many behaviors of autism.

**tpe:** What are some of Rex's autistic symptoms?

**LEWIS:** He can't sustain or start a conversation. A lot of people like Rex have trouble understanding the pragmatics of conversations. He has trouble after two exchanges, so we have some scripted answers because he does not always know exactly what an appropriate response should be. The communication and social skills go hand in hand. Rex loves people, but doesn't always empathize with people he meets.

**tpe:** How is day-to-day living different for Rex than a 13-year-old without autism?

**LEWIS:** It's hard for someone with autism to accept change or newness. When Rex was younger, little changes like the way I parked the car caused him to scream. Or, if we were leaving his school and I stopped to talk to someone and it cut into his pace of departure, he would scream. He's not like that now because

his brain has become much more flexible.

**tpe:** How did the music transform Rex's life?

**LEWIS:** The music and playing the piano have helped restructure his brain. Music has created areas of creativity in his mind and given him his own little world to grow in. When he is at the piano and hears sounds that normally bother him, he does not even seem to hear them. Music has become the counterbalance to his autism. It provides a safe place where the realities of his world are pushed back.

**tpe:** What are some of the practical ways music has improved his life?

**LEWIS:** I once thought Rex might never talk or walk. Now he does both.

**tpe:** You mentioned earlier that you made it a habit to get Rex out and about. Has music broadened those horizons even more?

**LEWIS:** We never went anywhere overnight before he started playing the piano. Now we travel all over the world and have been to Japan, Germany, London and Paris for him to perform.

**tpe:** What can Rex do that makes him a savant?

**LEWIS:** He can hear a piece of complex music one time and pretty much play it back verbatim. He can also transpose any song into another key.

**tpe:** When you hear Rex play the piano, what does that tell you about God?

**LEWIS:** That He is amazing. God is capable of anything and has a great sense of irony. He is loving, and it's just incredible to see the work He is doing in Rex's life and in mine. Because of it, I

know He is capable of doing similar work in other people's lives.

**tpe:** What encouragement would you give a single parent who is feeling overwhelmed with the demands of raising children?

**LEWIS:** I would recommend that if single parents are not going to church that they start going. And they need to remember there is a beauty in the lives of our children that may not be apparent right this instant, but children mature and evolve and things will get easier over time.

**tpe:** What is a practical thing a single parent — or any parent — can do to be a better parent?

**LEWIS:** Get rest. Raising a child is a team effort where the child is not more important than the parent. The child needs his or her mother or father rested and refreshed.

**tpe:** Despite the challenges you face daily you seem happy, content and even satisfied with how your life has turned out. How did you get to such a place?

**LEWIS:** Rex has changed my life in so many good ways. God gives us things we need and want even if we don't have the courage to ask for such things. Raising Rex has been the most amazing thing. I feel so honored to have such a beautiful boy. It is a privilege for me to be able to spend my days with someone who fills my heart with joy.

**tpe** *extra*

Watch a video clip of Cathleen and Rex at [tpe.ag.org](http://tpe.ag.org).

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).