



DANCE
Sofia Aniceto

FILM AND TV
Benjamin Weil

FINE ARTS
Caroline Kim

INSTRUMENTAL
MUSIC
Jadon Wu

MEDIA ARTS
Grace Lin

THEATER
McKenzie Cahill

VOCAL MUSIC
Viveka Saravanan

ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER SUNDAY

The Register
announces the
high school students
selected as winners
of the annual creative
arts program.

S1

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ENVIRONMENT

Cost for Orange County water agencies to clean up toxic 'forever' chemicals under new EPA regulations estimated at \$1.8 billion



PHOTOS BY LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

According to a study by the U.S. Geological Survey, 45% of the tap water in the U.S. is contaminated with PFAS chemicals — also known as "forever chemicals" because of how long they last — that are considered dangerous to human health.

40 WELLS UNSAFE UNDER NEW RULES

By Andre Mouchard
amouchard@ocug.com

This month, when the Environmental Protection Agency announced the first federal rules on how much of a half-dozen deadly PFAS chemicals to allow in your tap water, 40 public wells in Orange County instantly became unsafe for human consumption, at least on paper.

The fact that those wells will continue to supply water to hundreds of thousands of local residents — even while they're under a strict schedule that calls for them

WATER » PAGE 11



The Orange County Water District and the Serrano Water District began operating a PFAS treatment plant in Villa Park in 2022.

REHAB RIVIERA

Patient brokering has human, not just financial, toll



Teri Storza
Columnist

Some folks have gone so far as to call it a form of human trafficking — "body brokers" bribing folks with good private health insurance to come to California for addiction treatment, whether folks really want treatment or not.

The brokers and patients get

paid thousands of dollars by the rehabs. The rehabs then bill insurers many, many thousands more. It's an investment with fabulous returns, if you don't get caught.

But sometimes, you get caught.

Kevin M. Dickau, 35, of Tu-

stin pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit health care fraud by videoconference before U.S. District Judge Peter G. Sheridan on Tuesday, according to the Department of Justice. He was sentenced to 15 months in prison and three years of

SFORZA » PAGE 10

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

College officials brace for protests

Pro-Palestine demonstrations, like at USC last week, have led to encampments and police clashes

By Hunter Lee and Victoria Ivie
Staff writers

As tensions boil at universities across the country amid scattered police confrontations with pro-Palestinian protesters, Southern California colleges are grappling with campus safety issues as graduation ceremonies near in the coming weeks.

Locally, major disruptions have occurred at USC, UCLA, UC Irvine and Pomona College in Claremont over student-led demands for a permanent cease-fire in the war on Gaza and an end to financial support for Israel. And although security concerns there have been the most intense, other Southern California colleges are now taking measures to ensure their commencement activities — and the weeks leading up to them — are free of similar clashes.

PROTESTS » PAGE 9

FESTIVALS



WILL LESTER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Carin León makes history at Stagecoach

The balladeer is the first artist to perform mainly in Spanish at the Stagecoach country music festival this weekend. PAGE A10

SPORTS

LeBron keeps L.A. alive in NBA playoffs

James scores 30 points as the Lakers avoid elimination with a 119-108 victory over Denver in Game 4 of the first-round series. PAGE B1

PLAYLIST

SoCal restaurants with staying power

Operating a restaurant isn't for the faint of heart, but some have survived decades by keeping customers coming back for more. PAGE C1

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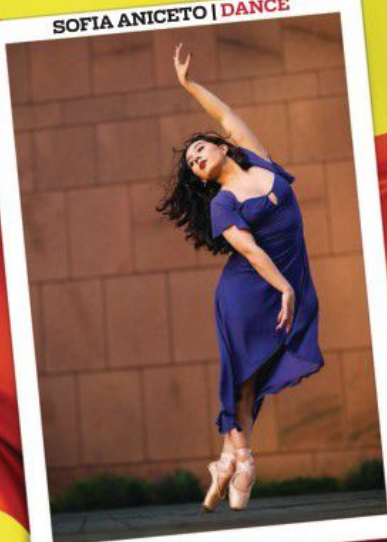


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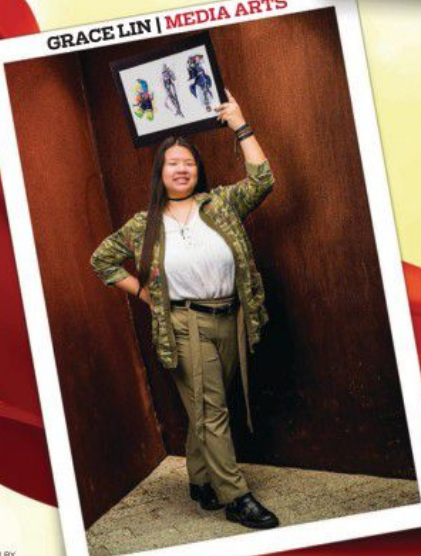


ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024

MCKENZIE CAHILL | THEATER



GRACE LIN | MEDIA ARTS



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ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024

AND THE ARTISTS OF THE YEAR ARE ...



