

# Mika Hasler teaches young music students the art of being bold

By Lawrence Elizabeth Knox, Correspondent

Sep. 27, 2019 | Updated: Sep. 27, 2019 4:13 p.m.



Mika Hasler started the Mika Hasler Competition, with the aim of providing dedicated young artists the means to succeed. Hasler is a former Concert Master of the Houston Grand Opera.

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Be ambitious, Mika Hasler said, recalling the words of encouragement from a professor years ago.

It was a simple message, but one that has guided her career in myriad ways. From a violin student at the age of 2 to a world-renowned violinist, Hasler takes pride in not only sharing the power of classical music as a performer but also providing opportunities to up-and-coming talent as a mentor. Just as she was encouraged to pursue her passion, she aspires to give back by helping students discover the boldness to use their gifts and reach their fullest potential, and that is exactly why she founded the Mika Hasler Competition in 2008.

"When you are sort of blue, if you have music inside your heart, you can listen to the music, and it will give you perfect peace of mind," Hasler said. "If you have opportunities, grab them and then show them to the world. Every single day, so many people are sick and dying, and they need this music."

Born in Sapporo, Japan, Hasler received the Japanese Minister of Education Award at age 13. Within the next five years, she won both the Siena International Competition and the Young Artist Competition in Washington, D.C., performed at the Kennedy Center and played with the St. Cecilia Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of the legendary Leonard Bernstein.

While a student at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts, she was awarded the Fulbright Scholarship, which opened the door for her to move to the United States and complete her studies as a pupil of the Russian-born violinist Josef Gingold at Indiana University.

---

## Mika Hasler Competition

For information on rules, eligibility and dates, visit [mikahaslercompetition.org](http://mikahaslercompetition.org)

---

A former member of the Cosmopolitan Trio, Hasler served on the faculty at the International Academy of Music festival and toured Europe as a soloist with Rice University. Locally, she has performed with the Houston Symphony, and for seven years, she was the concert mistress of the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra.

Today, Hasler continues to teach and perform around the world. Having just returned from Australia and New Zealand, she will soon begin reviewing applications for her annual namesake competition, which is open to musicians up to 23 years old. Last year's winners include flutist Arin Sarkissian, pianist Zhengyi Huang and cellist Katherine Audas, who was a finalist in the Houston Symphony Ima Hogg Competition shortly after.

Contestants, who are charged a \$75 entry fee, submit videos of themselves performing two works via YouTube by mid-December. Ten finalists are then selected to perform the same pieces of music live in front of five judges the following month at Duncan Hall at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, where they vie for the grand prize of \$10,000 and a 45-minute solo in a recital that takes place in February. The silver medalist receives \$5,000 and a 30-minute solo, and third place is named honorable mention.

Percussionist Bensen Kwan won the gold medal in 2018, an honor that provided him with opportunities he said he wouldn't have experienced otherwise. Following the competition, he played in churches, as well as in a retirement home in the Galleria area, which he describes as one of the most gratifying moments in his life.

The 23-year-old, native Houstonian just returned from Leipzig, Germany, where he participated in a semesterlong student-exchange program at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater, a prestigious conservatory founded by Felix Mendelssohn. Alongside his studies, he performed with ensembles such as the Saxon Wind Philharmonic, the Annaberg Opera and the Leipzig Symphony Orchestra.

This fall, Kwan will finish his bachelor's degree at the University of Houston's Moores School of Music by student-teaching at Horn Elementary and Westbrook Intermediate, influencing other young musicians the way his mentors, including Hasler, influenced him.

"For young musicians, it is very difficult to put your name out there, and one of the ways to do it is by competing," Kwan said. "Mrs. Hasler works very hard to make this competition run smoothly, and her willingness to give back and promote young musicians is something I strive to live up to."

Dylan Senderling, who trained under Hasler in both elementary school and high school, is equally inspired by her dedication to sharing her art. Although Senderling, 21, never participated in the Mika Hasler Competition himself, as his passion shifted to computer science in college, he is actively involved as an advisory board member. Using his expertise, he assists with managing email, updating annual advertisements and troubleshooting any technology issues.

"Every year, I watch as she pours her heart and soul into this competition, making whatever sacrifices are necessary to make it something she is really proud of," Senderling said. "Her focus on using her own success to pave the way for future generations motivates me to keep working hard so that one day, I, too, can give back."