

# TEENS SOUND INSTRUMENTAL

## A Capella group wants audiences to slow down and enjoy voice-only music

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“My Life is Ritarded.”

No, that’s not a typo. It’s the logo of an a capella group composed of six teens from Silicon Valley. They’ve performed for hundreds across the Bay Area — singing, dancing, beatboxing, delighting. They’ve been recruited to entertain at restaurants, the Stanford Mall and Santana Row.

The Ritards, a band of singers founded by South Bay high school graduates Jason Chou and Kevin Ju, have been something of a local phenomenon since they surfaced as an amateur group in 2003. Because a capella music consists only of vocal sounds, The Ritards never use

instruments. Their name comes from the Italian word *ritardando*, a musical term meaning “slow down.”

“When people come to us as audiences, we understand they’re taking some time out of their lives to watch us,” Chou said. “So we want to make sure they slow down and enjoy the performance. We want them to just live in the moment and the music we’re bringing to them.”

Over the years, as members graduated and left for college, new singers have joined, always maintaining a close-knit six-member group. The current members, Patrick Lu, Geoffrey Chen, David Wu, Jason Shiuan, Peter Chou and Alex Leu, preserve the legacy of The Ritards. But it’s not easy, because group members live in cities from Cupertino to Fremont, meaning that their weekly three-hour practices at different singers’ homes require constant travel.

The group delivered its latest

performance last Saturday at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Fremont. There was no air conditioning to combat the stifling heat, but the rows of wooden benches were packed. It appeared to be a regular church gathering until Shiuan welcomed the audience with a charming introduction.

“At this concert, if you think something is funny, laugh out loud,” Shiuan said. “If you want to dance, feel free to dance. And...if you think the six guys standing up here are the most handsome guys in the whole world, say ‘heyyyy,’” to which the audience responded enthusiastically, “heyyyy.”

And so began an unusually intimate night of song and dance. As the group burst into their first number, “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” from the Disney movie “Mulan,” the crowd cheered. The teen performers imitated the masculine voices in the original version — but with a twist. A dash of pop music infused the song with an

exotic, rhythmic spirit.

As the night progressed, various styles of music came alive onstage. When Leu’s passionate solo was sung entirely in Mandarin, the audience was absorbed in a different culture. When Shiuan and Wu offered a rendition of the romantic theme song for the movie “Titanic,” “My Heart Will Go On” emerged as something of a comedy.

The vocal virtuosos took on an eccentric form as they treated the audience with a vibrant beatboxing demo. Beatboxing incorporates non-vocal noises to create a sense of rhythm and percussion by using the mouth, lips, tongue and throat. What ensued was a whirlwind of electric buzzes, dynamic hisses, complex percussion, and even the glug-glug of water being gulped.

By the end of the night, a genuine feeling of camaraderie had formed between the stage and the crowd.

“We don’t just sing,” Chen said. “We entertain. On YouTube you see all these music videos where the singers are just like standing there. But we like to incorporate choreography.”

Many of the members’ parents have given time to provide dinners, transportation and facilities for the boys’ rehearsals. Ultimately, they feel only pride for the group.

“Just watching them all the time and seeing the progress they’ve made is amazing,” said John Lu, Patrick Lu’s father. “They add creativity to various aspects of their music and utilize technology to disseminate the music.”

In the end, it’s the heartfelt dedication that makes The Ritards’ music resonate with audiences.

“We actually try and have fun,” Lu said. “We actually love doing what we say we love doing. Singing isn’t just singing.

“It’s a passion.”