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2-5-2021

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Recommended Citation

Wilkins, Lynn Adams, "Acclaimed Singer and Pianist Lend Expertise to Young Musicians" (2021).

University of Mississippi News. 144.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews/144>

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Acclaimed Singer and Pianist Lend Expertise to Young Musicians

Fourth annual Living Music Institute develops skills in performance and the business of music

FEBRUARY 5, 2021 BY LYNN ADAMS WILKINS



Participants in the 2021 Living Music Institute, organized by the Living Music Resource at the University of Mississippi, are (top, from left) Zoe Rose Proeber, Emma Johnson and Erika Wheeler; (middle) Meredith Howell, Bethany Smith-Jacobs, Emma Steiner and Melanie Culhane; and (bottom) Olga Gerasimova, Alexandr Fee and Isaiah Traylor.

OXFORD, Miss. – What young musician wouldn't welcome a weekend of training that includes feedback from seasoned music professionals and targeted coaching on how to build a career, connect with the community and develop an identity as an artist?

That's exactly what the **Living Music Institute**, an intensive training weekend produced by **Living Music Resource** at the **University of Mississippi**, offers to musicians at the beginning of their careers. In January, LMI accepted 10 emerging artists into its intensive training program, including students from six states and two different countries.

Because this year's institute was virtual, the organizers knew that a smaller class would ensure each musician benefited from individual attention. Co-directed by UM vocal faculty members Nancy Maria Balach and Amanda Johnston, the institute combines intensive vocal coaching with training in how to build a career as a performing artist.

"Today's artists will have mosaic careers," said Balach, chair of the **Department of Music**. "Thinking carefully about how to use their music in a variety of situations – stage, classroom, community, business, philanthropy and beyond – helps young artists put together a career that will support them while impacting the world around them for the better."

Developing as a musician is critical, but the organizers know that an entrepreneurial understanding of how to build a brand, work with partners and bring project ideas to fruition are also important. Balach and Johnston bring balanced expertise to LMI through their own diverse work as performers and project developers, and by collaborating with specialists.

For this year's institute, Brady Bramlett, LMI faculty member and annual gifts officer for University Development, and a singer in his own right, worked closely with participants in the entrepreneurial component of the institute. Guest artists Lucas and Irina Meachem provided individual coaching sessions with each participant.



Celebrated baritone Lucas

Musical Heavyweights

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Campus Briefs

Donations Sought for 25th Annual Books and Bears Program

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children's play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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Thank You To Our Donors

Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship Aims to Build Leaders

OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

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Ole Miss In the News

Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith's Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith's enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith's 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school's first African-American student.

Meachem provided one-on-one coaching to Living Music Institute participants, an opportunity that would be cost-prohibitive under normal circumstances. Submitted photo

Working with the Meachems was a “rare and amazing opportunity,” Balach said. “The level and caliber of these two artists is huge.”

Johnston agreed, adding that one-on-one time with artists at this level “would normally be cost-prohibitive.”

Lucas Meachem is a Grammy Award-winning baritone and one of the most accomplished, in-demand singers of the moment. He has performed with operas in many cities around the world, including New York, San Francisco, Dallas, Chicago, Vienna, Paris, Berlin and Madrid.

Irina Meachem is a pianist who regularly performs and coaches. A gifted collaborative pianist, she often performs with her husband, and her work as a performer and coach has taken her to opera companies and classical music festivals around the country.

In working with each musician, Irina Meachem said she and Lucas wanted to “identify what about the singer’s musicianship is ready for improving and how to best utilize what is already within them.”

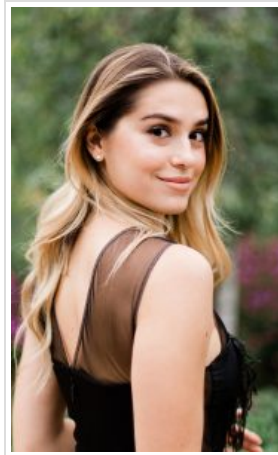
She praised the participants for their eagerness to enter an intensive training experience such as LMI and said the coaching sessions were “extremely positive and productive. Openness as a young musician is the cornerstone of personal progress, and each participant possessed such willingness to receive feedback on their performances.”

In a traditional master class, a lot of time is given over to the student’s performance, Balach said.

“Lucas and Irina reviewed our participants’ videos before LMI, so in the individual coaching sessions, they got right to work,” she said. “It was intense, personal, purposeful and different from most programs.”

Zoe Rose Proeber, a graduate student in music at the University of Alabama, participated in the institute and called the takeaways from LMI “innumerable,” and both practical and philosophical. She also won the institute’s performance competition.

Since Lucas Meachem had already reviewed her performance video, he was ready with notes and specific feedback.



Pianist Irina Meachem shared her expertise on collaborating in performance, preparation and motivation with participants in the recent UM Living Music Institute. Submitted photo



Zoe Rose Proeber won the performance competition at the 2021 Living Music Institute, but she says she took away much more than the prize money. Submitted photo

“We were able to spend the time actually working and singing,” Proeber said. “I’ve transferred several of his thoughts into my practice sessions and preparation of my upcoming role as Pamina in ‘Die Zauberflöte’ at the University of Alabama, and I’m grateful for the improvement I’ve seen as a result of his help.”

