

AMERICAN Traditions

by TERI R. WILLIAMS

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& AMERICAN TRADITIONS COMPETITION

This unique competition engages the vocalist on a journey of not only singing the music but learning about the rich American traditional history of the music.



It began with a dream. It was not a small dream. It was a big and bold idea that had the nerve to propose: Let's have a festival in Savannah of vocal and instrumental winners from around the world. As if that wasn't enough, they took their dream further and added a classic American vocal competition with world-renowned performers to serve as judges. And then they elected Ben Oxnard as President and called it Savannah On Stage.

Elizabeth and Ben Oxnard moved to Savannah in 1983. Ben was the 7th generation in his family's sugar business. The Oxnards immediately began to look for ways to get involved in the community. Elizabeth was interested in music, and Ben in historic preservation. Somehow their plans went in the opposite direction, as plans often do, and Ben became a part of the symphony board. In 1992 he was elected as the first President of a new music project called Savannah On Stage.

"Over time Savannah On Stage morphed into the Savannah Music Festival and named the American Traditions Competition," said Elizabeth. The ATC was a part of the festival until 2011 when a board was formed and the competition became an independent,



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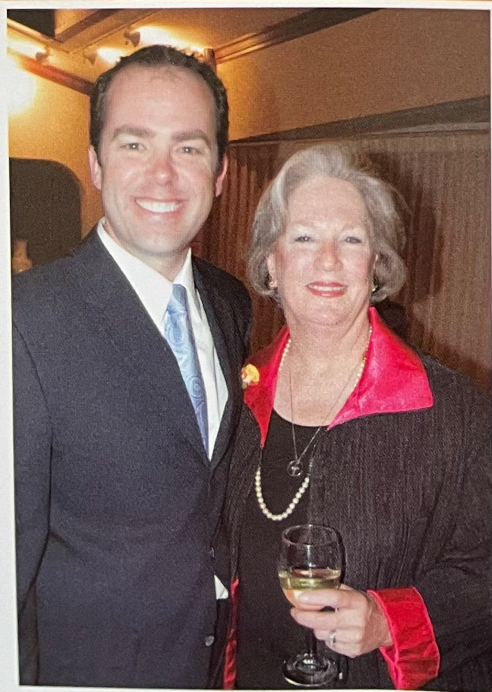




PHOTO BY LAURA SHAFFELL

nonprofit organization.”

“When we separated from the Music Festival four years ago we held our event in January,” said Susan Kleine, the President of the ATC. “The timing wasn’t great. People were just getting over the holidays. We decided to make a change. This will be the first year that the event will be held in February.”

The number of applicants continues to increase each year as well as the quality of talent. By the November 4, 2013 deadline almost a hundred contestants from all over the United States had submitted applications. To enter the competition contestants had to submit an application along with a digital recording of three songs written by American composers. In addition, contestants had to include a list of nine songs total. Each song had to represent a different genre from a list of fourteen categories and be approved by the ATC artistic consultant.

Another big change this year was the number of qualifiers. Instead of thirty-two quarterfinalists, there will now be twenty-eight. On November 25 the 2014 quarterfinalists were announced. One of the best things about the ATC, and there are many, is that as long as a contestant is twenty-one by the week of the competition, there is no age limit. “Last year an attorney from Atlanta competed who was in his fifties,” said Board Member Beckett Spreng. “He said he was looking for his big break. He made it all the way to the semifinals. Another who made it to the semifinals was a forty-something year old cabaret singer.”

All come for the opportunity the competition affords, and of course for the chance to compete for the \$12,000 Gold Medal Award, which

is sponsored by the Courtney Knight Gaines Foundation this year. Initially, all twenty-eight quarterfinalists will receive a cash prize. “Prizes, of course, do increase as a contestant progresses through rounds of competition and until the Gold Medal Winner is chosen,” according to the ATC website.

Heyward and Patricia Gignilliat are the sponsors for this year’s \$6,000 Silver Medal Award, and the Colonial Group is the sponsor for the \$3,000 Bronze Award. The \$500 Johnny Mercer Award is sponsored by Friends of Johnny Mercer Inc. and presented for the best performance of a Johnny Mercer song. In addition, “There are two People’s Choice Awards,” said Susan. “One for those who don’t go beyond the quarterfinals, and one for semifinalists that don’t go on to the finals. Each is a \$500 award.” Triad Supply and Services, Inc. is the sponsor of this year’s People’s Choice Award.

