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The Music Center Names 71 Southern California High School Students as Semifinalists in "The Music Center's 38th Annual Spotlight" Program

Nationally Recognized Arts Learning Program and Competition Offers \$100,000+ in Scholarships with Performance Opportunities and Invaluable Professional Feedback for Aspiring Artists

LOS ANGELES (January 28, 2026) -- The Music Center announced today that **71 outstanding high school students from across Southern California** have advanced as semifinalists in The Music Center's 38th annual *Spotlight* program, a free, nationally acclaimed performing arts competition, scholarship and artistic development program for teens. This year **1,300 students from 256 schools, 164 cities and eight counties** auditioned, reflecting the extraordinary depth of artistic talent found in local schools.

A longstanding initiative of The Music Center's programming arm **TMC Arts**, *Spotlight* supports teens through a unique blend of artistic training and personal development. Students receive expert feedback, advice, coaching, auditions and mastery classes taught by professional artists and arts administrators in **seven categories**: acting, ballet, dance, classical voice, non-classical voice, classical instrumental and contemporary instrumental. Throughout the competition, *Spotlight* recognizes and rewards students with more than **\$100,000 in cash awards following three rounds of auditions**. The Music Center, to date, has awarded **over \$3 million in scholarships**, impacting the lives of more than **56,000** high school students from across Southern California and the Central Valley, from Kern County to San Diego County.

All *Spotlight* applicants benefit from the program by receiving **written feedback from distinguished panels of judges** after each audition round to help the students improve, gain insight into their performing arts discipline and build the confidence to pursue their artistic dreams. With this supportive environment, students also develop vital life skills, including self-esteem, preparation and perseverance, which benefit them beyond the stage.

"This remarkable group of *Spotlight* semifinalists represents the incredible depth of talent and discipline thriving among young artists across Southern California," said **Rachel S. Moore**, president and CEO of The Music Center. "Advancing to this stage of the program is no small feat; it reflects countless hours of dedication and a profound commitment to artistic excellence. At a time when the arts are more vital than ever to fostering empathy, connection and resilience, these students inspire us with what is possible. Through *Spotlight*, we are honored to champion their artistry and support their growth as performers and artistic leaders."

Spotlight semifinalists earn the rare opportunity to attend a special mastery class within their discipline with highly regarded artists, who share their expertise on performance technique, training and professional life. These experts provide students with invaluable feedback about their performances, offering the students a rich learning experience. Each semifinalist will audition one last time before a new panel of judges, who will then select the top two performers (known as "Grand Prize Finalists") in each of the seven categories, for a total of 14 Grand Prize Finalists. Judges will also name an Honorable Mention in each category. **The 14 Grand Prize Finalists will perform in The Music Center's *Spotlight Grand Finale* on Saturday, May 16, 2026, at 8:00 p.m., at The Music Center's Ahmanson Theatre.** The *Grand Finale* will be preceded, on that same evening, by the *Spotlight Grand Gala*, which will be held at The Music Center's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

"*Spotlight* is more than a competition. It is a community where young artists feel seen, supported and inspired to grow," said **Jeri Gaile**, Fredric Roberts senior director of *The Music Center's Spotlight*. "Throughout the program, students take creative risks, learn from extraordinary teaching artists and discover resilience that will serve them far beyond the stage. Watching their confidence bloom, their artistry deepen and their support for one another grow year after year is truly rewarding. Their journey is why *Spotlight* continues to transform lives through the arts across Los Angeles County."

The Music Center's Spotlight semifinalists each receive \$500. Grand Prize Finalists will each receive \$5,000 scholarships; one Honorable Mention in each category will receive \$1,000. Making an indelible impression on this year's judges, 35 students (five selected from each category) will each receive a \$100 Merit Award; this special honor acknowledges their achievement in the competition and their potential in the performing arts.

To help students interested in applying to the *Spotlight* program, The Music Center created **The Spotlight Academy** as an episodic series of online videos and tutorials. *The Spotlight Academy* features more than a dozen webisodes on subjects related to applying for the *Spotlight* program as well as advice for anyone considering a career in the arts, both on- or offstage. The videos provide a deep dive into the program's seven categories and discuss curated topics featuring alumni and experts in the field, including New York City Ballet principal dancer **Tiler Peck**, actor **Barrett Foa** (*NCIS: Los Angeles*, *The Residence*), mezzo-soprano opera singer **Suzanna Guzmán** and more.

