

Academy Class of 2025-2026 Accolades

May

Cellist Katarina Kenney, student of Hans Jensen, was awarded the Bronze Medal at The Stulberg International String Competition, an internationally recognized competition that promotes excellence in string instrument performances by gifted artists under the age of twenty. The third-place contestant is awarded the Pinehurst Bronze Medal along with a cash prize of \$5,000 and a concerto performance with the Kalamazoo Junior Symphony Orchestra in February of 2027.

Cellist Ella Wimbiscus, student of Hans Jensen, was named the winner of the 57th Annual Dr. Robert Stanger Young Artists Competition, a prestigious competition recognizing talented young musicians from across Chicagoland. After winning the Strings Division of the Competition in February, Ella competed with the winners of the other instrument divisions. The announcement was made live at the conclusion of the Rising Stars Concert & Competition, Saturday, May 16, 2026. Wimbiscus earned top honors for her lyrical rendition of Antonín Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B Min., Op. 104, Movement I, performed alongside the Elmhurst Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Assistant Conductor Eli Chen. The Stanger Young Artist Competition is an annual tradition that supports and celebrates the next generation of classical musicians by offering high school performers the opportunity to appear as soloists with a professional orchestra.

April

Pianist Edie Park, student of Marta Aznavoorian and Winston Choi, was selected as one of the nine semifinalists for the Ruth Monte Memorial Bach Competition. The semifinal and final round will be held at Northwestern University on June 20-21 at Northwestern University. The competition offers a lecture, masterclass, community lunch/dinner, and a faculty recital.

Violinist Salvador Stein was invited to take part in a special masterclass with Chen Zao of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. In collaboration with The Stradivari Society, the event was set among extraordinary instruments and a rich musical tradition that represents the highest standards of the violin world. Salvador is a student of Ms. Almita Vamos.

Tikaani String Quartet, Romeo Vashishth, Sebastian Manning, Neena Agrawal, and Katarina Kenney, coached by Sang Mee Lee, won the Junior Division Silver Medal Award and the Composer Spotlight Prize at the St. Paul String Quartet Competition in April with their performance of Caroline Shaw's Blueprint.

Cellists Roy Wu, student of Hans Jensen, and Lavie Huang, student of Avi Friedlander, performed for CSO cellist, Olivia Huh, on the Chicago Youth in Music Festival, in Nichols Concert Hall. Violist Neena Agrawal, student of Sang Mee Lee, performed for CSO violist Teng Li, at the Merit School of Music earlier in April, and closing the master class series was academy violinist Paloma Furst Chavira with CSO Concertmaster Robert Chen at Symphony Center.

Elle Cho, violin student of Almita Vamos, is a member of her school's Constitution Team, which is comprised of six units, each focusing on a different aspect of the Constitution and how it is applied. Elle is on Unit 5, which focuses on case law and the Court's use of the Bill of Rights. They won state in January, and represented the state of Illinois at Nationals in Washington, DC.

Trio Novare, Linda Phan, Felix Pipal, and Noah Kim, coached by Claudia Lasareff-Mironoff and Inah Chiu, originally named 1st Alternate, is now a junior division quarter finalist in the 53rd Annual Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition. They will join the Meraviglia String Quartet, Lauren Kim, Elle Cho, Emily Chen, and Lucy Wu, coached by Rodolfo Vieira, at the live Junior Division Quarter Final round in South Bend, Indiana in May.

Cellist Katarina Kenney, student of Hans Jensen, was selected as one of twelve semifinalists to compete in the Stulberg International String Competition in Kalamazoo, Michigan on May 16, 2026. Allowing gifted students of different string instruments to participate, the Stulberg International String Competition is a violin, viola, cello, and double bass competition that students may perform in for the chance to win awards and prizes.

Violinist Alexandra Dreesen, a freshman at Adlai E. Stevenson High School, and pianist Edie Park, a junior at the Latin School of Chicago, performed at the Skokie Public Library on April 12 as part of the Steinway Young Artist Concert Series.

March

Violist Neena Agrawal, student of Sang Mee Lee, was the Nerenberg Award 2nd Prize Winner at the 2026 Musicians Club of Women Awards Competition. Founded in 1875, MCW is one of the oldest musical organizations in Chicago, continuously supporting emerging and established women musicians through scholarships and performance opportunities. Neena won a scholarship and will perform next year at an MCW event.

Violinist Sylvia Pine, student of Davis King and Almita Vamos, participated in the Guadalajara International Chamber Music Festival in Mexico over spring break. She'll play first violin in the Dohnanyi Sextet, coaching with Giovanni Gnocchi, and will have private lessons with Sibbi Bernhardsson, Nancy Zhou, and Ulf Wallin.