DANCE

Sofia Aniceto



FILM AND TV

Benjamin Weil



FINE ARTS

Caroline Kim



INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

Jadon Wu



MEDIA ARTS

Grace Lin



THEATER

McKenzie Cahill



VOCAL MUSIC

Viveka Saravanan

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

What does it mean to be an artist?

That question is asked of each high school student being considered for the Artist of the Year honors that spotlight local talent in seven artistic disciplines.

In their answers, they all talk about passion and the drive to inspire others. Through their individual creativity, they want to make a connection, foster understanding, nurture empathy.

They might be misunderstood at times, but as artists they strive to be true to themselves. They have the courage to show their vulnerability.

They care for their communities. They've committed their time to non-profit organizations.

They are storytellers, whether dancers, filmmakers, musicians, thespians, visual artists, or vocalists.

Now it's time to tell the stories of the seven Orange County high school students named the 2024 Artists of the Year, along with a crop of finalists.

They are each profiled in stories published today in The Orange County Register. They will be honored in person next month at an awards presentation. The top students also get to showcase their talents.

Conceived as a counterpart to the

Orange County Register's recognition of student-athletes who excel in varsity sports, Artist of the Year is in its 11th year. It is open to junior and senior high school students.

The program is co-sponsored by The Register and Chapman University. Artist of the Year benefited again this year from a commitment by Chapman University College of Performing Arts to cover \$25,000 in operating expenses.

Other help comes from UC Irvine's Claire Trevor School of the Arts to provide awards to the top students.

The first decade of Artist of the Year saw steady increases in students nominated and in the participation of schools and arts organizations.

The pandemic caused a dip in that growth but this year the number of nominees surpassed pre-COVID levels in all categories.

Overall, nominations reached 892 in 2024, up from 113 that first year in 2013: Film and TV had 60 nominees; Media Arts, 85; Vocal Music, 98; Dance, 101; Instrumental Music, 138; Fine Arts, 177; and Theater, 233.

Teachers from local high schools, private instructors, and arts organizations — 272 in all this year from 85 entities — make the nominations. A group of semifinalists are then given 15 minutes each to show their artistry and answer questions from a panel of judges tailored to each discipline.

cipline.

The judges are college and high school instructors, working professionals, and leaders from Orange County's arts institutions.

Each year, there is a refinement to the monthslong Artist of the Year process. For 2024, in addition to making it easier for teachers to nominate students, divisions were introduced.

Students were designated Division 1 or Division 2, depending on years of training that varied among the disciplines. At least two Division 2 students were included as semifinalists in each discipline and one as a finalist.

Artist of the Year producer Heide Janssen explained the goal: "We were hoping to see more students represented that are new on their journey but are showing promise as an artist."

Of the students who completed their applications, 586 were Division 1 and 102 were Division 2, Janssen said.

More than numbers tell the tale of growth in stature.

Consider what one excited dancer told Janssen out in the hallway while waiting to perform for the panel of judges that would choose the top artist from the semifinalist candidates.

She said that when she started at Orange County School of the Arts

back in seventh grade, she'd seen the photos of her school's Artists of the Year on the wall and made it one of her goals to be a contender.

"I thought that was great," Janssen said, "because for so many years a lot of students have said I never knew about this program until I was nominated."

A display of Artist of the Year photos means a school is celebrating the honor, Janssen added.

"So, it's something for the student to strive for. That's what you want. Now they know and they are looking forward to it."

Of the finalists, 13 were repeat performers.

The judges who have come back year after year to select the Artists of the Year also said they look forward to it.

The rise in the number of participants and in the level of talent on display impressed them. "I can't believe how many students there are this year," said Judy Scialpi, a dance teacher at Northwood High in Irvine who helped conceive and shape the Artist of the Year program and serves as a judge for dance.

The public gets a chance to see what the judges saw at the awards ceremony, 5:30 p.m., May 8, in Memorial Hall at Chapman University, 1 University Drive, Orange. Attendance is free.

ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 DANCE

SOFIA ANICETO



Sofia Aniceto, a senior at Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts, is the 2024 Artist of the Year in dance.

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

You can say the happy marriage of dancing on a stage and a love of theater is in Sofia Aniceto's blood.

Her parents met as cast members in a rendition of "West Side Story." Her mom was a Jet and her dad was a Shark.

At the age of 3, Aniceto landed a role as a little princess in another Broadway classic, "The King and I."

The desire that earned her the honor of being named Artist of the Year was already strong in her. The princess role called for Aniceto to stand still on stage but, she recalled, all she wanted to do was dance. She's never stopped.

