

# Spotlight winners take stage at Walt Disney Concert Hall

By **KAITLIN WRIGHT** | [kwright@scng.com](mailto:kwright@scng.com) | Orange County Register May 24, 2017 at 2:37 pm



Fourteen dancers, musicians and actors ages 14-18 took the Walt Disney Concert Hall stage one by one May 23 to perform before a crowd of thousands. They had recently been named grand finalists as part of The Music Center's 29th annual Spotlight Awards and this was their chance to show why they deserved to be there.

The artists, representing the top youth talent in the categories of acting, ballet, classical instrumental, classical voice, jazz instrumental, non-classical dance and non-classical voice, were chosen from over 1,300 applicants in Southern California.

The year-long selection process began with college and career presentations, workshops, a video-submitted audition in September and two rounds of live auditions. Eventually, two students from each of the seven disciplines were named grand finalists and invited to perform in the grand finale.

"The first thing Spotlight does is raise your self-esteem because you're being recognized as the top or most prepared artist in our category," said actor Samuel Christian, 18, who attends Options for Youth independent charter school in Los Angeles. "Every kid needs that boost, especially at this age. I personally spent a lot of time becoming confident, and I've worked hard to get where I am. It feels good to be recognized."

The evening began with a welcome by Music Center President and CEO Rachel Moore, a former dancer with American Ballet Theatre who commended programs like Spotlight for validating what she called a young artist's decision to pursue their art professionally.

Moore pointed out that since Spotlight began in 1988, the arts education and awards presentation has supported over 45,000 high-school-age students through master classes, career workshops and personalized performance critiques from a distinguished panel of judges.

“The whole program has been such a positive experience,” said ballet dancer **Jordan Coutts**, 14, who studies at V & T Classical Ballet Academy in Laguna Hills. “It’s amazing to have feedback from the judges and to just have the opportunity to audition and see what else is out there.”

In addition to interacting with professionals in the field, each Spotlight grand finalist is awarded a \$5,000 scholarship, and each honorable mention is given a \$1,000 scholarship, amounting to over \$2 million over the years.

**Jeannine Bauer**, 17, of St. Margaret’s Episcopal School in San Juan Capistrano has participated in Spotlight for three years. Last year, she received honorable mention in the classical voice category. Her placement this year as grand finalist meant she finally had the chance to take part in the grand finale.

“I have never performed in front of a group bigger than 100 people,” said Bauer, who sang “Allerseelen” by Richard Strauss and Hermann von Gilm zu Rosenegg. “It’s a chance for us to really perform in the real world. One day I want to audition for the Met, and I consider this a small, baby step in that direction.”

The 90-minute presentation, featuring master of ceremonies **Barrett Foa**, was part formal concert and part pep rally as a result of the young audience members there to support their peers.

Foa, who appears in CBS’ “NCIS: Los Angeles” and was in the original cast for “Mamma Mia” on Broadway, encouraged the cheering as he called each student to the stage.

“I’ve seen concerts like the LA Phil with Dudamel here, and to be able to stand right where they stood, I’m in awe,” said **Aileen Chung**, 17, a classical instrument grand finalist from Crean Lutheran High School in Irvine. “I was almost tearing up because of who has been here, the acoustics, everything.” Chung was also named the Orange County Register’s Artist of the Year for instrumental music.

As each artist exited to a roar of applause, audience members exchanged comments, marveling at the talent the students displayed.

But glitz and glamour aside, the grand finalists say the real reason they were there was to show their respect and appreciation for the craft they have worked so hard to improve.

“Even if Spotlight was in a theater with five people, I would be just as excited as I am about the 2,000 people,” Christian said. “It’s just always humbling to be onstage doing what you love.”

2017 Spotlight grand finalists: Samuel Christian, 18, and Camille Umoff, 16, for acting; Jordan Coutts, 14, and Lauren Hunter, 15, for ballet; Aileen Chung, 17, and Victor Shlyakhtenko, 15, for classical instrumental; Jeannine Bauer, 17, and Nathan Vasquez, 18, for classical voice; Anna Abondolo, 16, and William Brandt, 16, for jazz instrumental; Sophia Frilot, 14, and Taylor Kurtz, 16, for non-classical dance; and Joseph Silva, 18, and Brighton Thomas, 18, for non-classical voice.