

MARCH 18, 2026

The Stage is Set for 14 of Southern California's Brightest Young Performers Named Grand Prize Finalists in "The Music Center's 38th Annual Spotlight" Performing Arts Competition

The Public is Invited to Witness These Rising Stars Perform at 'The Music Center's Spotlight Grand Finale' at the Ahmanson Theatre on Saturday, May 16, 2026, at 8:00 p.m.

The Music Center proudly announces 14 extraordinary young performers from across Southern California who are the top performers (known as "Grand Prize Finalists") in The Music Center's annual *Spotlight* arts and scholarship program. These teens have earned the chance to perform at *The Music Center's 38th Annual Spotlight Grand Finale* in front of a live audience at The Music Center's Ahmanson Theatre on



Saturday, May 16, 2026, at

8:00 p.m. Selected among more than 1,300 applicants, the 14 talented teens triumphed in one of the program's seven categories: acting, ballet, dance, classical voice, non-classical voice, classical instrumental and contemporary instrumental. Each Grand Prize Finalist receives a \$5,000 scholarship.

Free tickets for the *Spotlight Grand Finale* are available now at musiccenter.org/spotlightfinale

Spotlight, which is part of the portfolio of The Music Center's programming and arts learning arm TMC Arts, offers teens expert advice, coaching and audition experience as well as mastery classes taught by professional artists and arts administrators. This year, more than 1,300 teens from throughout Southern California auditioned for the prestigious program, representing 256 schools, 164 cities and eight counties. The Music Center provided these young artists a range of invaluable opportunities, including performance auditions, individual feedback from industry professionals and more than \$100,000 in cash awards. The Music Center has awarded more than \$3 million in scholarships to date.

With the top two students selected in each of the seven categories, this year's *Spotlight* Grand Prize Finalists are:

- **Acting:**

11th grade students **Belle Gomer**, 17, of Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, and **Nyla Nevaeh**, 17, of Girls Academic Leadership Academy.

- **Ballet:**

Manuela De Souza, an 11th grade student at Penn Foster High School, and **Afina Gosla**, a 10th grade student at Cabrillo Point Academy--both 16 years old.

- **Classical Instrumental:**

Erin Liao, a 12th grade student at Eleanor Roosevelt High School, and **Connor Shim**, an 11th grade student at Canyon High School, Anaheim--both 17 years old.

- **Classical Voice:**

12th grade students **Emilia Bernstein**, 17, of San Marino High School, and **Lev Sakae Taira**, 17, of Laurel

Springs School.

- **Contemporary Instrumental:**

10th grade student **Emmet Althoen**, 15, of Orange County School of the Arts, and 11th grade student **Ishaan Natarajan**, 16, of Los Angeles County High School for the Arts.

- **Dance:**

17-year-olds **Brooklyn Covington**, an 11th grade student at Valencia High School, and **Gracy French**, an 11th grade student at Mission Viejo High School.

- **Non-Classical Voice:**

10th grade student **Lilia Cerna**, 16, of Cabrillo Point Academy, and 12th grade student **Ansh Narsingh**, 18, of Los Angeles County High School for the Arts.

"Each year, *The Music Center's Spotlight* reminds us just how vibrant and promising the future of the performing arts is," said **Rachel S. Moore, president and CEO of The Music Center**. "These remarkable students demonstrated exceptional dedication, artistry and courage and have grown in numerous ways throughout their *Spotlight* journey. We are proud to celebrate their achievements and to provide a stage where their talent can shine and inspire audiences from across Southern California. Programs like *Spotlight* ensure the next generation of artists has the opportunity, encouragement and community they need to thrive. Congratulations to them all!"

In addition to the 14 Grand Prize finalists, The Music Center also named one Honorable Mention in each of the seven categories, with each student earning a \$1,000 scholarship: **Delila Carlos**, of Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, in acting; **Reese Morgan**, who is homeschooled, in ballet; **Shido Kamai**, of Troy High School, in classical instrumental; **Olivia Xia**, of Rancho Bernardo High School, in classical voice; **Aaron Chang**, of Orange County School of the Arts, in dance; **Colton Checchi**, of Harvard-Westlake Upper School, in contemporary instrumental; and **Emily OckoMichalak**, of Marlborough School, in non-classical voice.