Since the program's launch in 1988, numerous *Spotlight* participants have gone on to successful professional careers. Nearly two dozen past finalists are Presidential Scholars, and many more have joined or performed with professional companies, such as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theatre, Metropolitan Opera, LA Opera, Boston Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. Notable *Spotlight* alumni include:

- **Misty Copeland**, who made history in the dance world as the first Black principal dancer for American Ballet Theatre
- Recording artists **Adam Lambert** and **Josh Groban**
- **Tony Award® winner Lindsay Mendez** (Broadway revival of *Carousel*), who also earned a Tony Award® nomination for her role in the 2023 Broadway revival of *Merrily We Roll Along* and starred in the 2025 film release
- Emmy® Award-winning composer **Kris Bowers**, whose work includes the scores for *Bob Marley: One Love*, *Bridgerton*, *Green Book* and *Dear White People* and who is the producer, co-director and composer of the Oscar®-winning short documentary *The Last Repair Shop*
- **Matthew Rushing**, associate artistic director for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
- **Jennifer Stahl**, a Diana Dollar Knowles principal dancer of San Francisco Ballet
- Choreographer **Norbert de la Cruz III**, who is creating works on Flight Path Dance Project and Westside Dance Project in 2026
- **YaoGuang Zhai**, principal clarinetist of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
- **Mason Alexander Park**, starring in the West End title role of *Oh Mary!* and has appeared in *Cabaret*, *The Tempest* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; the Broadway tour of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*; and on-screen in *The Sandman*, *Quantum Leap* and *Cowboy Bebop*
- **Sean Plumb**, baritone singer for the *Opéra National de Lyon* and the *Metropolitan Opera*
- GRAMMY®-nominated jazz recording artist **Gerald Clayton**; among many others.

Major support for The Music Center's *Spotlight* program is provided by Fredric Roberts; Helen and Peter Bing; and Edgerton Foundation. Fredric Roberts is founding chairman of *Spotlight*; the late Walter E. Grauman is the creator.

For more information about *The Music Center's Spotlight* program, visit **musiccenter.org/spotlight** or follow **[@musiccenterspotlight](#)** on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok and **[@spotlightawards](#)** on X.

ABOUT THE MUSIC CENTER

As L.A.'s performing arts center, The Music Center convenes artists, communities and ideas with the goal of deepening the cultural lives of every resident in Los Angeles County. The \$80 million non-profit performing arts organization has two divisions: TMC Arts and TMC Ops. TMC Arts, The Music Center's programming engine, provides year-round programming inside The Music Center's four theatres, on Jerry Moss Plaza, outside at Gloria Molina Grand Park—a 12-acre adjacent green space—in schools and other locations all over Los Angeles County. TMC Arts presents world-class dance with *Glorya Kaufman Presents Dance at The Music Center*, free and low-cost public concerts and events, live and digital K-12 arts education programs, workshops, performances, interactive experiences and special events. TMC Ops manages the theatres, the Plaza and Gloria Molina Grand Park, which comprise \$3 billion in county assets, on behalf of the County of Los Angeles. The Music Center is also home to four renowned resident companies—Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles Master Chorale, LA Opera and LA Phil. For more information, visit **musiccenter.org**. Follow The Music Center on social media **[@MusicCenterLA](#)**.