The ATC is excited to announce a new award this year named the Ben Tucker Jazz Award. The \$500 award will go to the contestant with the best performance of a jazz song. “Ben was an original member of the American Tradition Competition Board. Every year he played the bass on the final night of the competition for finalists who opted to use the combo,” said Susan. “This award was something Ben’s friends wanted to do to honor him.”

In addition, all finalists will receive \$1,200, semifinalists \$600, and quarterfinalists \$300 (except in the case where a contestant advances to a higher round in the competition).

“We’re the only organization that does something like this,” said Beckett. “It’s the only competition of its style. Contestants, even those

who only make it to the quarterfinals, are given a tremendous opportunity to be in front of these fabulous judges, and to further their careers."

"Doug Carpenter," said Susan, "who was the winner of the 2011 Gold Medal Award, went on to perform on Broadway. Another past contestant, Josef Spencer, was a finalist two years in a row. Today he writes medical software for a living, but also just released a CD that's doing quite well. Barbie McCulloch was also a finalist two years in a row. We were all excited because she was a Georgia girl. She went on to enjoy success in New York, and in addition to greater personal performing opportunities, she books musical performances for a line of cruise ships."

"Danny Brevik is another amazing story," said Susan. "He was this big guy who got injured playing football and turned his focus to singing. He was a great singer. Danny won the People's Choice Award, and he's now with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis."

Roger Moss and Huxie Scott are two of Savannah's own who were chosen as finalists. In 2001 Savannah hit gold when Kim Polote won the Gold Medal Award. "I tried three years before winning the gold," said Kim. "The first year I competed was in 1999. I made it to the semifinals. The second year I only made it to the quarterfinals. And then in 2001 I won the Gold."

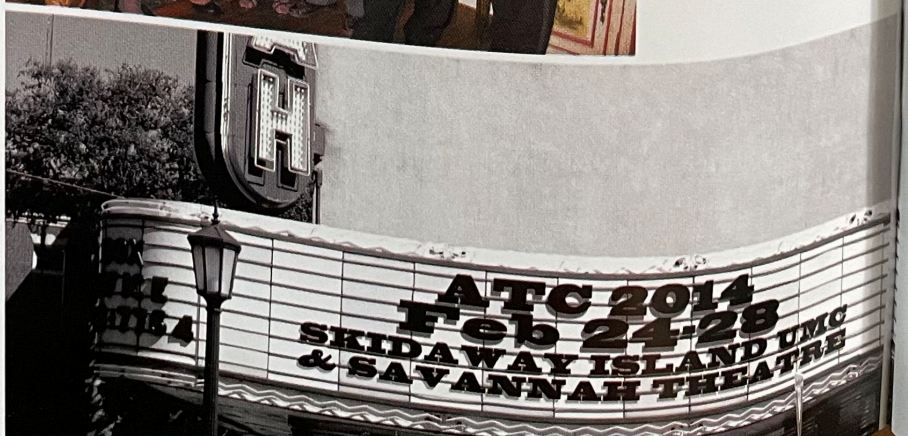
"A lot of these competitions are cut-throat," said Elizabeth. "Ours is not. The difference in the ATC and other competitions is evident from the moment the contestants arrive in the 'City of Hospitality.'" "It's a competition," said Beckett, "and they're being judged by top-notch judges. But we lend a personal side to it. It's no surprise when it comes to the finals and they're rooting for one another."

PHOTO BY JOHN CARRINGTON



Kim was the single mother of three. "I had put music on hold while I was raising my kids. The ATC was my way of stepping out and singing again. The competition gave more credibility to what I do." Opportunities opened up for Kim from singing at Jimmy Carter's church to getting up on stage with Harry Connick Jr. and his orchestra. Since the ATC hardly a weekend goes by that she isn't singing for some function either at home in Savannah or across the country. "The ATC gave me a bigger format to share my music," said Kim.

Today Kim serves as the Gold Medal Ambassador



to the community and wherever she travels. "I'm the only person who was born in the City of Savannah to have won," said Kim. "The competition engages the vocalist on a journey of not only singing the music but learning about the rich American traditional history of the music. By knowing the history, it gives them a more in depth way of interpreting the music."

"Winning the Gold Medal was the wind beneath my musical wings," said Kim. "I want more people in Savannah to be aware of the opportunity. I didn't have a degree in music, and that kept me from participating sooner. To the singer that thinks he or she may not qualify, I want to say, 'Embrace the song in your soul and your heart. Share it. And try.' I didn't meet the credentials of other competitors. But it's not about what they can do – it's about what you can do. More importantly, within the competition you become a part of a family."