Cellist Roy Wu, student of Hans Jensen, won 2nd place in The Peoria Symphony Guild Young Artist Competition (YAC), an annual, prestigious competition for high school and junior high musicians within a 350-mile radius of Peoria, IL. Winners are awarded monetary prizes, and the top winner performs with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra during the Annual Student Concert.

Violinist Emily Chen, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi, won 2nd place in the senior strings division of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) competition, one of the most prestigious student music competitions in the U.S., It is structured primarily into three progressive tiers (State, Division, and National) for Piano, String, and Woodwind categories. It serves as a comprehensive educational experience, ranging from educational performance assessment to national-level recognition. Congrats to Emily on this significant achievement.

Violinist Linda Phan, student of Davis King, was the winner of the Howe Foundation Young Artist Competition. The Muscatine Symphony Orchestra's annual Howe Foundation Young Artist Competition is open to student musicians in grades 9–12 who live or study within 50 miles of Muscatine, Iowa. Winners receive cash prizes, scholarships for music education, and the opportunity to perform with the symphony.

Cellist Ella Wimbiscus, student of Hans Jensen, will perform with the Elmhurst Symphony on May 16th for the final round of the 57th Annual Stanger Competition. Ella was the winner of the strings division and will compete with the other division winners in the finals.

Ella was also the winner of the West Suburban Symphony Concerto Competition and will perform with orchestra on June 28th in Naperville.

The Meraviglia String Quartet, Lauren Kim, Elle Cho, Emily Chen, and Lucy Wu, coached by Rodolfo Vieira, advanced to the live Junior Division Quarter Final round of the 53rd Annual Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition, held in South Bend, IN at Notre Dame each May. The Fischhoff competition is the largest chamber music competition in the country.

Trio Novare, Linda Phan, Felix Pipal, and Noah Kim, coached by Claudia Lasareff-Mironoff and Inah Chiu, has been named 1st Alternate and the Vallora String Quartet, Annalise Song, Matthew Kim, Brayden Wu, and Ella Wimbiscus, coached by Stefan Kartman, has been named 4th Alternate. Groups will learn mid-April if alternate groups advance to the quarterfinals in May.

Two Academy chamber groups won top prizes at the 14th Annual A.N. and Pearl G. Barnett Chamber Music Competition, Sunday, March 15. The Tikaani String Quartet (Sebastian Manning, Neena Agrawal, Katarina Kenney, and Romeo Vashishth), coached by Sang Mee Lee, won 1st Place in the Strings and Piano Division and was also named the Grand Award

Winner of the Barnett Chamber Music Competition! Meraviglia Quartet (Lauren Kim, Elle Cho, Emily Chen, and Lucy Wu), coached by Rodolfo Vieira, received Honorable Mention in the Strings and Piano Division.

The Tikaani String Quartet, Sebastian Manning, Romeo Vashishth, Neena Agrawal, and Katarina Kenney, coached by Sang Mee Lee, advanced to the Junior Division Finals of the 21st Annual St. Paul String Quartet Competition. Tikaani will compete with five other national ensembles in various rounds.

The Meraviglia String Quartet, Lauren Kim, Elle Cho, Emily Chen, and Lucy Wu, coached by Rodolfo Vieira, won second place at the 13th Annual Coltman Competition at the Austin Butler School of Music in Austin, Texas. The national chamber music competition launched in 2010, offers advanced applicants performance experience and expert commentary. Winners of the competition receive a cash prize and multiple performance opportunities.

Ingrid Updegraff, Edie Park, Neal Eisfeldt, Eliana Song and Simon Cegys performed on the Stars of Tomorrow Concert hosted by Steven Honigberg and the Pilgrim Chamber Players on March 8th in Highland Park. Academy faculty member, Sung Hoon Mo, also performed. This annual concert showcases talented high school musicians.

Violinist Ingrid Updegraff, student of Davis King, performed at the Skokie Library in Skokie, IL on March 1st as part of the Young Steinway Concert Series. This series showcases talented young performers of classical music.

January

The DePaul National Concerto Competition gives from the Midwest the opportunity to compete and receive performance evaluations from well renowned judges. Winners perform a movement of a concerto with the Oistrakh Symphony of Chicago later in the spring. The following Academy students were winners this year.