Aniceto ended up focusing on ballet. But singing and acting remain part of her repertoire.

Her ballet training — contemporary and neoclassical — has been extensive, including seven years at Long Beach Ballet and her current study at

the Colburn School dance program in downtown Los Angeles that began in 2021.

Aniceto told the Artist of the Year judges that she aimed for Colburn once she got "really serious" about ballet.

How serious?

Aniceto, 17, rides a Metrolink train to Colburn weekdays from her home in Cerritos, undaunted by sketchy moments that can happen aboard public transportation.

"It's a little bit scary sometimes," she explained, "but I have pepper spray."

And when her day ends at Colburn, she rides the train back to participate in the theater program at Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts on the Huntington Beach High campus. (When you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way, right?)

Aniceto presented both a self-choreographed ballet dance and a musical theater number in her Artist of the Year performance, describing herself

as primarily a ballet dancer but with the bigger goal of being well-rounded.

Aniceto's focus and drive, coupled with the flair she brought to her self-choreographed ballet combined to make her stand out.

"I really love adding flavor to the ballet," she said, noting that the movement she creates is influenced by her Hispanic background and folklorico dance.

Ballet training can be so structured and monotonous that the sense of joy inherent in dancing can be lost, said Aniceto, a high school senior who aims for a career as a dancer and a choreographer.

She wanted to express a childlike wonder in her ballet number, to "get that little glimmer, that spark in your eye when you perform."

Her joy in performing, the quality of her movements, and her self-assured personality delighted the judges.

Said Judy Scialpi, who teaches dance at Northwood High in Irvine, "She's the real deal."

DANCE FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year, the judges selected finalists from among the 16 semifinalists whose dance genres included ballet, contemporary, flamenco, folklorico, hip hop, jazz, and musical theater.

CHRISTOPHER ARREDONDO, DIVISION 2

The senior at Sunny Hills High in Fullerton always loved dance but didn't start any dance program until his freshman year. And that was a year marked by COVID pandemic restrictions. For someone who doesn't like sharing his feelings, dance is a sort of therapy, he said. The judges declared his choreography natural storytelling. Arredondo, 18, plans to audition for dance at Mount San Antonio College and continue training at his dance studio in Whittier.



Christopher Arredondo

MACKENZIE COUCH, DIVISION 1

She's had her ups and downs with dance — love it, hate it, and always going back to it — because "I don't know what life would be without it." That tension partly stems from a sibling rivalry with her younger twin sisters. All three are in the dance conservatory at Orange County School of the Arts, where Couch is a senior. Couch, 18, plans to earn a BFA and teach dance or start her own company. "When I have my mind set on something, you best believe I'm going to get it."



Mackenzie Couch

PIPER ROVSEK, DIVISION 1

Simply put, "Piper is an artist," said UC dance professor Ariyan Johnson. Rovsek, 17, revealed that she didn't know where to start with her self-choreographed jazz number to "Sweet Dreams" but felt free as the music took her over. "I was letting my bones do what they wanted to do." Dancing since she was 6, the junior at Orange County School of the Arts co-founded a youth organization, Wire4Dance, that provides adaptive therapeutic dance classes to underprivileged youth. She hopes to hold a summer camp this year.



Piper Rovsek

ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 | FILM AND TV

BENJAMIN WEIL

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

Last year when Benjamin Weil posted his black-and-white short "Hotel Overstimulation" on YouTube, he left a disclaimer.

Weil explained how he made the two-minute feature to submit for college admissions. "I recognize it isn't the most razor tight project but the aim with it is to represent myself and the stories I choose to tell/the ways in which I tell them rather than create the most technically airtight production."

The film is about living with ADHD in a constantly overstimulating environment. He added that he wrote, starred in, edited, audio engineered, and animated the film on his own.

What Weil, 18, left out is that he filmed the movie entirely within the hotel room he was sharing with his parents after they lost their rental house. And that he shot it with a cellphone on a tripod, then finished it on his iPad and a public library computer.

It was filmed in color, but he learned to use software a friend online told him about to convert it to black and white and enhance its emotional impact.

Beyond praising what Weil accomplished in the film, an intense mini thriller expressing his inner struggle, the Artist of the Year judges marveled at the circumstances under which it was made.

"Ben broke the mold on everything," said Eric Timmons, who teaches film production at Santa Ana High School.

Said Victor Payan, founder and director of Media Arts in Santa Ana (MASA) and co-founder of OC Film Fiesta: "There's a depth and darkness to his experience that he really channels to his piece."

Several of the judges remembered Weil's work from last year when he was a Film/TV semifinalist. Weil talked about being



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Benjamin Weil, a senior at Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts, is the 2024 Artist of the Year in film and TV.

in an "artistic drought" a year ago, thinking his work had to be perfect. Now he is writing scripts to share the stories in his head without worrying about compromising his vision. He hopes to film some of these "impulse projects" over the summer. "He's rediscovered a joy in creating

again," observed Eric Nong, Viet Film Fest artistic director.

