

Dear 2026 VM-er,

Greetings! My name is Brittany Benningfield, and on behalf of the Vocal Music Faculty of Governor's School for the Arts (GSA), I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your selection for our 2026 program! You are one of only 30 singers chosen from the many who auditioned from around our state. We, the faculty, are truly excited about the opportunity to work with you, and we hope that you will come to us both excited and eager to take part in three rigorous (*but very fun-filled*) weeks of musical activity. ***Once you have read this letter, please email me at the address listed at the end of this letter to let me know!***

As my first order of business, I would like to introduce the members of our 2026 Vocal Music Faculty with whom you will work this summer:

Thomas Frost is a conductor, singer, and teacher whose work is rooted in artistic expression, community engagement, and educational access. He is currently pursuing a Doctor of Musical Arts in Choral Conducting at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Frost earned his Bachelor of Science in Music from Tennessee State University and his Master of Music with a dual concentration in Vocal Performance and Choral Conducting from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. While not a Kentucky native, Frost has strong ties to the Paducah music community through his work with the Paducah Singers, where he performed and served as Youth and Education Outreach Coordinator. In that role, he led the inaugural season of the Paducah Singers Choral Scholars, a youth chamber ensemble designed to provide advanced choral opportunities for developing singers seeking rigorous artistic and vocal growth.



Previously, Frost served as Instructor of Music at Dyersburg State Community College, where he developed and implemented the Associate of Science in Music Emphasis degree program. He is thrilled to return to the Governor's School for the Arts, continuing his commitment to advancing artistry and inspiring creative expression among young musicians.





Heralded for her “soaring lyric soprano voice,” Dr. Angelique Clay has garnered accolades for performances in the United States, Europe, and South America. Operatic roles include Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, Rosalinda in *Die Fledermaus*, the title role of Susannah from Floyd’s American drama *Susannah*, and Bess in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Dr. Clay’s oratorio repertoire includes Handel’s *Messiah*, Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, Brahms’ *Requiem*, and Haydn’s *Lord Nelson Mass*.

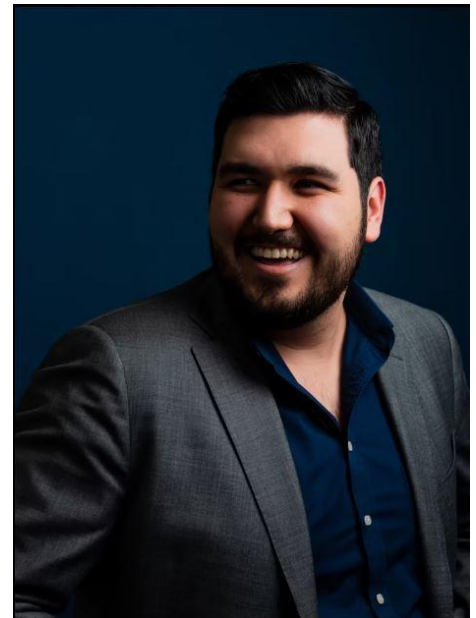
Dr. Clay has recorded and toured as a featured soloist with the American Spiritual Ensemble throughout the United States, Spain, and Brazil. Dr. Clay has performed with international and regional orchestras such as the Slovak State Philharmonic, in Kosice, Slovak Republic; Sinfonia Warsawia in Poland; Cincinnati Orchestra, Hilton Head Symphony Orchestra, Missouri Symphony Society; Knoxville Symphony Orchestra; Lexington Philharmonic, Louisville Orchestra and Arcadiana Symphony Orchestra.

Dr. Clay is in the process of completing a recording project entitled *Songs for the People: Art Songs of African-American Women Composers* to be released soon. She received her Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Kentucky and is currently an Associate Professor of Music at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Clay has students who are performing in opera houses throughout the United States, including the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Chicago Opera, Sarasota Opera, and Des Moines Opera.



Praised for his “confidence,” “brightness,” and “high level of control” (Operawire), tenor **Matthew Pearce** is a Lexington, Kentucky native who has appeared with major companies including Chicago Opera Theatre, Pacific Opera Victoria, The Glimmerglass Festival, Portland Opera, and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. Recent highlights include Don José in *Carmen*, Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, and the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto*.

He has also performed with leading symphonies such as the Dallas Symphony and Chattanooga Symphony and has sung at renowned venues like David Geffen Hall with the New York Philharmonic. In addition to his busy performing schedule, Pearce is a dedicated educator, offering masterclasses and seminars at universities across the country. He proudly serves on the board of OperaLex, an organization committed to supporting and advancing the next generation of opera artists at the University of Kentucky. Fun facts: Matt has also bowled a perfect game in competition play, is a former Barbershop International Competitor, and has two beautiful dogs, Mabel and Milton, who may visit (allergies pending!).





Dr. Joy Burdette, dramatic soprano, is in her twenty-seventh year as a professor of voice at Northern Kentucky University. She has performed opera, oratorio, and various concert works regionally and internationally. Her operatic roles include Leonore in *Il Trovatore*, Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, Vanessa in *Vanessa*, Mrs. Maurrant in *Street Scenes*, Magda in *The Consul*, and Mother in *Hänsel und Gretel*. Joy has performed various roles, as well as professional chorus work, with Opera Theatre of Lucca, Italy, Cincinnati Opera, Kentucky Opera, University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and the University of Louisville School of Music. Joy has performed concert works with the Opera Theatre of Lucca, Italy, Kentucky Symphony Orchestra, Hamilton-Fairfield Symphony Orchestra, Viva Voices Choral Organization, Voices of the Commonwealth, University of Louisville, University of Virginia, Northern Kentucky University, Hartnell Chorus, and the Northern Kentucky Community Chorus. Joy presents recitals and masterclasses regularly and is in demand as an adjudicator.