CELLO

Winner

Katarina Kenney -17, student of Hans Jensen

Honorable Mention with Distinction

Ella Wimbiscus - 15, student of Hans Jensen

Honorable Mention

Ruoyi (Roy) Wu -13, student of Hans Jensen

PIANO

Honorable Mention

Edie Park– 16, student of Marta Aznavoorian and Winston Choi

VIOLIN

Winner

Neal Eisfeldt- 16, student of Almita Vamos

Honorable Mention with Distinction

Sebastian Manning-17, student of Almita Vamos

Honorable Mention

Alexandra Dreesen-15, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi

Annalise Song-17, student of Almita Vamos

Ingrid Updegraff-15, student of Davis King

VIOLA

Winner

Brayden Wu- 17, student of Sang Mee Lee

Trillium Trio, Edie Park, Sal Stein, and Henri Smolen, coached by Marta Aznavoorian and Paula Kosower, advanced to the finals of the Rembrandt Chamber Musicians Annual High School Chamber Music Competition. The live finals will be held on Sunday, February 8 at North Park University's Anderson Chapel.

Sebastian Manning, student of Almita Vamos, and Ella Wimbiscus, student of Hans Jensen, were finalists in the Crain-Maling Foundation CSO Young Artists Competition. Sebastian was named Alternate, and violinist Cecilia O'Malley won first place.

Emily Chen, student of Injoo Choi and Almita Vamos, advanced to the third and final tier of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) Competition. The Nationals will be held in March in Chicago. Emily will be representing the state of IL and the Midwest, after winning the three-tiered state and division competitions in the fall. The MTNA National Competitions are the most successful and prestigious student competitions in the country.

Sylvia Pine, student of Almita Vamos and Davis King, won a Gold Prize from Berlin's Euterpe Music Awards. The Euterpe Music Awards are open to vocalists, instrumentalists (piano, string, wind, and percussion instruments) and interpreters of chamber music of all nationalities.

Felix Pipal, student of Adrien Zitoun, advanced to the semi-final round of the Bolz Young Artist Competition, a highly regarded statewide competition in Wisconsin. Watch for updates.

Neena Agrawal, student of Sang Mee Lee, was the winner of the 2026 Arthur D. Montzka Young Artists Concerto Competition at the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra. Edie Park, student of Marta Aznavoorian, and Matthew Park, student of Sang Mee Lee received Honorable mentions.

December

Ella Wimbiscus, student of Hans Jensen, and Sebastian Manning, student of Almita Vamos, have advanced to the finals of the Crain-Maling Foundation CSO Young Artists Competition, a prestigious concerto competition for Illinois' top young soloists, on Saturday, January 17.

Violinists Emily Chen, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi, and Neal Eisfeldt, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi, were named winners of the 2026 YoungArts Competition. This year's winners included 734 of the nation's most accomplished young visual, literary, and performing artists representing 39 states and the District of Columbia. Bestowed annually since 1981, the YoungArts Award is the only award in the nation that recognizes exceptional young talent across disciplines and affirms their pursuit of a professional life in the arts.

The YoungArts Award recognizes work that demonstrates exceptional technique; a strong sense of artistry; and a depth of thinking/performance that exceeds the level of peers at this career stage. YoungArts award winners receive a monetary award of \$250.

November

The Music Teachers National Association Performance Competitions (MTNA) are the most successful and prestigious student competitions in the country. Each year, thousands of students compete for top prizes and national recognition. The purpose of the competitions is to provide educational experiences for students and teachers and to recognize exceptionally talented young artists and their teachers in their pursuit of musical excellence. The three-tiered Junior, Senior and Young Artist Performance Competitions begin with a live state competition. The winners/representatives of each state's competitions advance to a video-only Division Competition. Division winners compete in the National Finals at the annual 2026 MTNA National Conference held in Chicago.

Violinist Emily Chen, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi, was the 1st place winner in the strings division of the MNTA Illinois Competition, held on November 9. Illinois state winners advance to the East Central Division of the competition in January 2026. Pianist Edie Park, student of Marta Aznavoorian and Winston Choi, was named alternate in the piano division of the MNTA Illinois competition.

Cellist Henri Smolen was the 2nd Place Winner in the Virtuoso Category of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra's Maurer Young Musicians Competition. Henri is a student of Austin Huntington.

Sejong Cultural Society Competition, held on Saturday, November 22. The society strives to advance awareness and understanding of Korea's cultural heritage amongst people in the United States by reaching out to the younger generations through contemporary creative and fine arts. Pianist Noah Kim, student of Christopher Guzman, won 2nd place in the senior division of the 2025 Sejong Music Competition. Violinist Lauren Kim, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi, won 2nd place and Eliana Song, student of Almita Vamos and Davis King, won an honorable mention in the senior violin division. Violinist Sylvia Pine, student of Almita Vamos and Davis King, won 2nd place and best interpretation of a Korean piece in the junior violin division.

Katarina Kenney, 2025 Stars of Tomorrow Competition winner, was invited to perform in the Milwaukee Symphony Youth Concert Series - Journey of Imagination at the Bradley Symphony Center. She performed Tchaikovsky Pezzo Capriccioso, Op. 62, on six performances, reaching a total of 9,000 students.