His family's housing situation — sharing one room or sleeping in their car — might be relieved for Weil as he prepares to graduate from Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts.

Depending on what he called "the financial stuff," Weil plans to attend Woodbury University, a private nonprofit liberal arts school in Burbank. He'll be able to live in a dorm room.

"I'll have a roof," Weil told the judges, "which will kind of be nice."

FILM AND TV FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year, the judges selected four finalists from among 16 semifinalists who showcased their skills in animation, cinematography, directing, editing, sound design, and visual effects:

HUNAINA HIRJI, DIVISION 1 » She is a repeat finalist. Her ability at creating bespoke sounds for a short commercial she debuted for her Artist of the Year presentation this year stood out to the judges. Her work was very precise, said Andy Lane, associate professor of storytelling at Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts, where Hirji hoped to study film design. "Great work," Lane told the 18-year-old Hirji. "You'll be in big demand."



Hunaina Hirji

AZTLAIT AGUIRRE PAREDES, DIVISION 2 » His montage of short films — including a re-imagining of "The Beatles' "Strawberry Fields" and a look at the greatness of boxer Muhammad Ali — highlighted the quickly acquired editing skills of Aguirre Paredes, 18. He had played around on an iPad when he was younger but didn't study editing until taking a video production class in his senior year at Buena Park High. For now, it's mostly a hobby, said Aguirre Paredes, who plans to major in computer science.



Aztlaire Aguirre Paredes

MACY PATTERSON, DIVISION 1 » Patterson wrote and directed the short film "I Just Want to Be Pretty." It explores the relationship between two sisters, the younger one's desire to feel pretty like her sibling, and a cruel joke that brings them closer together. It was shot over 48 hours with a crew of 20 from El Dorado High for a film competition. A huge fan of "Barbie" and "Lady Bird" director Greta Gerwig, Patterson, 18, said she is tired of films that depict women tearing at each other. "It's important to show relationships of being with each other, lifting each other up, and bonding." She plans to attend film school at Chapman.



Macy Patterson

TAHLIA POMPEL, DIVISION 1 » Pompel, a cinematographer, did her Artist of the Year presentation by Zoom, from 5,000 miles away. She was in Edinburgh, Scotland, along with classmates and teachers from El Dorado High in Placentia on "kind of a school trip." Even with a few glitches in the transmission, Pompel ably spoke about a PSA on the mental health of teens that was based in part on her own poetry. Her message: "Life will always be full of struggle. Find the little joys in between." She's 17 and a senior who was accepted into her dream school, New York University for film, but also got into Chapman and Emerson College in Boston.



Tahlia Pompel

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INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC: **JADON WU**, Orange County School of the Arts
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ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 | FINE ARTS

CAROLINE KIM

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

The teacher who nominated Caroline Kim for Artist of the Year described her this way: “a doer, a thinker and always a designer.”

Here’s one of the reasons why Paige Oden, director of the visual arts conservatory at Orange County High School of the Arts, used those action words.

“She has created several designed animal characters and related images and has branded those characters and images into a self-sustaining business that fuels her passion for design and success.”

In naming Kim the fine arts Artist of the Year, her abilities as a painter, designer and embroiderer stood out to the judges. She doesn’t appear to be headed to a life as a starving artist.

Kim, 16, came across professional, yet humble. Accomplished, yet picking up new techniques quickly.

“She had the skill, the passion and the art,” said Kyung Sun Cho, professor and program coordinator of drawing and painting at Cal State Fullerton.

Added David Kiddie, associate professor of ceramics at Chapman University, “She’s going to be a successful business-woman.”

Kim brought along examples of TheC-ityTigers brand she created for her own enjoyment and has sold at OCSA’s winter market. They included engaging juice and milk drink boxes that keep the consumer sipping to the bottom to reveal the answer to riddles along the way.

She’s also created mugs, plush toys, totes, and T-shirts. She’d sold about 100 so far with plans to do the winter market again and explore other venues.

Why the tiger motif? Kim had a plush tiger she carried everywhere as a child.

Her work included a mixed-media identity piece — inspired by her childhood toys



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Caroline Kim, a junior at Orange County School of the Arts, is the 2024 Artist of the Year in fine arts.

— that involved working on a sewing machine, wielding a hot glue gun, and embroidering cloth pieces.

She said she is driven to use art to explore the world of design, “realizing that my passion resides in creating for others.” Kim has gravitated toward design be-

cause “You have this issue or something to solve and you use creativity and art to solve it.”

Like, getting children to drink their milk.

She told the judges she feels validated just by someone enjoying what she’s cre-

ated even if they might not connect her name to the finished product.

