

A teenage big band jazz composer

By Elizabeth Blair

- 1 Some 300 young musicians from around the country are in New York for Jazz at Lincoln Center's annual Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Competition and Festival. They're attending workshops and jam sessions, meeting professional musicians and competing. One of them, Skylar Tang, 16, has already won her award. The San Francisco Bay Area trumpet player is the winner of the Dr. J. Douglas White Composition and Arranging Contest, an honor bestowed on an original composition written and arranged for big bands by a high school student.
- 2 Tang said the vibe of her winning piece, Kaleidoscope, is kind of "frantic," a bit like her life right now. "There's a lot of stress in the tune. I go to school. I have assessments and tests. Maybe that has something to do with it," she said. It took her about seven months to create her work. Composing for big band is "quite a process," Tang said. As a result of her win, she'll receive \$1,000 and a composing and arranging lesson with Grammy winner and longtime Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra member, Ted Nash. The orchestra also recorded Tang's piece.
- 3 To determine the winner, Nash and some others listened for "several factors like the strength of their thematic material, their harmony, their use of the instruments, the overall feeling of the music." All found Tang's entry remarkable for its maturity, Nash said. "You have the melody, you have solos, you have backgrounds, you have a development, sometimes we call it a 'shout chorus,'" he said. "She has all of these important elements in the piece, but it's deeply personal as well."
- 4 Nash is thrilled that students have come from all over the country to participate in the Essentially Ellington Festival. "We have gone through a period where people weren't that interested in big bands," he said. Nash credited Wynton Marsalis, managing and artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, with reversing that trend by "understanding the importance of having an orchestral vision and orchestral voice in jazz."



- 5 Tang said she's inspired by all kinds of music from different time periods, videos of which she devours on the Internet. Her training began with classical piano when she was a little girl; she started playing in her school jazz bands in sixth grade. She said she "absolutely loves" trumpet player Roy Hargrove and admires contemporary artists like pianist Aaron Parks and drummers and composers Terri Lynne Carrington and Kendrick Scott Oracle. During quarantine, Tang learned how to make split screen videos to share her cover arrangements online. In her cover of *Do You Wanna Do Nothing With Me* by Lawrence, she plays trumpet, guitar, drums and keyboards. "That's what I love about music. It's about creating. It's about expressing yourself and it's about innovation," she said.

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