

Spotlight 2025 Classical Instrumental Semifinal Judges

Dr. John Burdett is the Director of Instrumental Studies, Director of Bands, and Director of Graduate Music Education at Azusa Pacific University, where he leads the band division and teaches graduate students pursuing the Master of Music in Conducting. Previously, Dr. Burdett has held tenure track and adjunct appointments teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in conducting, music education, and ensemble direction at Mt. San Antonio College, Cal Poly Pomona, California State Universities at Fullerton and Los Angeles, among others. Dr. Burdett completed music education and conducting degrees at Azusa Pacific University and California State University, Los Angeles and earned a Doctor of Music Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He conducts, plays and records throughout the LA area and has toured in the U.S. and Japan with a variety of classical, jazz and commercial ensembles, and was founding Music Director and Conductor of the Southern California Philharmonic.

Dr. Susan Helfter is an artist-educator, known for her community engagement work through music. For 19 years, Susan was a faculty member and scholar in the Thornton School's Music Teaching and Learning Department at the University of Southern California, teaching a range of courses in community music, music in higher education, and pedagogy. She served as founding Director of the Thornton Community Engagement Programs, guiding the direction, design, implementation, and securing of funds for the extensive community music programs. Expanding and extending this work, Susan has recently earned board certification as a music therapist and works with patients in mental health, hospital, and memory care settings. Susan has presented her work at conferences and events in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. She has shared her scholarship in publications such as the Journal of Research in Music Education, Music and Science, and international scholarly handbooks published by Oxford and Routledge.

Dr. Louise Thomas is the Associate Dean of the College of Performing Arts and Director of Keyboard Collaborative Arts at Chapman University. She studied at Trinity College in Dublin and at the Hochschule für Musik in Hannover, Germany, and received her Doctor of Musical Arts in piano performance from the University of Southern California. Dr. Thomas has concertized extensively throughout Europe, North America and Asia at such notable concert venues as the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, and Carnegie Hall in New York City. Dr. Thomas has made CD recordings in Germany, at the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada with the Irish Contemporary Music group Nua Nós and has made numerous radio and TV broadcasts.

Dr. Sakura Tsai, violinist and educator, performs nationally and internationally as a soloist and chamber and orchestral musician. She earned degrees (B.M., M.M., and D.M.A.) in Violin Performance from USC's Thornton School of Music. Her mentors and teachers included Midori Goto, Kathleen Winkler, Hagai Shaham, and Alice Schoenfeld. She is on faculty at University of Redlands Conservatory of Music, California School of the Arts - SGV, California State Summer School for the Arts, and Junior Chamber Music (Inland Empire). Dr. Tsai frequently appears as an adjudicator and serves as clinician in schools around Southern California and maintains a robust private studio. She is a member of the Redlands Symphony and the Long Beach Symphony, performs in several regional orchestras, and has spent summers at the Lucerne Festival (Switzerland) and Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival (Germany) academies, and Music Masters Course Japan (Japan). Dr. Tsai's solo and ensemble performances have been featured live on TV and radio broadcasts, such as classical KUSC, KRTU-FM, Norddeutscher Rundfunk (Germany), and Japan Broadcasting Corporation – NHK (Japan).

Dr. Leif Thomas Woodward is an alumnus of the USC Thornton School of Music and graduated Pi Kappa Lambda. He holds a doctorate degree from the University of Southern California as well as master's and bachelor's degrees from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Dr. Woodward performs with groups such as Tesserae, Los Angeles Musica Angelica, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Pacific Symphony, Long Beach Symphony, and Pacific Choral. He has appeared at the Carmel Bach Festival, San Luis Obispo Mozart Festival, and Corona Del Mar Baroque Music Festival. Dr. Woodward currently teaches at Orange County School of the Arts and has been a guest instructor at USC, UC Riverside, and the Colburn School. Dr. Woodward is in high demand as a teacher and his students attend top universities and conservatories around the nation.