When Kim said that, Cho noted, “I was like, OK, I’m sold.”

She still has her senior year to finish at OCSA and then hopes to attend a college with a good design program.

FINE ARTS FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year, the judges selected finalists from among the 16 Fine Arts semifinalists whose work spanned drawing, painting, sculpting, 2D and 3D styles, mixed media and ceramics.

ANAIŠ ESQUIVIAS COLLADO, DIVISION 1

He’s soft spoken but Esquivias Collado’s mixed 2D styles say a lot about his thoughts. There’s the acrylic piece “Hunger,” about wanting to be someone else, he said. And his watercolor, acrylic and color pencil image of a boy looking at a drawing of a boy is about wanting to change yourself, the La Habra High senior, 18, explained. “That’s supposed to be me, holding kind of like a self portrait.” Chapman ceramics professor David Kiddie observed the “deep thinking going on there.”



Anais Esquivias Collado

ETHAN LARSEN, DIVISION 2

Album covers and the “vibe” of the hard-core punk and metal music he listens to are Larsen’s greatest inspirations. “I like to think of my work as myself and the music, which is why it looks rough around the edges.” He’s OK with mistakes when he’s sculpting; he leaves them in. He purposely nicks his pieces to “make them look all torn up.” The senior at Esperanza High in Anaheim explained how “good or bad, it still makes you feel something.” But ceramics isn’t cheap, the 18-year-old pointed out. That’s got him thinking about becoming an electrician.



Ethan Larsen

CHILI SLOOP, DIVISION 1

Sloop, 18, possessed the coolest name of all the semifinalists, the judges declared. Sloop likes to focus on the environment and family portraits of relatives in Denmark when she draws. Black ink is her preference. A senior at Orange County School of the Arts, Sloop is interested in the ocean, scuba diving and biology. She’d like to start a line of adult coloring books about environmentalism. On her dives, she’s seen trash 50 meters below the surface. It bothers her: “I want to make people aware of that impact.”



Chili Sloop

MELODY WU, DIVISION 1

Wu, 18, is once again a finalist in Artist of the Year. She paints, draws, sculpts, and creates 2D and 3D mixed media. “In a world so hectic and fast-paced, art gives me the power to instill order in my life.” She helped start the National Art Honor Society at Orange County School of the Arts. Activities included drawing classes at homeless shelters and art tutorials for children nationwide. A senior, she plans to attend a liberal arts school and make art a part of her education path.



Melody Wu

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ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 | INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

JADON WU



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jadon Wu, a junior at Orange County School of the Arts, is the 2024 Artist of the Year in instrumental music.

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

It might sound like some crazy idea, but Jadon Wu has done his research.

A classical pianist interested in medicine and music, Wu talks about perhaps becoming a doctor and maybe someday airdropping a piano in a remote area of the world as part of a medical mission team.

There's precedent: It happened during World War II, he informed an astonished panel of Artist of the Year judges. He's dreamed since he was little of traveling to Africa with his father, a doctor, on such missions.

"Music is not so much about being a professional," Wu said, "but what I can do for other people."

To Wu, 17, that means combin-

ing physical care with the healing power of music.

He's been bringing his gifts as a musician to people in need since 2020 as the founder of Mending Melodies, an organization that performs for senior citizens, disabled people, and those with long-term illnesses, as well as fundraisers to benefit music education for underprivileged children.

Wu's commitment to using his musicianship to better someone else's life stems from personal experience. A few years ago, his grandfather fell off a roof while doing some maintenance. The accident broke his back and caused intracranial bleeding.

Following surgery, his grandfather was comatose. "The prognosis was that he would forever be unresponsive and unable to talk to me again," Wu wrote in

his Artist of the Year application. To show his love, Wu visited regularly — "after school, at night, on weekends, and whenever I could" — to play the piano for him.

"In some ways, I hoped that music would reach deep into his mind and heal him."

Months passed before his grandfather opened his eyes. Wu, a junior in the music conservatory at Orange County School of the Arts, continues to visit and play for his grandfather.

"Now he will wave at me whenever I come by," Wu told the judges, who were impressed by both his artistry and his altruism.

"It's not just about his virtuosity," said Paul Hodgins, a pianist and longtime arts writer who is publisher of the website Culture OC.

"He's a thoughtful pianist."

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year, the judges selected finalists from among 15 Instrumental Music semifinalists who played a variety of music — classical, jazz, rock, pop and soul — on the piano, violin, cello, double bass, oboe, guitar, drums, and with electronic software.

PAUL GONG, DIVISION 1 » He was 5 when he started playing piano, switching to the cello in fourth grade after moving here from China, and then the double bass three years later. He has also played trombone in the Northwood High marching band and bass trombone in the school's jazz ensemble. Gong, 17, wants to be a professional double bassist, and also teach. He's also joined top music conservatories to attend after graduation this year. Juilliard is his dream school.