Violinist Lauren Kim, student of Almita Vamos and Injoo Choi, and pianist Claire Wang, performed in a concert for the Young Steinway Artists on Sunday, November 2, 2025. Young Steinway Artists Concert Series showcases young people with extraordinary talent, giving local audiences the chance to enjoy first-class music, for free, and close to home in Skokie.

October

Cellist Henri Smolen, student of Austin Huntington, advanced to the live final round of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra's Maurer Young Musicians Competition, on Saturday, November 8. This competition is held every year for young, promising musicians from Indiana with a goal of giving students a place to hone their performance skills. Former Academy winners include graduates Sasha Varchenko, Lily Sullivan, and Serge Kalinovsky.

Illinois State Music Teachers Association Piano Competition (ISMTA) was held on Saturday, October 25, 2025. Edie Park was the 2nd place winner in the Senior II Division and Noah Kim was the 3rd place winner, Senior II Division. Edie studies with Marta Aznavoorian and Winston Choi, and Noah studies with Christopher Guzman. Academy cellist Roy Wu received Honorable Mention in the Junior Piano Division.

Composer Sylvia Pine's War for wind quintet was featured on Introductions on WFMT as a part of the 2025 CSO Young Composers Initiative on October 4, 2025. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Negaunee Music Institute and mentor Jessie Montgomery took six young composers and guided them through workshops of new pieces throughout the year. The Young Composers Initiative culminated in a concert featuring fellows of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago as performers.

The Meraviglia Quartet, Elle Cho, Lauren Kim, Emily Chen, and Lucy Wu, coached by Rodolfo Vieira, performed at the Art of Masquerade Gala celebrating 70 years of the Deer Path Art League, Saturday, October 4 at the David Adler Estate in Lake Forest.

Pianist Edie Park, student of Marta Aznavoorian and Winston Choi, performed Scarlatti, Beethoven, and Chopin on an Encore broadcast on WFMT Introductions on October 18, 2025.

Pianist Edie Park performed Beethoven's Fantasia for Piano, Chorus & Orchestra, Op.80 with the Fox Valley Orchestra on Sunday, October 26, 2025, at Crimi Auditorium at Aurora University.

September

Cellist Lavie Huang, student of Avi Friedlander and violinist Eliana Song, student of Almita Vamos, were named winners of the Chicago Chamber Music Festival (CCMF) Concerto Competition 2025. Concerto competition winners performed with the Northeastern Illinois University Orchestra in the Collage Concert of October 24th, 2025. Lavie performed Shostakovich Cello Concerto No.1, Mvt.1, and Eliana performed Lalo Symphonie Espagnole for Violin and Orchestra Location.

Violinist Elle Cho, student of Almita Vamos, was featured on WFMT Introductions on Saturday, September 20, 2025. Introductions is WFMT's weekly Saturday morning program that features talented pre-college classical musicians in the Chicago area.

Alumni News

Though currently based in Paris, cellist Johannes Gray, 28, started his musical career in Chicago and has become an award-winning instrumentalist. His solo engagements have taken him across four continents, including performances at the Berlin Philharmonie, the festivals of Ravinia and Verbier, Lincoln Center, SuperCello (Beijing), and the Cello Biennale Amsterdam. Johannes has won the International Pablo Casals Award, Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition, and the Verbier Festival's Prix de l'APCAV award. He studied in the Academy with beloved MIC cello faculty member Gilda Barston, followed by Hans Jørgen Jensen, Jérôme Pernoo in Paris, Frans Helmerson in Berlin, and Ivan Monighetti in Madrid. Johannes has resided in Paris since 2015. Johannes' sister, Erika Gray, was also in the Academy. Her string quartet, Quartet Stracciatella, won the gold medal in the 2012 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition junior division. Erika is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music where she studied with Roberto Díaz

Violinist Sameer Agrawal, 20, former student of Sang Mee Lee, and Hun Jae Lim, 27, former student of Shmuel Ashkenasi, have advanced in the 2026 Elmar Oliveira International Violin Competition, to be held January 4 through January 18, 2026, at Lynn University in Boca Raton, FL. Sameer is a current student of Midori at the Curtis Institute of Music, as was Hun Jae Lim.

Academy alumna Karisa Chiu, Class of 2017, student of Almita and Roland Vamos, recently released her first album titled HOME. Influenced by her Chicago upbringing, pandemic discoveries, and Korean and Chinese family roots, the recording reflects on the various interpretations of “home” in Chiu’s life, with works by Jean Sibelius, Claude Debussy, Augusta Read Thomas, Cyril Scott, and Gabriel Fauré.