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Lynn Adams Wilkins

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Music Department Resumes Student Recitals

With mask requirements and no audience, this milestone still carries real weight

OCTOBER 8, 2020 BY LYNN ADAMS WILKINS



Isiah Traylor, a senior vocal performance major, performs his recital. Traylor reported that the delay since the spring semester gave him more time to prepare and become more deeply connected with the texts. Photo by Jos Milton/UM Department of Music

OXFORD, Miss. – Recitals are both the bane and the glory of every musician’s experience. And they’re especially important to the formation of a performing musician, said Jos Milton, an associate professor of music at the [University of Mississippi](#).

“A recital is a big milestone in a young performer’s development,” he observed, speaking from his perspective as both a performing tenor and a voice professor. “Solo work is really challenging. You don’t have the support of fellow choir members. You’re up there by yourself, vulnerable; everything is out there.

“It’s just you and the pianist, and all of your gifts are on display, but so are all your imperfections as well. It’s a huge thing to get through.”

A recital is a significant milestone for student musicians because it requires that they take the tools they learn in the practice room and use them to create a performance moment that is technically skilled and capable of moving a listener.

Voice recitals include music in at least four different languages. Junior performance majors must present 30 minutes of music on their program, and seniors are required to present 50 minutes’ worth.

Over the last few weeks, four students have met this challenge. Senior vocal performance majors Katie Hovan, Madi Morris, Isiah Traylor and John Michael Walker had junior recitals scheduled for last spring, but their recitals were postponed because of COVID-related shutdowns.

“Junior recitals are not just degree requirements; they are integral to the development of our students as performers,” said Nancy Maria Balach, the department’s interim chair. “Although we had no choice but to cancel those scheduled for late spring, we knew we wanted to create an opportunity for these students to have the recital experience as soon as possible.”

Recitals provide an opportunity to share music that a student has been laboring over and working to understand on many different levels, said Traylor, of Tupelo.

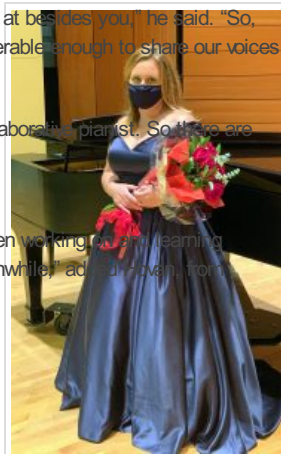
“Being a part of a production or show gives people other things to look at besides you,” he said. “So, recitals give us field training, if you will, on how to go about being vulnerable enough to share our voices in a more intimate way.

“We hit the stage with flaws, talents, the work we’ve done and the collaboration with the pianist. So there are many layers of learning that take place both in the preparation and performance of recitals.”

“It’s really gratifying to be able to show an audience what you have been working on and learning because, at the end of the day, that’s what makes the hard work worthwhile,” added Hovan, from Hattiesburg.

Singing in a Pandemic

Perhaps inevitably, COVID-19 protocols introduced new challenges and opportunities. Performers had to wear masks while singing, and dealing with a mask that is slipping or collecting moisture can be distracting, Milton said. The singers must focus even more closely on their technique.



Katie Hovan, a senior vocal performance major whose background is in musical theater, said her recital represented a

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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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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.

Protocols also meant that there could be no audience. Without people in the seats, “the performer can’t feel the reciprocal energy between performer and a supportive audience,” Milton said.

‘new realm of performance.’
Photo by Jos Milton/UM
Department of Music

“It was very hard to have my family and the rest of my colleagues absent,” said Morris, of Starkville. “For music majors, these recitals are huge milestones in our college careers, and not having people present to celebrate it with us is discouraging.

“However, we persevere and we do what we must to make music and stay safe!”

Recitals Signal Growth

The delay, although unusual, did have its upside.

“Postponing my recital allowed me more time to really perfect certain techniques that I could carry into my senior year, but I was definitely ready to get my junior recital behind me,” Morris said.

Walker had a similar experience.



John Michael Walker performs his junior recital in Nutt Auditorium. The senior vocal performance major said the extra prep time meant that the technical aspects of his performance were in ‘muscle memory,’ allowing him to relax and lean into the artistic, interpretive aspects of his performance. Photo by Jos Milton/UM Department of Music

“The rest provided by the delay ended up being good for my voice,” the Olive Branch native said. “The skills I’d built as I prepared were able to marinate and then helped me perform what I consider to be a vocal best.”

Hovan, Morris, Traylor and Walker all train in Milton’s Ole Miss voice studio, and for his part, Milton is proud of his students’ work.

“They’re developing into fine young artists,” he said. “I assign them challenging music that takes them out of their comfort zone. They showed great tenacity and perseverance and delivered very moving performances under less than optimal conditions.”

But these singers are not resting on their laurels. They already have the music they’ll need to prepare for next spring’s senior recitals.

“Everything we learn is in preparation for this,” Walker said. “It helps that we start with the half-hour recital, so as you prepare for the 50-minute program, you have a reference for what it’s like to stand on the stage, by yourself, and present music.”

The Impact of a Collaborator

Walker praised the talent and support of his collaborator, Amanda Johnston, associate professor of music and a collaborative pianist with a specialty in comparative diction and vocal coaching. She

performed with all four of the recent recitalists.

“Not only is Professor Johnston my collaborator, she’s also one of my professors,” Walker said. “She’s taught me a lot about diction, phrasing and nuance, so I want to make sure that I use the knowledge she gave me in class and apply it during my performance.”

The trust and communication that characterizes the collaboration between pianist and singer is unique, he said.

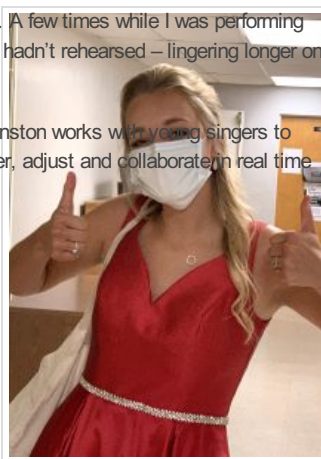
“Professor Johnston is so talented that she will always catch you. A few times while I was performing the Italian pieces, I was able to really express in certain ways we hadn’t rehearsed – lingering longer on certain words, for example.”

Walker was able to feel confident in those moments because Johnston works with young singers to help them understand how a singer and pianist listen to each other, adjust and collaborate in real time during a performance.

“Working with a collaborator may be the closest we’ll ever get to a telepathic form of communication,” he said.

Student recitals are resuming across instrumental areas, with similar health protocols, Balach said.

Readers interested in hearing some of the music performed by students and faculty can tune in to the **Department of Music’s** new monthly podcast: the “yoU Me Music Hour,” premiering Oct. 21.



UM vocal performance major Madi Morris gives two thumbs-up following her recital. Photo by Jos Milton/UM Department of Music

“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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