Paul Gong

JOSEPH HUFFORD, DIVISION 1 » He wore a pink and blue checked beanie and similarly checked red, blue, burgundy and pink sweater jacket — an outfit he crocheted. True to the jazz guitarist that he is, Hufford, 18, maintained a cool demeanor. He's been playing guitar for four years and got hooked on jazz after hearing Chet Baker's "There Will Never Be Another You," one of the songs he showcased for the judges. He plays local coffeehouses and, after graduating Costa Mesa High, plans to attend Sonoma State. What would really be cool, he said, would be to play in jazz clubs.



Joseph Hufford

YAMILETT MELENDEZ, DIVISION 2 » Melendez never saw a double bass until middle school. Now she plays the instrument in the Santa Ana High chamber orchestra. Melendez, 18, learned to play harp for a school production of "Les Misérables" and has picked up the trumpet. She's been in the marching band for two years and serves as drum major. She's been playing Symphony Irvine. All this while convincing relatives it's worth it. "I've needed to have patience with family members because living in a Hispanic household means they don't understand how music can take you far in life," Melendez wants to study music education and teach.



Yamilett Melendez

SAVANNAH TWEEDT, DIVISION 1 » She's played drums since she was 6, more as a hobby than anything else. Then, three years ago, the Orange County School of the Arts music student realized a girl could be a professional drummer in a rock band. That's when she saw Karah James of the Canadian indie pop group Valley perform live. "She was living the dream: playing drums for 2,000 people and absolutely loving every second of it," Tweedt got serious. She recorded an EP in 2022 with her band, t85, and wants to master the studio techniques of record production, her "dream career." Tweedt, 18, hopes to mentor young women and raise the profile of females in the music industry.



Savannah Tweedt

ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 | MEDIA ARTS

GRACE LIN



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Grace Lin, a senior at Arnold O. Beckman High School, is the 2024 Artist of the Year in media arts.

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

In middle school, Grace Lin was headed down the path of a possible career in robotics. That was a logical expectation given that her parents both had a background in the computer science field.

The stress was on academics. But more and more as high school drew near, Lin found herself spending time on her art and, as she put it, "fiddling with the pencils." Her freshman year at Beckman High in Irvine coincided with the COVID pandemic and there she was, "floundering" and "without direction."

The emphasis on robotics gave way to art. Lin, 17, loves comic books and she dived headfirst into Original Character Tournaments that allow artists like Lin to pit their original characters against each other in online battles.

The tournaments unleashed Lin's creative expression.

"Looking back at the past three years of endless comic making and battling, it almost feels like I've never been able to step away," she wrote in her Artist of the Year application.

One of the characters she created is a gunslinging pyromaniac — her words — from a concept titled "Bullet Hell." A towering figure drawn with fiery red and yellow tones in her hair, Lin described her digital creation as "completely crazy, almost nothing holding her back morally."

"Bullet Hell" captured the judges' attention. Eric Chimenti, associate professor of graphic design at Chapman University, noticed the character's charred fingertips. Lin explained: "She's touched the fire. She's even crazier because of that."

Lin sees a bit of herself in the character.

"I want to aspire to be not the pyro, but unafraid to be big and bold and absolutely fiery in my personality."

Then she added, "I think it's OK to be selfish once in a while." To that end, Lin said her mother is OK with her choice to pursue digital art. Her father and grandfather still want her to consider robotics.

Lin said she was accepted at all the schools she applied to, including Laguna Beach College of Art and Design, ArtCenter College of Design, and California College of the Arts. Finances and distance from home will determine where she'll attend.

The judges figure Lin's strong vision, great sense of who she is, and "amazing artwork" may well lead her to set the game and comic book world on fire.

Said Ziyang Duan, assistant curator at Orange County Museum of Art: "She is determined to be an artist."

MEDIA ARTS FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year the judges named four finalists from among the 15 semifinalists who submitted work in 2D animation, digital drawing and illustration, game art, photography, and mixed-media video.

NATHAN ALEXANDER AYALA, DIVISION 2 » Ayala's digital photography captures moments that many people don't bother to notice. A lone surfer who, "although she's alone, I didn't get the sense she was lonely." A restaurant worker at the end of his night shift. "He seemed to enjoy taking out the trash because he's ready to go home." A local car meet and the people who love those cars. Ayala, 17 and a senior at Villa Park High, started taking photography seriously when he got his first camera in November. Now it's all he thinks about: "It's every day."



Nathan Alexander Ayala

ANDREW HSIEH, DIVISION 1 » Hsieh, 18, has had a camera in his hands since 6th grade. He's headed for Brown University to major in modern culture and media with plans to be a photographer for the student paper, the Brown Daily Herald. Hsieh shoots sports and other school activities for the campus paper at Fountain Valley High. He also photographs concerts and has shot mesmerizing videos of himself doing fancy card shuffling. One judge called him "The Tom Brady of this group."