"For nearly four decades, *Spotlight* has created a nurturing community where young artists challenge themselves, learn from one another and discover the depth of their own potential," said *The Music Center's Spotlight* Fredric Roberts Senior Director Jeri Gaile. "Watching these students grow--from their first auditions to the Grand Finale stage--is always inspiring. Their commitment to their artistry, as well as their support for one another, embody the true spirit of the *Spotlight* program. Audiences will be amazed by the passion and brilliance they bring to The Music Center's Ahmanson Theatre on May 16!"

An important part of The Music Center's fundamental support for arts learning, *Spotlight* offers performance opportunities, audition experiences and guidance, plus technical and artistic insights provided by professional artists and arts administrators. It is distinctive from other programs of its

type: the program accepts students at every skill level and focuses on learning, growth and accessibility. *Spotlight* is completely free with no financial barriers for participants, which gives equal footing to all aspiring artists, no matter their talent level. All *Spotlight* applicants receive written feedback from distinguished panels of judges following each audition round to help students improve and gain knowledge in their specific performance discipline.

Guests and performing arts lovers can enhance their experience at *The Music Center's Spotlight Grand Finale* by supporting The Music Center's annual *Spotlight Grand Gala*, which will take place prior to the *Grand Finale* performance. Proceeds help ensure that *Spotlight* continues to be provided, at no cost, to future generations of young artists. The 2026 gala is honoring longtime *Spotlight* patrons Pamela and Dennis Beck. The honorary gala committee members are Judith and Thomas L. Beckmen; Louise and Brad Edgerton; Terri and Jerry Kohl; Dr. Lily Lee and Dr. Tom Chang; Merle Mullin; Robbie Shipp and Dr. Michelle Israel Shipp; Laura and Bill Siart; and Liane and Richard Weintraub. More information about the *Spotlight Grand Gala* can be found at musiccenter.org/spotlightgala

Since *The Music Center's Spotlight's* launch in 1988, numerous 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 of the same name;
- Emmy® and Academy 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 who 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; and
- GRAMMY®-nominated jazz recording artist **Gerald Clayton**; among many others.

Major support for *The Music Center's Spotlight* program is provided by Fredric Roberts, Pamela and Dennis Beck, Helen and Peter Bing, Edgerton Foundation, Colburn Foundation, Marie H. Song Foundation and Cathy Stone. 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.

To RSVP for free tickets to this year's *Spotlight Grand Finale*, visit musiccenter.org/spotlightfinale

The Music Center's 38th Annual Spotlight Grand Prize Winners

HOMETOWN	NAME	CATEGORY	SCHOOL	GRADE
Anaheim	Connor Shim	Classical Instrumental	Canyon High School - Anaheim	11
Buena Park	Lilia Cerna	Non-Classical Voice	Cabrillo Point Academy	10
Burbank	Manuela De Souza	Ballet	Penn Foster High School	11
Eastvale	Erin Liao	Classical Instrumental	Eleanor Roosevelt High School	12
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
Long Beach	Belle Gomer	Acting	Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	11
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
Mission Viejo	Gracyn French	Dance	Mission Viejo High School	11
Orange	Emmet Althoen	Contemporary Instrumental	Orange County School of the Arts	10
San Marino	Emilia Bernstein	Classical Voice	San Marino High School	12
Santa Clarita	Brooklyn Covington	Dance	Valencia High School	11
Yorba Linda	Afina Gosla	Ballet	Cabrillo Point Academy	10

CALENDAR LISTING

WHAT:

The Music Center's 38th Annual Spotlight Grand Finale

Selected from more than 1,300 teen applicants, 14 rising stars--known as Grand Prize Finalists--of *The Music Center's Spotlight* program will showcase their artistry on stage in front of a live audience at The Music Center's Ahmanson Theatre. *The Music Center's Spotlight* is a nationally acclaimed free performing arts competition, scholarship and artistic development program for Southern California teens in seven categories: acting, ballet, classical instrumental, classical voice, contemporary instrumental, dance and non-classical voice.

WHEN:

Saturday, May 16, 2026

8:00 p.m.

WHERE:

The Music Center's Ahmanson Theatre

135 S. Grand Ave.

Los Angeles 90012

TICKETS:

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

To RSVP for tickets, visit musiccenter.org/spotlightfinale

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