

Orinda Idol – Winning and Beyond

By Nina Mohan



Sophie Lurie wins the K-2 Soloist competition

Photo Ohlen Alexander

Finals for the sixth annual Orinda Idol took place Sunday, September 11 at the Orinda Theatre. The event brought together Round One winners to compete for grand prizes including Best Solo Performer, Best Group Performance and the Audience Choice Award. Over 200 students from the Lamorinda community auditioned for this year's Orinda Idol and on Sunday the finalists delivered a series of incredible performances that drew seismic applause – the Theatre shook with stomping and clapping. The votes were counted and the following students were announced as the 2011 Orinda Idol winners:

Grades K - 2 Soloist:

Sophie Lurie (Glorietta)

Grades 3 - 5 Soloist:

Michaela Sasner (Stanley)

Middle School Soloist:

Ellie Glade (OIS)

High School Soloist:

Katie Marino (Campolindo)

K-5 Group: Topaz Girls:

Samantha Martin (Happy Valley) and Jennifer McFarlane (Lafayette Elementary School)

Grades 6-12 Group:

Maritza and Katie: Maritza Grillo (Miramonte) and Katie Marino (Campolindo)

Orinda Idol is a fun experience for participants and audience members, and it has also ignited professional ambitions for many of the winners, all of whom credit the program with advancing their skills and inspiring bold dreams.

Katie Marino of Campolindo is a graduating senior, so 2011 was her last Orinda Idol. But she fully intends to keep singing and performing, and has hopes of becoming a recording artist. A five-year participant, in her award speech Katie thanked Orinda

Idol for providing a creative outlet for vocal performers and the opportunity it gave her to grow as a singer.

Martiza Grillo, who won the Grade 6 -12 Group competition with Marino, is also a long-time participant and likewise plans to keep singing through high school and college. She also hopes for a professional singing career, perhaps in musical theatre.

While high-school, college and the professional world are further away for younger winners, they too plan to keep singing, and like Marina and Grillo, many will continue with Orinda Idol.

First time participant and winner of the Grade 3 – 5 Soloist category, Michaela Sasner, says Orinda Idol elevated both her vocal and performance skills: "Orinda Idol was a really good experience," she said, "I've been in a lot of musicals but I never had a solo. And because of Idol, I got a vocal coach and worked on new levels of performing, things like stage

presence, emotion and facial expressions." Michaela plans to continue musical theatre through middle and high school, and hopes to someday work as a professional musical theatre actor, as well as continuing to compete in Orinda Idol.

Return contestant and winner of the Middle School Soloist Category, Ellie Glade first started singing with Orinda Idol and definitely plans to continue. "Orinda Idol has certainly built my confidence on stage," says Ellie. "I've done other performances through school and it's really helped me with that by helping me get comfortable on stage."

When asked if Orinda Idol had improved her singing, Ellie said "absolutely, I would recommend Orinda Idol for anyone who likes to sing and perform, if you try out and you don't make you can try again, there's no boundaries. A lot of people try and it's pretty tough, so if you don't make it, don't be discouraged and try again!"



Multiple award winner Katie Marino

Photo Ohlen Alexander

The Orinda Idol Community

Katie Marino, who won three awards this year – High School Soloist, Group Category 6-12 (along with Maritza Grillo) and the Audience Choice Award – has three previous awards to her credit, including two Audience Choice Awards, which she's won over the five years that she's participated in Orinda Idol.

Her Group partner Maritza Grillo has also sung in five Orinda Idols and likewise has won two previous awards. Still in high school, she plans to participate in Orinda Idol until she graduates.

Grillo and Katie exemplify an unexpected but happy side-effect of Orinda Idol, says Susan Garell, who created the program along with Petra Michel. Founded to provide a creative outlet for young singers, and to support community arts, the program has also turned out to be a great platform for young singers to develop vocal and performing skills, and hone their artistic style:

"Kids are growing up through Orinda Idol. We remember when they were little ones in the elementary groups and now they're in middle and high school. Orinda Idol has been a great creative outlet for these kids and a place for them to grow as singers and performers; it a great opportunity for them to develop their skills," said Garell.

It's not just the necessary practice that helps these young singers; the structure of the whole event provides them with numerous training and performance opportunities. For example, participants are invited to sing at other local events, including the Orinda Farmers Market and the Orinda Car Show. They also attend group seminars on what makes a great performance and a summer pool and karaoke party.

"The competition is so much more than just the event you see. It begins in April, and throughout the summer until finals, students are training, rehearsing, developing their skills and style. It's a really large event that serves to develop the vocal and performance skills of the participants," Garell explained.

In fact, an entire singing community has grown out of Orinda Idol. Chairman Steven Harwood has established a peer mentoring program for the young contestants, which allows the students to come together not as competitors, but as fellow singers helping one another to grow and achieve. Harwood has also opened his home to the kids, with his own local singing lounge for young performers, Club 93. Built above his garage, and complete with disco ball and smoke machine, Club 93 is an after-school-hours karaoke venue where Idol participants (and other local singers) come to practice, or just for the fun of belting out their favorite tunes.

While Harwood thinks Orinda Idol is a wonderful community event, even he is a little awed by the popularity: "For some reason, it really struck a nerve. Maybe it's because of the celebrity singing shows, but maybe there was a need for a channel for creative kids that we tapped into. Orinda Idol really gives creative kids a program to work with, and a great chance to develop their skills and express their creativity and talent. A lot of these kids become close friends, and we've established a great creative community." N.Mohan

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