Andrew Hsieh

SARAH F. HU, DIVISION 1 » Discovering graphic design on YouTube changed the course of Hu's career dreams. She had considered various artistic occupations, including crafting, interior design and baking. This while in middle school. Once at Beckman High, she took an elective course in graphic design and discovered a way to create a brand for her other artwork, which she has sold at school functions. Hu is 18 and plans to continue in the art industry. Chapman University graphic design professor Eric Chimenti was impressed by her printmaking: "That was so good."



Sarah F. Hu

HECTOR LOPEZ, DIVISION 3 » As a photographer, Lopez has the composition skills and he has the heart. Ricky Rivas, the teacher at Anaheim High School who nominated him for Artist of the Year, recalled how Lopez, 17, told him he spends hours exploring North Orange County on a public bus and on foot, finding the everyday — and typically overlooked — subjects and moments that his camera elevates to black and white art. A senior who may be headed to Cypress College to study film and photography, Lopez has only been focusing on photography for about two years.



Hector Lopez

ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 | THEATER

McKENZIE CAHILL



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

McKenzie Cahill, a senior at Capistrano Valley High School, is the 2024 Artist of the Year in theater.

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

Dressed in a black sweatshirt and baggy brown pants, McKenzie Cahill stood stark still as she belted out "To My Angels" from the musical "SuperYou," her voice a poignant mix of vulnerability and powerful emotions.

Then, for her next song, she flung the sweatshirt aside to move about freely as the menacing nanny Miss Andrew singing "Brimstone and Treacle" from "Mary Poppins."

The two numbers embodied the personal story and the theatrical command that earned her the vote for Artist of the Year.

"Amazing" was the word used by one of the judges to describe both the powerhouse voice and the driving force behind Cahill's artistry.

There was something about the 18-year-old senior from Capistrano Valley High that stayed on the mind of Sara Guerrero, a founder and artistic director of Breath of

Fire Latina Theater Ensemble.

A lot of students, Guerrero noted, go through personal issues similar to those Cahill faced down — being called the "N" word and egged in predominantly white south Orange County for her mixed-race background, and feeling helpless in defense of her younger sister, bullied in middle school for her sexual orientation.

For students like Cahill, Guerrero said, "Art has allowed them to find their voices."

Cahill spoke about how she connects the song "To My Angels" — and such lyrics as "There's nothing I see that's divine/And I'm waiting for some little sign" — to that trying time when her sister suffered intense harassment by her peers. Cahill went so far as to contact school administrators herself in seeking a stop to the bullying.

Then during her junior year in high school, she put all her anger and passion into the role of the cruel Miss Andrew in "Mary Poppins."

That year, she said, was the hardest for her sister. Things are better now, but Cahill couldn't help tearing up when talking about it, as she admitted also doing during her interview for New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, where she was waitlisted.

Cahill has earned accolades that include the OC Cappies Best Vocalist and the JRAY Featured Actress awards for her 2023 roles of Miss Andrew and Birdwoman in her school's production of "Mary Poppins."

Her teacher, Emily Tucker, described Cahill as "an outstanding vocalist, actress and dancer. A true triple threat."

Actually, quadruple. She's excelled as a student director this year, Tucker added.

Asked what her dream role might be, Cahill began naming lead characters from "Wicked" and "Hedestown" but then paused and declared, "Any character in any Broadway show ever."

THEATER FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year, the judges selected finalists from among the 16 Theater semifinalists for their singing, acting and technical art skills.

JD CAVALLUZZI, DIVISION 2 » Cavalluzzi decided on taking a class in theater design at El Dorado High in Placentia because his best friend was going to and, what the heck, Cavalluzzi needed the credit. He found his calling. He's designed props for seven shows, including doggie string puppets for "The Book of Dog." Cavalluzzi, 17 and a junior, impressed the judges with his sophistication. "That's college level stuff," Concordia University professor of theatre Tony Vezner said of the lighting choices Cavalluzzi made for his school's production of "Frankenstein."



JD Cavalluzzi

AVA DEVÖE, DIVISION 1 » DeVoe started with film acting when she was 6. She's had TV roles on "Grey's Anatomy" and "This Is Us." Stunt training is coming up this summer. "I'm so excited about the idea of jumping off a building." A senior at Orange County School of the Arts, DeVoe, 17, plans to attend the Creative Producing program at Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts. "I want to be that person with all the answers and be the person people come to for those answers."



Ava DeVoe

ISABELLA KIM, DIVISION 1 » For the roles that she's taken on since starting in seventh grade at the Orange County School of the Arts acting conservatory, Kim ponders the nature of a character to create a backstory, whether portraying a water spirit in an avant-garde project or Ophelia in "Hamlet." She wants to know: "Who am I?" "Where did I come from?" "Where do I fit in this puzzle piece of a story even though I'm a minor character?" Kim, 16, has another year of high school. "Whatever I do in the future, I hope it is theater related."



