



## **A WINNING FORMULA: REVIEWING THE 2017 AMERICAN TRADITIONS VOCAL COMPETITION**

**SAVANNAH, GA – March 13, 2017** – The American Traditions Vocal Competition (ATC) wrapped up its exciting 2017 season at the Historic Savannah Theatre on the evening of Feb. 24 after announcing Julie Benko as the winner of the coveted Courtney Knight Gaines Foundation Gold Medal.

Benko dazzled audiences with her rendition of nine songs from nine different genres throughout the competition, ranging from Johnny Mercer’s “Wonderful, Wonderful Day” – which won her the Johnny Mercer Award – to John Denver’s “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” In addition to the Gold Medal, Benko was awarded \$12,000 and a contract to perform with the Savannah Philharmonic. The Johnny Mercer Award is sponsored by the Friends of Johnny Mercer, Inc. and Armstrong State University. This award, along with \$750, is presented to a contestant each year for the best performance of a Johnny Mercer song.

Benko is an actress, singer and songwriter based in New York City. She has worked on Broadway, national tours, and in regional theaters across the country. A graduate of NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, she is constantly involved in developmental readings and workshops of new works at venues throughout New York City.

In addition to being the 2017 ATC Gold Medal winner, Benko’s career highlights include creating the leading role of Rebeca Frankel in Barrington Stage Company’s world premiere musical “The Golem of Havana” (2015 IRNE Best New Play nominee) and singing alongside the stars at the 85<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. Most recently, she performed on Broadway in the acclaimed 2015 revival of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

Along with her career, Benko also gives back to the community by regularly volunteering her vocal talents with Sing For Your Senior and VocalEase, organizations

that provide senior centers and nursing homes with Broadway-level entertainment at zero cost. She also provides educational services to members of Footsteps, the only organization in North America that assists people who wish to leave the ultra-Orthodox community.

The Patricia and Heyward Gignilliat Silver Medal Award and \$6,000 was awarded to Dara Tucker. Tucker also received the Ben Tucker Jazz Award and \$500, sponsored by the David A. and Margaret L. Cohen Foundation, for the best performance of a jazz song. Third place, the Enmarket Stations, Inc. Bronze Medal Award, and \$3,000 was awarded to Kisma Jordan. Jordan also received the Sherrill Milnes American Opera Award – a new award this year – of \$500 sponsored by Sherrill Milnes and Maria Zouves on behalf of the Savannah VOICE Festival

Dara Tucker made her national U.S. television debut on “The Travis Smiley Show” in 2015, opened for Grammy award-winning jazz vocalist Gregory Porter in 2016, and was named Best Jazz Vocalist at the 2016 Nashville Industry Music Awards. In addition, she has released 3 studio projects and is slated to release her 4<sup>th</sup> album this spring.

Kisma Jordan most recently shared her fusion project “OperaSoul” with audiences at TEDxDetroit 2016 and has enjoyed performing across the U.S. including features with Michigan Opera Theatre, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Annapolis Opera, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Mississippi Symphony Orchestra, and Omaha Symphony Orchestra. Among her honors are the Jensen Vocal Competition and The Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

Other awards presented included:

- The fourth-place prize of \$1,200, sponsored by Kay and Don Gardner, was awarded to Aundi Marie Moore.
- Fifth-place and \$1,200, sponsored by the Savannah Friends of Music, was awarded to Sarah Mesko.
- The Richard Chambliss’ People’s Choice Award, sponsored by Swann Seiler, was awarded to Stephen Dobson, a native of Savannah, from the quarterfinals,

and Rachel Sparrow from the semifinals. They each receive \$500 along with this award.

“I can’t even begin to sing the praises warranted for everyone involved in making the 2017 ATC one for the books. We had an incredible line-up of talent between the contestants, judges, and pianists and an amazing support system of volunteers and sponsors,” said ATC Board President Danny Cohen. “Thank you to the Savannah community for supporting us and celebrating classic American music with us year after year - we can’t wait to see you for the last week of February 2018 for our 25<sup>th</sup> competition season!”

To learn more about the ATC, please visit [www.americantraditionscompetition.com](http://www.americantraditionscompetition.com).

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For media inquiries, please contact Hollie Barnidge at [hollie@lesleyfrancispr.com](mailto:hollie@lesleyfrancispr.com) or 912-272-8651 or Lesley Francis at [lesley@francis.com](mailto:lesley@francis.com) at 912-429-3950 or the team at 912-417-LFPR (5377).