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Another great opportunity for the contestants that is also open to the community is the master class on Thursday afternoon. One of the judges chooses three or four of the competitors and works with them in the class on ways to improve their talent. "A lot of people in the community have come in the past just to listen and learn," said Susan. This past year Michael Paul, a famous opera singer and vocal coach based in New York, led the master's class.

The ATC also adds an educational component to the weeklong event. "Our Artistic Consultant goes into some of the schools and does a music program," said Elizabeth "Last year he went into some of the middle and high schools. We feel it's important for young people to learn about music and to keep interest alive. Some of the contestants go as well. They also perform a Johnny Mercer Song and give a bit of history."

"One of the most entertaining and fun performances is the Judges Concert on Thursday night," said Susan. "Last year, three judges, Bob Dorough, an actor and composer best known for his songs on 'Schoolhouse Rock,' Anita Gillette, an American actress who appears in movies, television, and on Broadway, and Rod Gilfry performed together."

The ATC is also excited to announce that the great two-time Grammy nominee baritone opera singer and actor, Rod Gilfry, will be returning this year to head up the Judges Panel. The caliber of judges for the event continues to be next to none. Five world-renowned judges come from all over the country and from all fields of music. Past judges have included Broadway producer Chapman Roberts, longtime Broadway performer of Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables* Craig Shulman, mezzo-soprano vocal star



Denyce Graves, and the list goes on.

One final change to the ATC this year is that the quarterfinals will be held at the Skidaway Island United Methodist Church at The Landings. The Semifinals, Judges Concert, and Finals, will all be at the historic Savannah Theatre.

In true southern style, the community steps up and helps to create a hospitable and enjoyable experience for everyone. Volunteers in the community provide housing, meals, and transportation for the contestants. "We couldn't do this if it wasn't for the Savannah and Chatham County community," said Susan. "We have wonderful residents and supporters who give magnificent lunches and dinners on behalf of the ATC to welcome the judges."

"I've had a wonderful relationship with some of these people," said Elizabeth. "I gave the Gold Medal for twenty years, but whatever I gave, I received much more in return."

"Last Sunday was my birthday," said

Susan. "I got three phone calls. Each of them were from former contestants who stayed with us during the competition." Everyone reiterated the same thing: The greatest gift that the ATC gives is the opportunity for great friendships to be formed across the board.

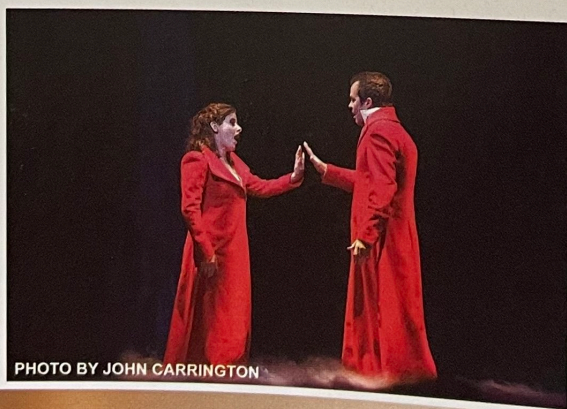
An amazing story that really underscores this statement began in 1999 when Robert Simms won the Gold Medal Award. Through the years that followed Ben and Elizabeth Oxnard continued to follow Robert's career, and they became good friends. Today Robert Simms performs in well-known venues across the United States, Europe, and Asia, and has enjoyed three performances at Carnegie Hall. But in 2005 he returned to Savannah to sing at Ben Oxnard's funeral. He refused payment of any kind. He simply came to honor his friend who was also a great man.

At the ATC the following year, Elizabeth attended the ATC Finals to present the Gold Medal Award. The

winner of the 2006 competition was Vale Rideout. It was Vale's incredible moving performance that caused Elizabeth to want to return to the event she and her husband had served and loved for so long. Even though the American tenor Vale Rideout is in much demand throughout the United States and Europe today, he still returns to Savannah to serve as Artistic Consultant for the ATC.

There's nothing quite like the magic of music to comfort or uplift the soul, as Elizabeth Oxnard would affirm. The great cellist Pablo Casals actually went so far as to say, "Music will save the world." If anything could, it would be music. What better place for it to happen than in Savannah, the place that great American artists like Johnny Mercer and Ben Tucker called home. † **CCL**

For more information go to: www.americantraditionscompetition.com



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