Isabella Kim

KAYA SPARNICHT, DIVISION 1 » Talent runs in the family. Her sister, Elora, was an Artist of the Year theater finalist in 2023. Kaya Sparnicht, 17, included an original poem "Ode to My First Last Goodbye" in her presentation. Besides her studies as a junior at Orange County School of the Arts, she competes with the Get Lit Player slam poetry group in Los Angeles. Sara Guerrero, the Breath of Fire ensemble co-founder, saw Sparnicht perform her poetry at an OCSA event. "She was. Awesome."



Kaya Sparnicht

ARTIST OF THE YEAR 2024 | VOCAL MUSIC

VIVEKA SARAVANAN



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Viveka Saravanan, a senior at Orange County School of the Arts is the 2024 Artist of the Year in vocal music.

By Theresa Walker
Correspondent

For Viveka Saravanan, the second year was the charm.

Last year, she finished as a semifinalist.

Now the Orange County School of the Arts senior can call herself Artist of the Year, the standout among what one judge deemed "a very polished group."

"Here's the thing, they were all so great!" said Tim Nelson, musical theater chair at Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts, who also runs the Rose Center Theater in Westminster.

The long list of honors on Saravanan's résumé includes being named a 2024 YoungArts National Award winner.

Saravanan, trained in both Western classical opera and the classical Carnatic music of her family's native south India, chose the two pieces she sang for different reasons: The first, "Tornani

a Vagheggari" from Handel's opera "Alcina," to challenge herself. The second piece, "There Will Be Stars" from composer John Woods Duke, she selected for its poetry by Sara Teasdale.

A soprano, Saravanan said she hoped to display her versatility. Asked to describe how she has grown over the past year, Saravanan, 18, replied that she has learned to accept her voice as it is.

"Before, I was trying to mold it into what a singer should sound like."

And where once she was shy about her culture, Saravanan said she has been inspired by cultural events at OCSA to want to share it with the world.

"Everyone has a heritage," she said. "This is nothing to be ashamed of."

Her self-discovery is paying off.

"Heaven knows the opera world needs her," said Talena Mara, vice president of education at Segerstrom Center for the Arts and one

of the judges who remembered Saravanan from last year when she presented both classical and Carnatic pieces.

While she didn't sing this time from her Carnatic training, which began at the age of 3, Saravanan talked about how the two different styles — Western and Eastern — intersect, because, she said, "Fundamentally, they are really the same."

Where one might be more to tell a story and the other more devotional, the scales are the same, Saravanan pointed out.

And someday she'd like to be part of creating an opera to show everyone else that intersection of the classical and the Carnatic.

"I really want to explore that," said Saravanan, who is studying conducting and has conducted OCSA's middle school vocal choir.

Saravanan would like to double major in vocal performance and music education.

VOCAL MUSIC FINALISTS

In addition to Artist of the Year, the judges also selected four finalists from the 16 vocalists who showcased classical, musical theater, pop, country, rhythm and blues, and jazz singing.

WILLIAM BOLIN, DIVISION 1 » Bolin, 18, expressed a personal mission as an artist. "... to reinvigorate our culture with the rich legacy of past artists and help people of even the most mundane circumstances to understand and experience the intense emotion and humanity of classical music." Blessed with what one judge called an "exceptional" baritone — and parents who are both accomplished in classical music — the Orange County School of the Arts senior has the solid foundation to pursue his goals.



William Bolin

CATHERINE DOSIER, DIVISION 1 » She's 18 and calls herself "totally a hopeless romantic" who got into musical theater in middle school. Dosier, who attends Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts, said she enjoys performing so much that "it's kind of relaxing." She expects to major in theater and wants to minor in neuroscience because she is fascinated by how the brain works and how that connects to emotions: "I would love doing work to emotionally save lives."



Catherine Dosier

NOELLE LIDYOFF, DIVISION 1 » Lidyoff, 17, is a singer-songwriter, who works in both the indie folk and gospel genres. Her pop music streams on platforms under the band name Della Luz and her worship songs have aired on "Hour of Power." Her songwriting was born when a youth leader at her church taught her to play guitar. She was 11. She's a junior at Fullerton Union High with another year of high school to finish. She wants to attend college in Nashville. The judges saw her as a working artist, with this prediction from Talena Mara, vice president of education at Segerstrom Center for the Arts: "She'll be singing in arenas by next year."



Noelle Lidyoff

BELLA WILSON, DIVISION 2 » Tiny frame, but big voice. Wilson's father is a singer. Her parents didn't stay together but "I don't care if I have to sell a limb, I'm going to be on Broadway. I need to."



Bella Wilson