HOME CITY	NAME	CATEGORY	SCHOOL	GRADE
Aliso Viejo	Giselle Devey	Ballet	Cabrillo Point Academy	9
Anaheim	Arabella Kim	Ballet	Orange County School of the Arts	11
Anaheim	Connor Shim	Classical Instrumental	Canyon High School - Anaheim	11
Bell Gardens	Charlize Leslie-Barrera	Acting	Downey High School	12
Beverly Hills	Caelan Gagnon	Ballet	Acellus Academy	11
Buena Park	Lilia Cerna	Non-Classical Voice	Cabrillo Point Academy	10
Burbank	Manuela De Souza	Ballet	Penn Foster High School	11
Cerritos	Aaron Chang	Dance	Orange County School of the Arts	12
Costa Mesa	Ashwin Desai	Contemporary Instrumental	Orange County School of the Arts	12
Diamond Bar	Xuanrui Gu	Classical Instrumental	Diamond Bar High School	9
Eastvale	Kelsey Franklin	Dance	Chino Hills High School	10
Eastvale	Erin Liao	Classical Instrumental	Eleanor Roosevelt High School	12
Fountain Valley	Shido Kamai	Classical Instrumental	Troy High School	10
Fullerton	Irene Cho	Non-Classical Voice	Orange County School of the Arts	9
Fullerton	David Lim	Contemporary Instrumental	Idyllwild Arts Academy	12
Fullerton	Kenny Song	Classical Instrumental	Orange County School of the Arts	11
Huntington Beach	Bianca Stratta	Acting	Huntington Beach High School	12
Idyllwild	Delilah Grad	Non-Classical Voice	Idyllwild Arts Academy	11
Idyllwild	Serch Barberi	Dance	Idyllwild Arts Academy	12
Irvine	Diane Doberstein	Ballet	iLead Exploration Hybrid	12
Irvine	Miri Izenberg	Contemporary Instrumental	Orange County School of the Arts	12
Irvine	Logan Macy	Dance	Orange County School of the Arts	11
Irvine	ChloeLux Phan	Acting	Orange County School of the Arts	12
Irvine	Olivia Song	Classical Voice	Orange County School of the Arts	10
La Cañada Flintridge	Ishaan Natarajan	Contemporary Instrumental	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	11
La Cañada Flintridge	Lev Sakae Taira	Classical Voice	Laurel Springs School	12
Ladera Ranch	Hannah Gu	Ballet	Tesoro High School	12
Laguna Beach	Lavinia Watkins	Classical Voice	Orange County School of the Arts	12
Laguna Niguel	Richie Granese	Dance	Orange County School of the Arts	12
Lake Forest	Brandon Pham	Contemporary Instrumental	Orange County School of the Arts	10
Long Beach	Belle Gomer	Acting	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	11
Long Beach	Reese Guenther-Clark	Classical Voice	Orange County School of the Arts	11
Los Angeles	Delila Carlos	Acting	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	12
Los Angeles	Colton Checchi	Contemporary Instrumental	Harvard-Westlake Upper School	12
Los Angeles	Noah Choi	Classical Instrumental	California School of the Arts - San Gabriel Valley	11
Los Angeles	Charlie Cohn	Contemporary Instrumental	Windward School	12
Los Angeles	Jack Heath	Acting	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	12
Los Angeles	Aria Kamei-Oser	Ballet	Palisades Charter High School	12
Los Angeles	Chase Klein	Non-Classical Voice	Brentwood High School	12
Los Angeles	Issa Leon	Dance	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	9
Los Angeles	Reese Morgan	Ballet	Home Schooled	9
Los Angeles	Ansh Narsingh	Non-Classical Voice	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	12
Los Angeles	Nyla Nevaeh	Acting	Girls Academic Leadership Academy	11
Los Angeles	Emily OckoMichalak	Non-Classical Voice	Marlborough School	12
Los Angeles	Armando Pacheco	Dance	Van Nuys Senior High School	12
Los Angeles	Nathan Pak	Classical Instrumental	Taft High School	12
Los Angeles	Dilan Patton	Non-Classical Voice	Van Nuys Senior High School	12
Los Angeles	Zakary Risinger	Acting	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	11
Los Angeles	Mateo Rodriguez	Contemporary Instrumental	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	11
Los Angeles	Evan Simonowitz	Acting	Venice High School	10
Los Angeles	Camille Strabo	Ballet	Home Schooled	10
Mission Viejo	Gracyn French	Dance	Mission Viejo High School	11
Newport Beach	Everett Leigh	Classical Instrumental	Pacific Academy, Irvine	10
Newport Beach	Lexie Shehab	Non-Classical Voice	Orange County School of the Arts	11
Ontario	Sebastian Olguin	Non-Classical Voice	Ontario High School	12
Orange	Emmet Althoen	Contemporary Instrumental	Orange County School of the Arts	10
Pasadena	Sophia Yoo	Classical Instrumental	Westridge Upper School	12
Placentia	Avalina Thomas	Classical Voice	El Dorado High School	12
Rosemead	Aleyda Arreola	Dance	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	11
San Diego	Katherine Backues	Classical Voice	Canyon Crest Academy	9
San Diego	Evonne Fangao	Classical Voice	The Cambridge School	11
San Diego	Olivia Xia	Classical Voice	Rancho Bernardo High School	10
San Marino	Emilia Bernstein	Classical Voice	San Marino High School	12
Santa Clarita	Brooklyn Covington	Dance	Valencia High School	11
Santa Monica	Ansel Brodtkin	Classical Voice	Santa Monica High School	11
Santa Monica	Austin Washington	Contemporary Instrumental	Crossroads School for Arts & Sciences	12
Thousand Oaks	Ava Melendez-Sims	Non-Classical Voice	Oaks Christian High School	11
Thousand Oaks	Simon Yao	Classical Instrumental	Newbury Park High School	9
West Hollywood	Alice Killoran	Acting	Hamilton High School	10
Yorba Linda	Afina Gosla	Ballet	Cabrillo Point Academy	10
Yorba Linda	Megan Reta	Dance	El Dorado High School	12

