

Jazz Education Achievement Awards

Connaitre Miller

Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Thinking Melodically

IN FALL 2011, A CAPPELLA ENSEMBLE

Afro Blue pushed jazz vocal groups into prime-time American entertainment. These Howard University students stunned audiences on the NBC competition program "The Sing-Off" with a jazz version of "A Change Is Gonna Come." The group's optimistic spirit also shone a spotlight on their school and their ensemble director, Connaitre Miller.

Miller's advocacy for jazz harmony singing took her from middle America to the other side of the world before she started teaching at Howard 12 years ago. Along with directing Afro Blue, Miller is also the university's coordinator of jazz studies. Because she did not originally set out to sing jazz, Miller knows that it's never too late to immerse talented singers in the music.

"Someone can sing for me and may not know a single thing about jazz," Miller said, "but I can hear that they have the potential to do this, and do it well if they're interested in putting the work into it."

While Miller describes herself as "a late bloomer" when it comes to jazz, she always was a dedicated music student. She grew up in Junction, Kan., and studied classical piano at Kansas State University. Miller took jazz band as an elective junior year, and began absorbing albums of famous pianists.

"One of the records I got was Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald's *A Perfect Match*," Miller said. "As I was listening to him to learn how to play piano, I started singing along to Ella."

Matt Betton—who helped start the International Association for Jazz Education—was in Kansas at the time, as was another IAJE director, Bill McFarland. Miller worked with both of them and still draws on Betton's advice.

"Matt had a big thing about people improvising and straying so far from the melody you couldn't tell what tune they were playing," Miller said. "That's something that tends to be common with young players, so he would say, 'Don't forget the melody' and when you're improvising, think melodically."

Miller solidified her commitment to singing over the piano when she began teaching vocal music at an elementary school in Manhattan, Kan., while also serving as the director of the Kansas State University jazz band and an adjunct professor. She wanted to help students who had vocal issues. Miller knew that furthering her own education would be necessary and completed postgraduate work at the University of Northern Colorado's program for choral conducting and jazz pedagogy.

After completing the program, Miller began building the jazz voice program at the El-



der Conservatorium of Music, University of Adelaide, Australia, in 1994.

"The university wanted the singers to be able to do everything the instrumentalists were doing, but they didn't know how to get them to do that," Miller said. "So that's what I had to figure out."

Miller taught the singers to get their ears around pieces the way horn players bring their fingers around instruments. Along with training in arpeggios and scales, she had them transcribe solos to learn accents and articulations. After six years, she returned to the United States and taught on the West Coast at Cypress Community College and California State University, Long Beach.

When Miller began teaching at Howard, she and jazz studies director Arthur Dawkins worked to make the university's vocal ensemble as strong as its instrumental groups.

"I found singers who had top-notch voices, but didn't have any jazz background," Miller said. "I had to go back to the basics and get them all playing piano and reading from a pianist's point of view."

Afro Blue developed during Miller's second semester because she wanted a primary vehicle to teach them the works of Count Basie, Duke Ellington and other jazz masters. Its growing national prominence widens her mission.

"[Jazz] is something that should be taught in the public schools," Miller said. "All of my students are doing some teaching, and they notice jazz blending with other styles of music: hearing jazz chords in contemporary gospel and r&b singers using jazz. Jazz education is the best education they can get because of the ear training, theory and keyboard skills. Everything that you need for any style of music is there."

—Aaron Cohen

Brock Chart

"Northern Lights"

University of Kansas
Dan Gailey
Lawrence, KS

Devin Wright

"Imploding Man"

University of Kansas
Dan Gailey
Lawrence, KS

Graduate College Winner

Emily Merrill

"Ondine's Dance"

University of North Texas
Rosana Eckert
Denton, TX

Graduate College Outstanding Performances

Brendan Doshi

"Vulture"

Cal State Long Beach
Jeff Jarvis
Long Beach, CA

Laura Otero

"Nuestra Cancion"

University of North Texas
Rosana Eckert
Denton, TX

Original Composition – Orchestrated Work

High School Winner

Sam Klein-Markman

"Get Off My Lawn"

Berkeley High School
Sarah Cline
Berkeley, CA

High School Outstanding Performances

Pete Miller

"First Flight"

John Jay High School
Jeff Richardson
Cross River, NY

Nathaniel Doucette

"The Rider"

Williamsville East High School
Dr. Stephen Shewan
East Amherst, NY

Performing Arts High School Winner

Sara Sithi-Annua

"Cindy's Song"

Colburn School of Performing Arts
Lee Secard
Los Angeles, CA