

2024 Spotlight Classical Instrumental Strings Preliminary Panel

Dr. John Burdett is the Associate Director of Winds and Percussion, and Director of Music Education at Azusa Pacific University where he conducts the acclaimed APU Wind Ensemble and teaches graduate students pursuing the Master of Music in Conducting and the Master of Music in Music Education degrees. Dr. Burdett completed music education and conducting degrees at Azusa Pacific University and California State University, Los Angeles before earning the Doctor of Music Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has published and presented his research at European and American conferences, including the International Society for Music Education, College Band Directors National Association, Spirituality and Music Education, and California Music Educators Association and contributed to the Peter Lang (Oxford) series. Dr. Burdett particularly enjoys engaging with high school and middle school students through conducting regional and state honor bands and orchestras in Texas and California and serving as an adjudicator for the Spotlight program.

Dr. Marek Szpakiewicz is a Polish-born cellist described by Yo-Yo Ma as an artist whose “energy, motivation, earnestness and generosity of spirit are evident through his work.” He studied with Ryszard Losakiewicz and Stanislaw Firlej, and later with Stephen Kates at the Peabody Conservatory. Dr. Szpakiewicz completed his doctorate degree under the tutelage of Eleonore Schoenfeld at the Thornton School of Music at USC. He has also studied with such distinguished cellists as Daniil Shafran, Lynn Harrell, and Siegfried Palm. He currently teaches cello and chamber music at Azusa Pacific University, where he serves as Director of String Studies and Director of Chamber Music. He has also contributed his talent to film orchestration as a collaborator with Polish composer Jan A.P. Kaczmarek. Among the scores he has worked on, the music for the critically acclaimed movie Finding Neverland received the 77th Academy Award for Best Original Score in 2005.

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, 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 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, 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 UC Riverside, Orange County School of the Arts, and has been a guest Instructor at the University of Southern California and the Colburn School. Dr. Woodward is in high demand as a teacher and his students attend top Universities and Conservatories around the nation. Recently, his former student was appointed as the new Principal Cellist of the Pacific Symphony.

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