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Voices from the big stage

San Marcos High junior wins seventh annual Teen Star vocal competition at the Arlington Theatre

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On Saturday night, the familiar phrase "Teen Star" once again lit up a prominent block of State Street, as it has for one gala night out each year - same luminous brand, different marquee, larger venue.

What had settled into the Granada Theatre for several years headed up to the larger Arlington Theatre this year, upping its audience capacity (2,000 versus 1,500) and generally upping its game as an enterprise and institution on the local cultural calendar.

To cut to the evening's finale, this year's grand prize went to Jackson Cocciolone, a San Marcos High School junior, who moved to Santa Barbara from New York and has battled diabetes and other health challenges partly through the power and commitment to music.

Mr. Cocciolone easily won over the audience, and the judges, with his varied one-two punch of a powerful blues song, "The Sky is Crying," then shifting gears to opera in the "finalist" portion of the evening, for the well-known aria "Nessan dorma," from Puccini's "Turandot."

Now in its seventh year, the well-established singing competition was founded by impresario Joe Lambert as a locally based variation spun off the general format of high-profile television competitions such as "American Idol" (the Santa Barbara competition was originally called "Teen Idol") and "The Voice."

As it has grown and expanded its reach and ambition, Teen Star has become a more challenging forum for teen singers from area high schools - many of whom have been honing their vocal wares through musical theater programs.

Along the way, Teen Star's final friendly showdown, vying for prizes including cash,

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Jackson Cocciolone gets a hug and applause as he is announced the winner of Saturday's Teen Star contest at the Arlington Theatre.

HELENA DAY BREESE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Teen Star contestants perform the opening number together.

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a scholarship through the Santa Barbara Bowl, studio time (at Santa Barbara's state-of-the-art Sound Design) and industry contacts, also showcases the considerable vocal talents of young in the area, giving them are public exposure and a possible segue into future options in the music field.

Awards fever was no doubt in the collective air, on this night before tonight's Academy Awards show, and that spirit was infection, right down to a token touch of red carpet leading from State Street to the Arlington entrance.

Before the official show began, three members of the audience had their names drawn from a hat for the chance to sing onstage, acapella, for 30-second "quick pick" spots - Alyssa Thompson, Vanessa Perez and Jeff Miller. The moment was also a chance to test out the show's "vote by texting" system, through which the crowd anointed Mr. Miller for his performance of a satirical original, "Santa Barbara Blues."

Master of ceremonies JJ Lambert introduced the judges, Catherine Remak, from K-LITE radio, PCPA casting director Erik Stein, and Santa Barbara-based worldly opera tenor Eduardo Villa. The judges offered nurturing support of the singers, along with constructive criticisms throughout the show, in line with the model of the TV singing competitions.

Another important figure in the influential margins of this year's Teen Star operation this was famed songwriter/composer and Santa Barbara resident Barry Devorzon, who served as a mentor to the finalists, and appeared in video clips before each singer took the stage.

Over the stretch of first songs by each contestant, a diversity of musical genre, song choice and personal styles made the evening more than a typical talent show. Among the range of performances was country star Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats," sung by San Marcos senior Megan Wilson; a soulful take on "House of the Rising Sun" by Bishop Diego High student Claire Velez, 15; and Cabrillo High senior Rachel Guron's impressive, dramatic rendition of "I Who Have Nothing," famously covered by Tom Jones and Shirley Bassey.

Pioneer Valley High Daniel Geiger, also 15, gave his all to "Titanium," and Cabrillo High sophomore Kailin Chui's powering through the 4 Non-Blondes song "What's Up?"

From other corners of the musical world, Jillian Garnett offered a stirring, dynamic account of Alicia Keys' "I Ain't Got You," Hunter Hawkins' wrapped a soul-fired voice around "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," and Santa Barbara High's Ava Burford, the youngest contestant at 14, veered skillfully down a swampy country path.

Chloe Schwartz played guitar along with her bold, artful versions of Amy Winehouse's "Valerie," and later an intriguing and personal original that inspired judge Mr. Stein to effuse "it's incredible to experience you. You've moved your way to becoming an artist ... in 10 years, the young girls will be copying you."

Impressive levels of talent were evident this year, as demonstrated by an initial vote so close, the judges decided to opt for the special "hanging chad" clause in the rules, allowing four finalists rather than the usual three. Mr. Jackson was part of a finalist team that included Ms. Schwartz, Ms. Velez, and Ms. Wilson.

As votes from the crowd texting were tallied, the stage turned over to a moving song by last year's Teen Star winner, Sydney Shalhoob, and choreography featuring finalists from a new offshoot of the mothership operation, called "Teen Dance Star."

Taking the stage late in the evening, founder Mr. Lambert thanked volunteers whose 3,000 hours of work "made this all possible." With Teen Star, he noted, "We showcase the beauty and the talent in our community. We inspire dreams. That's what we're about. We're trying to teach the kids how to overcome obstacles and pursue their dreams."

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