



Impact Story:

*Saskatchewan Music Festival
Association*

by
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Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

Young musicians and their communities benefit from the Saskatchewan Music Festival Association

Like most arts organizations, the Saskatchewan Music Festival Association (SMFA) faced unprecedented disruptions in 2020. Yet, it continues to find ways to bring communities together and offer opportunities for young musicians to perform, compete, and learn.

Established in 1908, the SMFA held its first festival in Regina in 1909. Today, some 17,000 musicians compete annually in forty-seven volunteer-run local festivals. More than 500 go on to compete at the provincial level. In 2022, a new level of competition for musicians from all of western Canada will launch at the University of Saskatchewan. SMFA attributes much of its success to the financial support received from the Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture, and Recreation and the many scholarship donors.

“Music festivals promote excellence, provide important goals, and offer students feedback from first-rate adjudicators,” says Carol Donhauser, the SMFA’s executive director. They also give participants a chance to perform publicly, bringing together all ages

of their communities—particularly important in rural areas, where performing opportunities are rarer than in the cities.

Many competitors go on to careers in the performing arts. Mayson Sonntag, currently in his third year of a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Musical Theatre at Ithaca College in New York, found his Saskatchewan music-festival experience invaluable. “The Saskatchewan Music Festival Association made me the artist I am today,” he says. “The extremely talented professionals they brought in gave me unique learning experiences. I likely wouldn’t have continued studying music beyond high school without this program.”

Instructors echo that praise. Robert Ursan, a Regina voice teacher and Artistic Director of Do It With Class Young People’s Theatre, says, “Music festival has been part of my life for almost fifty years. It is a time to interact with others whose musical obsessions coincide with our own—a time of growth for the ear, the mind, and the heart.”



The Honourable Russ Mirasty presents Emma Johnson (Saskatchewan vocalist) with the 2019 National Grand Award – 1st Place - as Saskatchewan hosts the competition in Saskatoon as part of the SMFA 110th Anniversary celebrations.



Centennial Photo of award winners from the SMFA's 100th Anniversary celebration in 2009.



Jerry Hu performs at the Grand Awards Concert/Competition at 2019 Provincial Finals.

Due to the pandemic, most festivals were cancelled in 2020. But despite the disruption and loss of income, the SMFA is moving forward. It recently launched a teacher mentorship program to connect qualified instructors with communities in need of music teachers. It's also preparing to run festivals virtually this year, if necessary.

Also moving ahead is the SMFA's Concerto Competition, sponsored by the late William Shurniak and held every two years in conjunction with the Regina and Saskatoon Symphony Orchestras. Competitors, who must either live or study in the province or have competed in a Saskatchewan music festival within the past five years, will perform a complete concerto from memory, then upload their performance to a private YouTube channel for adjudication. The winner receives a \$2,000 scholarship and an opportunity to perform with the two orchestras.

"The uncertainty we are all experiencing makes the solace and joy found in music more vital than ever," Donhauser says. "The effort musicians are making to create and share their performances in new ways is a testament to their passion and commitment. Teachers and students are connecting virtually, continuing to strive toward increased skills and musicianship. Music is breaking through the barriers put before us."

Though grieving the loss of its 2020 festivals, the SMFA remains strong, Donhauser says. "The SMFA will continue to enhance lives and communities through music and the spoken word for many years to come."



Historical photo of an ensemble group.

Edward Willett is the award-winning author of more than sixty books of science fiction, fantasy, and non-fiction for readers of all ages. He's also a singer and actor who competed many times in the music festival in Weyburn, where he grew up and where he began his career as a reporter for, and eventually editor of, the Weyburn Review. He lives in Regina with his wife and daughter, who has also competed many times in music festivals. You can find Ed online at www.edwardwillett.com.