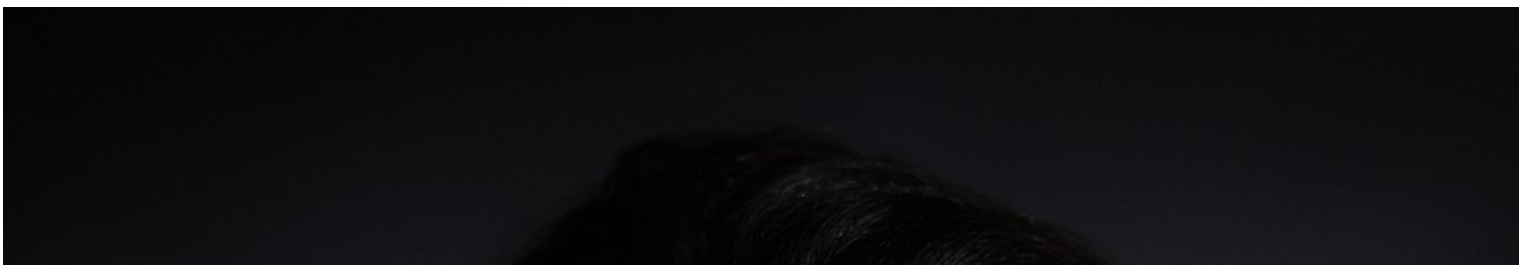


Is Musical Merit a San Diego secret?

Classical-music foundation, founded in 1946, supports up-and-coming classical singers and musicians



Finalists at the Musical Merit Foundation's 2024 competition. The 2026 competition takes place May 24 in Mission Valley. KAY ETHERIDGE





San Diego mezzo-soprano Guadalupe Paz said winning the first of three prizes at the Musical Merit Foundation vocal competition in 2012 was “life-changing.” KARLA AUDELO



Kay Etheridge is the president of the Musical Merit Foundation. BETH ROSS BUCKLEY

BY BETH WOOD

FOR THE UNION-TRIBUNE

Classical music aficionados may have never heard of the Musical Merit Foundation, but it's likely that they've benefited from it. The nonprofit's annual scholarship program boasts a stellar array of past recipients who have graced classical-music stages here and all over the world.

Founded in 1946, the Musical Merit Foundation annually awards more than \$100,000 annually to high school and college students who reside in San Diego and Imperial counties and Northern Baja California, Mexico.

This weekend will see semifinalists audition for these scholarships, culminating in a concert by the finalists next Sunday. No finalist will go home empty-handed; the awards usually start at \$5,000.

Musical Merit Foundation differs from other annual student competitions in several ways. The recipients, or protégés, are also allowed to compete in years to come, as long as they are within the geographic and age requirements. Instrumentalists must be between 16 to 26 years old, while vocalists must be between 18 to 32.

“We support our protégés long after they win their scholarships,” said Kay Etheridge, Musical Merit’s current president. “Unlike other competitions, we celebrate their future successes and keep our membership informed on our web page and social media.”

Etheridge and incoming president Arlie Langager are both unabashed name-droppers when it comes to Musical Merit’s recipients/protégés. Here are just a few — in random order.

Flutist Claire Chase: A MacArthur Fellow recipient and Harvard University professor, she is the founder of International Contemporary Ensemble and the ambitious international flute project, Density 2036.

Pianist Dana Burnett: The founder and co-artistic director of the thriving local chamber music company Camarada and music lecturer at Cal State San Marcos.

Violinist Wesley Precourt: Associate Concertmaster of the San Diego Symphony and frequent artist at Art of Elan concerts.

Bass-Baritone Nicolas Newton: The 2025 Winner of the Marian Anderson Vocal Award, a singer in New York’s Metropolitan Opera’s “La Sonnambula” last fall and a performer in Opera Philadelphia and Houston Grand Opera productions, and at the Salzburg Festival in Austria.

Soprano Tasha Hokuao Koontz: The first Native Hawaiian woman to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, a favorite guest of San Diego Opera and Camarada, an internationally touring vocalist, and, in June 2027, a featured singer in San Diego Symphony’s performance of Beethoven Ninth.

Mezzo-soprano Guadalupe Paz: A frequent performer for the National Opera Company of Bellas Artes in Mexico City, guest singer with San Diego’s Mainly Mozart Festival and San Diego Opera.

Making 'careers come true'

This December, Paz, who won three Musical Merit awards between 2012 and 2014, will be performing with Koontz, who is also a three-time winner. The sought-after artists will sing Mahler's Resurrection with the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus, led by its conductor Sameer Patel.

A Tijuana native, Paz said that Musical Merit makes "careers come true."

"The labor that they put into this competition and the generosity of the prizes speak volumes," said Paz, now a San Diego resident. "It shows that they know what a future artist needs, which is a lot of support.

"You need to take lessons and coaching, do auditions and recordings. They really understand a career in classical music is a marathon and a very expensive career," Paz said.

Since launching 80 years ago, the Musical Merit Foundation has sought: "To discover, encourage and present young music students of exceptional talent." In its first 50 years, \$250,000 was awarded to 260 students.

In 2009, two board members almost tripled the foundation's endowment, extending the number of scholarships. More recently, a donor established a fund enabling the top finalist to attend a nine-week session at the prestigious Aspen School of Music, in addition to the monetary award.

The deadline for applications to Musical Merit was April 15, time for judges to choose the semifinalists who will compete next weekend. The application fee is \$15. Instrumentalists of all kinds are welcomed. Long ago an accordionist was a finalist; last year a marimbaist. Four-time finalist Chelsea Chen is now a successful touring organist.

The applications are sent to YouTube and reviewed by Musical Merit judges. Auditions coordinator Sonya Schumann, a pianist and San Diego State University professor, established the video applications to allow participation from area residents who are studying away from home.

Vocalist Paz said she was especially grateful that Musical Merit's accepted applicants from Northern Baja California. Few, if any, San Diego competitions do.

"There were such limited opportunities," she said. "I was studying with a San

Diego tenor who said I should enter. And I won the Aspen prize, which was life-changing for me.”

‘San Diego’s best-kept secret’

Incoming president Langager has been on the board for more than 17 years, many of them as auditions coordinator. She said the board wants more students to know about Musical Merit’s scholarships.

“Over the years, we’ve relied on word of mouth,” said Langager, who is also president of the California Choral Directors Association and a teacher at MiraCosta College. “We’ve encouraged musical instructors, teachers and studios to get their students in this competition. It might be San Diego’s best kept secret, and that’s certainly not our intention.”

Musical Merit president Etheridge, who is a distinguished artist at San Diego Piano Academy and a University of San Diego retired music professor, suggested a way for more people to become familiar with the foundation: Attend the free awards concert and scholarship competition next Sunday afternoon.

Langager agreed.

“People who attend our awards concert for the very first time inevitably say the same thing,” she said. “They are astonished at the exceptional talent of these young artists. And it’s a recital featuring all different disciplines, instrumental and vocal. It’s just the crème de la crème of the emerging artists that San Diego and Imperial counties and Baja have to offer.”

Etheridge added: “These artists give their whole heart and soul to their performances. They perform with conviction, passion and a sense of authority. When you’re in the audience, you will be moved by them.”