



Schmidt Vocal Arts held its first-ever national competition for high school students in Sarasota, Fla., this June, with some star judges. (L to R) McAlister, soprano Tamara Wilson, Benjamin Riverón (3rd place), Nicole DiPasquale (1st place), Dalila Lugo (2nd place), soprano Amanda Majeski, and Sarasota Opera’s general director Richard Russell. (Lori Sax)

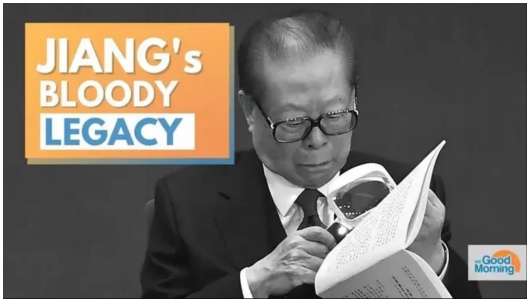
How to Train an Opera Star: Schmidt Vocal Arts Guides High School and College Students in Classical Techniques

Led by Linda McAlister, Schmidt Vocal Arts continues its legacy of helping young opera singers realize their goals

BY [DAVID DUDLEY](#) TIME [NOVEMBER 15, 2022](#) [PRINT](#) 

Though the paths that lead to a career in [music](#) are myriad, guides are invaluable to aspiring singers. Linda McAlister’s unique background may have given her the ideal foundation to oversee the robust roster of programs at Schmidt Vocal Arts, the umbrella entity that includes the Schmidt Vocal Competition, Schmidt Vocal Institute, and Schmidt Vocal Education, as well as scholarship opportunities for high school and college-age singers. An accomplished soprano, McAlister also holds a degree in international business. “It’s important for young singers to know that when you build a career in the arts, you’re also an entrepreneur,” she told American Essence.

Born and raised in Hector, Minnesota, McAlister’s dad, Willard Fluck (pronounced “Fluke”) raised corn and soybean crops on a farm of about 900 acres. McAlister said she inherited her love of music from her mom, Heather, a school teacher in St. Paul. “She was a city girl,” McAlister said. “Because of her, I took up violin at 3 years old, piano at 5, and flute and choir by middle school.” Though she participated in choir, and she had private lessons, McAlister’s musical ambitions compelled her to study voice at St. Mary’s University in Winona, Minnesota, during her junior year of high school. Around that time, she became interested in the business of music, too. “I thought I might become an agent for artists,” she said. She pursued a double major in vocal performance and international business, which would help immensely in the world of classical music. “Opera is an international art form,” she said.



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Raised on a farm in Minnesota, Linda McAlister inherited her mother's love of music and became passionate about helping young singers realize their artistic goals. (Stephanie Berger)

McAlister earned a bachelor's degree by the time she turned 20. From there, she earned a Master of Music from Miami University in Ohio. Then, she did doctoral studies at the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music. After singing at the Steans Music Institute at the Ravinia Festival, McAlister furthered her study of German Lieder at the Hochschule für Musik, Nürnberg-Augsburg (Meisterklasse). "I caught the performance bug early," she said. Her first—and favorite—role in Germany was Rosalinde in "Die Fledermaus," by Johann Strauss II. "I was in a stunningly beautiful space—but I didn't speak German!" The language barrier didn't stop her from playing other roles, such as Venus in "Dardanus" and Belinda in "Dido and Aeneas." She also appeared in concerts of works by Mendelssohn, Haydn, Fauré, and Mozart, among others.

McAlister said she missed the United States, so she began applying for jobs while still in Germany. Upon returning to the States, she became the first-ever executive director of SongFest at Colburn, in Los Angeles. She acted as artistic coordinator for the Steans Music Institute Vocal Program at the Ravinia Festival, the summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. McAlister joined the William E. Schmidt Foundation's team as the Schmidt Vocal Competition manager in 2012, while also serving on the voice faculty at Miami University in Ohio.

The Foundation was founded by local philanthropist William E. Schmidt and his extended family in 1992. Schmidt loved music and was committed to fostering young students' passion for classical singing, which led to several successful programs and ultimately the creation of Schmidt Vocal Arts. In September 2019, McAlister assumed the newly-created role of executive director for Schmidt Vocal Arts, overseeing the organization's programming.

Not bad for the farm girl from Minnesota. "While I didn't end up singing on the world's biggest stages," McAlister said, "I'm still following my passion. I want to help our kids dream big—while giving them the skills they need to achieve their goals."

Filling a void

Tamara Wilson knew McAlister was perfect for a leadership role at SVA. “Linda excels at the art and business of singing,” Wilson said. She’s known McAlister since their days at the University of Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.



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An exceedingly busy soprano, Wilson said she was excited when McAlister asked her to judge SVA competitions, and she hopes to mentor many young singers in the years to come. “Linda and SVA are filling a void,” Wilson said. “Most high schools in the U.S. really aren’t equipped to prepare students for college music programs.”





Alumni of the Schmidt Vocal Institute outside the Sarasota Opera House. (Lori Sax)

Saman de Silva, a baritone from Palo Alto, California, knows that struggle. At 14, he fell in love with opera after hearing “The Pearl Fishers’ Duet,” from Georges Bizet’s 1863 opera, “Les Pêcheurs de Perles.” De Silva said that he learned a great deal from participating in the Schmidt Vocal Institute during the summer between his junior and senior years in high school. “My high school didn’t have the resources to give me a private voice teacher,” he said. “The coaching I received at the Institute, and the communal learning that took place while I watched others sing, changed my life.”

De Silva graduated high school in June, and he is now preparing to attend Harvard, where he will pursue a bachelor’s degree in science. Then, he will work on a Master of Music at New England Conservatory, as part of [the Harvard/NEC dual degree program](#). “I gained such valuable tools from my time with SVA,” de Silva said. “I learned to build relationships and collaborate. I learned how the art world functions.”

Dreams Are Reachable

Miami, Florida, native Saige Hoffman’s first encounter with SVA came in her sophomore year of high school. “The pandemic had already hit,” Hoffman said, “and my regional competition was moved to virtual.” While the move from in-person to virtual competition created new challenges for singers, Hoffman came to appreciate the experience of recording her three selections and sending them in via YouTube. “It was a valuable asset that I would need for college applications and future endeavors,” she said.



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Hoffman, who is a soprano, wasn’t sure that she would pursue a career in opera. “I felt like there was so much that I still hadn’t learned,” she said. “After attending Schmidt Vocal Institute, I realized my mission in life was to be a part of the future generation of opera.” In May, she won the National Association of Teachers of Singing competition. “It was important because it confirmed for me that I had something to offer,” she said.

Hoffman said that SVA, and especially McAlister, was instrumental in realizing her goals. “Linda was my private coach during the Schmidt Vocal Institute,” Hoffman said. “Working with her was an absolute joy. It is nice to be taught by someone who is currently singing in their career, as they can sympathize with their students.”

“Because of the relationships I’ve built with SVA,” Hoffman continued, “I will be attending Oberlin, my dream college, with Dr. Katherine Jolly.” SVA isn’t just a foundation that gives out prize money, Hoffman said. “They’re a foundation that truly cares and nurtures the future generation of opera. They helped me realize that my dreams were reachable.”

This article was originally published in American Essence magazine.

A previous version of this article contained an incorrect reference to the Schmidt vocal arts organization. It also incorrectly described Hoffman’s academic studies at the University of Cincinnati. American Essence regrets the error.



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