Proeber also appreciated the expertise of Irina Meachem.

“Her session concerning collaboration was not only a master class in working with a pianist; it was a master class in being a good colleague and prepared performer, and in implementing positive self-talk,” she explained.

Johnston, a collaborative pianist and diction coach, said that Proeber “presented a full package” in the performance competition, leading to her win. She had “gorgeous tone, full command of her instrument across the registers, excellent and communicative diction, and visual expression,” Johnston said.

“Her performance was vulnerable, engaging and immediately noteworthy.”

This year’s institute featured the highest level of applicants yet for the annual workshop, she added.

Putting Ideas into Action

Ole Miss graduate student Erika Wheeler already has ideas about the next steps she’ll take after completing her Master of Music in vocal performance, thanks to her experience with LMI. Participating in the institute gave her direction for focusing on her dream, which is to open her own vocal studio, she said.

“Everything from the various think tank sessions to the one-on-one sessions with guest clinicians and UM professors helped me gain clarity,” Wheeler said.

“James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier,” a collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

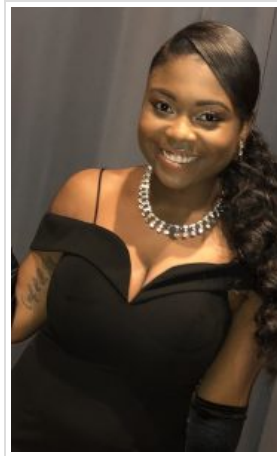
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LMI prompted Wheeler to engage in both big-picture thinking and detail-oriented decision-making, which helped her decide on her style of teaching, her target audience and how to apply her own expertise, “even the potential name of my studio, thanks to great brainstorming and networking amongst the other program participants,” she said.

“Young musicians who attend LMI leave with better knowledge and understanding of where they may want to go in their musical journey and a better grasp of how to get there,” Wheeler said.

Emma Johnson, a junior vocal performance major from Paducah, Kentucky, won the institute’s entrepreneurial competition. Her project idea involves helping young singers bridge the gap between their academic study of music and the professional world, an idea that she’s already begun to research for her capstone project in the **Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College** and was able to develop further during the institute.



Erika Wheeler said that her role of student director at the 2021 Living Music Institute allowed her to collaborate more closely with LMI staff and network with participants, faculty and sponsors. Submitted photo



UM music major Emma Johnson won the entrepreneurship competition at the 2021 Living Music Institute by identifying a gap in the market and developing a plan to address it. Submitted photo

“I plan to take this research and my own revelations throughout this journey and document it into one coherent, published document that I’ll make into a presentation for my peers,” Johnson said.

As with the performance category, this year’s institute featured a strong field in the entrepreneurial competition, Bramlett said.

“This year, the LMI participants came in with incredible entrepreneurial ideas that showed their individuality and empathy,” he said. “Each student showed remarkable growth in their ideas and presentations, which is important for both an entrepreneur and performer.

“The biggest takeaway I hope they gained was to know their ‘why’ – why they perform, why their entrepreneurial idea came to be and why they do what they do, because that’s what drives ideas and ingenuity.”

Like Bramlett, the Meachems brought more than their deep artistic talent to LMI. They also see themselves as artist-citizens, with a duty to engage with issues of the day.

Last year, they created the **Perfect Day Music Foundation** to give a voice to underheard classical music composers and performers, including women and people of color. They launched their first program quickly, despite the pandemic.

“PDMF’s mission is to standardize the music of historically excluded composers, and the quickest way possible was to use social media,” Irina Meachem said. “We created a virtual voice competition for singers who enter simply by posting a video of themselves performing an art song, aria or spiritual by a composer, arranger, librettist or poet of African descent.

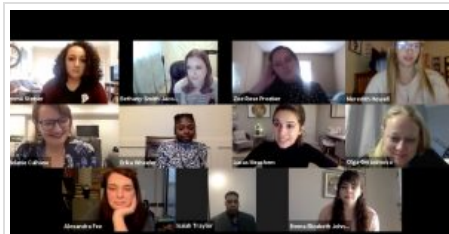
“The initiative allows this equally-important music to be heard, learned and performed by so many musicians.”

The Meachems hope that PDMF projects such as the virtual voice competition help lesser-known composers and works “to become part of the standard canon of classical vocal repertoire,” she said. “It’s our small part in trying to make a difference in classical music and to help the future of classical music, our young artists, who are severely struggling these days.”

That effort meant a great deal to this year’s institute participants.

“I have a renewed faith in the future of opera,” Proeber said. “In the past, I have felt dismayed considering the trajectory of our field. Not only is it a difficult one to broach professionally; the sociopolitical, economic and personal aspects of pursuing classical music can be quite overwhelming.

“Knowing that every single person at LMI, colleague and mentor alike, had a vision to move the industry



Irina Meachem (center right) works with participants in the 2021 Living Music Institute via Zoom. Meachem, an acclaimed collaborative pianist and performer, shared perspectives gained from working with opera companies and classical music festivals around the country.

to be more equitable, inclusive and innovative was both encouraging and healing.”

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