



Announces Winners of the 2017 VSA International Young Soloists Competition

**Four Soloists to Give Free Performance on the
Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage May 25, 2017 at 6 p.m.**

(WASHINGTON)—Four young musicians have been named as winners of the 2017 VSA International Young Soloists Competition, a Jean Kennedy Smith Arts and Disability Program in its 33rd year, highlighting the talents and skills of young musicians living with disabilities. **Elliott McClain, Kohlin Sekizawa, Natalie Sheppard,** and **Jessica Tucker** will spend May 24–25, 2017, participating in a full array of pre-professional activities including rehearsals and roundtable discussions with music professionals. The two-day intensive culminates with a performance on the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage on May 25 at 6 p.m. and a cash award of \$2,000 given to each winner. This performance is free and open to the public and will be streamed online at kennedy-center.org/video/upcoming.

Elliott McClain, age 23, is a pianist and graduate student at Belmont University in Nashville studying commercial music performance. He is an independent artist and musician, specializing in jazz and popular forms of music for live performance and session recording. Blind since birth, McClain started playing piano as soon as he discovered a keyboard and is known for his exceptional aural and improvisational

skills. A recipient of the Woods Piano Scholarship, he has performed with Belmont's top jazz ensembles and has been a guest performer in many of Nashville's most prestigious venues. McClain is the 2016 VSA Tennessee Young Soloist Award winner.

Kohlin Sekizawa, age 17, is a high school junior in Davis, California. He has been taking piano lessons for 12 years with Huei-Ping Chen Lin. Sekizawa, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder, has won numerous local and statewide piano competitions and performed in the honor recitals of the Music Teachers' Association of California and the California Association of Professional Music Teachers. Last year, he earned a Paderewski gold medal from the American College of Musicians. He is currently playing the harpsichord and the violin in the Davis High School Baroque Ensemble, and recently performed J.S. Bach's Harpsichord Concerto with the ensemble in April 2017.

Natalie Sheppard, age 21, is a mezzo-soprano from Cincinnati, Ohio. She is an undergraduate student at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, receiving a scholarship to study voice under William McGraw, as well as pursuing studies in International Human Rights. Sheppard has performed roles including Dido from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and will sing Cherubino from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* this summer in Berlin. She has worked with composers such as Jake Heggie and Libby Larsen at the prestigious SongFest art song festival in Los Angeles, California, and will return this summer as a Colburn Fellow in the Young Artist Program. Sheppard, who has anxiety disorders and depression, has recently been recognized by Aspen Opera Theatre, the Opera Guild of Dayton, Cincinnati Three Arts Foundation, and *Classical Singer*, and has sung on stages around the world.

Jessica Tucker, age 21, is a classical saxophonist from Carson City, Nevada. She has performed across the United States and Canada, including in Vancouver, Seattle, Reno, San Francisco, Chicago, and Las Vegas. Tucker was born with amblyopia in her right eye, which renders it effectively blind. She graduated in May 2017 with a

bachelor of music in saxophone performance from the University of North Texas, studying under Dr. Eric Nestler. While at the University of North Texas, she performed with the North Texas Wind Symphony under the direction of Eugene Corporon and can be heard on several of their recordings. She will begin her masters in saxophone performance this fall at the Russian Academy of Music, Gnesin.

Since 1984, the VSA International Young Soloists Competition, founded by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, has annually recognized emerging young artists ages 14–25, with disabilities from all over the world who demonstrate exceptional musical talent. Previous winners have gone on to have careers with top symphony orchestras around the world, become international recording stars, and achieved success on television programs such as *American Idol* and *Platinum Hit*. Past award recipients include international recording artist Melody Gardot, violin virtuoso Adrian Anantawan, and award-winning jazz pianist Justin Kauflin.

About Education at the Kennedy Center

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is the national champion for arts learning and creativity. Committed to increasing opportunities for all people to participate in, learn about, and understand the arts, [Education at the Kennedy Center](https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/) offers programs and events that strive to reflect the nation and communities and that are accessible and inclusive for all. From performances and exhibits on the Center's stages and in the community, to classroom and community partnerships, including the recent addition of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities Turnaround Arts initiative, to online resources accessible nearly anywhere, the Center serves the burgeoning artist, the exploring student of any age, the teacher and teaching artist, and even the local and national infrastructure—any person interested in arts learning and utilizing the arts for positive change. As an essential component of the living memorial to President Kennedy, the Center's Education utilizes the arts to embrace the ideals of service, justice, freedom, courage, and gratitude, and to activate and support the Citizen Artists in all our audiences. For more information, please visit [kennedy-center.org/education/](https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/).

About VSA

Serving the international disability and arts community, VSA provides opportunities for people with disabilities, of all ages, across the globe to learn through, participate in and enjoy the arts. Founded 42 years ago by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, the VSA international network supports and offers a wide array of accessible cultural, arts and education programs and experiences. Please visit VSA at [kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/](https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/).

Funding Credits:

Funding for the *VSA International Young Soloists Program* is provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

Kennedy Center education and related artistic programming is made possible through the generosity of the National Committee for the Performing Arts and the President's Advisory Committee on the Arts.

International Programming at the Kennedy Center is made possible through the generosity of the Kennedy Center International Committee on the Arts.

The content of this program may have been developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education but does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education. You should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

For more information, please visit the VSA [website](#).

Discover VSA on social media:

**PRESS CONTACT**

Brittany Laeger

(202) 416-8445

balaeger@kennedy-center.org