



Music first: Eric McElroy is a top singles player on the varsity tennis team, enjoys his advanced placement English class, reads J.R.R. Tolkien, plays the mellophone in marching band and gets good grades. But playing the piano and composing music are the passions in his life.

Jazz makes for an early riser: Up at 5 a.m., Eric leaves his family's house in Swede Heaven near Darrington at 6 a.m. in order to make it on time to the 7 a.m. rehearsal of the school's top jazz band, "On Hold."

Next year: Eric's plan is to earn his undergraduate degree in piano performance at either Washington State University or the University of Kansas, schools suggested by his piano teacher, Maria Sier of Snohomish. A graduate degree in conducting will follow, he said.

Life goal: Everything focuses on the dream of being a composer. "I hope to eventually conduct a major orchestra, make some money and then go into semi-retirement to spend the rest of my life composing. Leonard Bernstein was a guest conductor while he composed," Eric said. "The starving musician thing doesn't work for me. The whole idea that composers are troubled, crazy people is complete garbage."

Award winner: A piano student since age 3 and a composer since second grade, Eric more recently has earned composing prizes from the national PTA Reflections arts contest and the regional Music Teachers National Association for a piano show piece he titled "Dance for Solo Piano."

Five pianos: At home, Eric has a keyboard near his desk, an upright piano on which he tries out his current composing projects and a grand piano for solo work. At school, he uses the grand piano in the Byrnes Performing Arts Center and the upright in the band room.

Classical pop: Eric is not a fan of dissonant modern music, nor what he terms "classical pop," the Mozart and Bach pieces made so popular they have become cliché, he said. Early 20th century composers, such as Ottorino Respighi, are his current inspiration. "I like complex harmonies and rhythms, but not atonal music," he said.

By hand: Eric writes his musical scores out by hand and then sometimes uses a computer program to print out the various parts for his musicians.

In and out: "Composing is the introverted part of me and conducting is the extrovert." Eric has had the pleasure of conducting his own compositions played by the school's wind ensemble. He currently is at work on a large-scale project for wind ensemble, "but I don't usually talk about the details of the current composition until it's finished."