A regular with Cincinnati Opera, she has been a member of the company's professional chorus for twenty years and is often featured as a soloist in outreach events and chorus showcase concerts. Equally comfortable in the field of musical theatre, Joy has taught in the theatre departments of Xavier University and Northern Kentucky University. She is the past music director for the NKU Preparatory Department's Mainstage Theatre Company.

Joy earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, a Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Louisville School of Music, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music Education from the University of the Cumberlands (Williamsburg, Kentucky). In the summers of 2012 and 2019, Joy spent five weeks teaching music courses in Salzburg, Austria as part of the Kentucky Institute of International Studies. Joy is a member of the American Guild of Musical Artists and the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and is currently the President of the Kentucky NATS Chapter. She is married to Tony, also a singer, and they have two children, Calia and Benjamin. They reside in the Northern Kentucky/Greater Cincinnati area.



I am **Dr. Brittany Benningfield**, and I'm happy to return to GSA for my 12th year as Vocal Music Faculty member, and eighth year as chair of the VM discipline! I also served as the Dean of Faculty in Session 1 last year. As a graduate of the Vocal Music Discipline in 2001, I have served GSA as a Discipline Assistant (2004, 2005, and 2008), a Residential Assistant (2006), and as a participant in alumni masterclasses and concerts all the years in between.

I am an enthusiastic voice educator, teaching artist, and "soprezzo" (ask me about that!) currently living in Lexington, Kentucky. Equally at home on the concert/opera stage as I am on the karaoke stage, I use my varied music background as the inspiration for my teaching. I value my ability to turn classical voice study ideas into the building blocks of lasting vocal technique for all genres of singing. I've had the great opportunity to perform with many prestigious ensembles and win competitions (Cincinnati Opera, Bay View Music Festival, Kentucky Opera, Central

Region winner NATSAA 2019, to name a few), but I am proudest of the accomplishments my students make both on- and off-stage. My students have been accepted and received scholarships to schools such as Cleveland Institute of Music, Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, Shenandoah Conservatory, Indiana University, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Mannes School of Music, and University of Kentucky, perform at musical theatre and opera houses like Los Angeles Opera, Fireside Dinner Theatre, Dutch Apple Theatre, Mill Mountain Theatre, Surflight Theatre, Lexington Theatre Company, and appear on The Voice and American Idol. Many of these students go on to pursue opera, musical theatre careers, or songwriting. BM in Music Education: Campbellsville University MM in Vocal Performance: University of Kentucky Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy: University of Kentucky. When I'm not singing or teaching singing, I am either talking about sports or thinking about sports – particularly UK basketball!

In addition to our Vocal Music Staff, you will also work with our wonderful pianists through our time together:

Zachary Hall
Ethan Neal
Robert Conda
Michelle Conda
Velislava Franta
Matthew Zalusky

Last, but certainly not least, you will spend a lot of time with a very special person – our wonderful Discipline Assistant, Logan Smalley. Logan is a Music Education major at Morehead State University and is a wonderful human being! Logan will be assisting us in a student-teacher type position, but cooler. More info to come!

Your three weeks at GSA will be very rigorous and challenging! The average day at GSA is longer than your average day at school. Monday through Fridays start with studio from 10:00am to 1:00 pm, lunch break from 1:00pm to 2:00 pm, studio from 2:00pm to 6:00 pm, dinner break from 6:00pm to 7:00 pm, and then either studio again from 7:00pm to 10:00pm or an evening performance. Saturdays we do the same thing except we start at 10:00 am, and then Sundays start at 1:00 pm. While this sounds like *a lot,* there are brain breaks during the academic day, and we include lots and lots of fun while learning! At the beginning of each week, you will receive a schedule for that week, which will lay out a wide variety of activities including (but not limited to):

- 1) Private voice lessons (you will be assigned a teacher when you arrive)
- 2) Rehearsals (for both choral and smaller ensembles)
- 3) A Vocal Music Alumni Masterclass and recital presented by your lovely voice faculty, where you will meet alumni from previous years and hear their wonderful, post-GSA vocal development
- 4) Vocal Masterclasses in which YOU will get the opportunity to meet and to sing for guest instructors from higher ed institutions, including:

The Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (Cincinnati, OH)
The University of Kentucky (Lexington, KY)
The University of Louisville (Louisville, KY)
Northern Kentucky University (Highland Heights, KY)

- 5) Music Theory classes
 - 6) Sight-Singing classes
 - 7) Diction classes
 - 8) Several performance opportunities
- . . . and *much, much* more!

The best advice I can offer to help you prepare for this experience is to **ARRIVE RESTED!** We plunge into a full schedule of activities on Day 1, so make sure that the last couple of days before you leave home are filled with as much relaxation as you can stand!

Two IMPORTANT things for which you should be prepared are:

- 1. The Sing-Off
- 2. Your Music Theory Placement examination

The first event is very friendly, even though it might *sound* intimidating. On our first Monday of GSA, we hold a “Sing-Off” where you’ll re-sing your audition selection for us. **THIS IS IN NO WAY ANOTHER AUDITION!** We do this so all the Voice Faculty members and your student colleagues will have the pleasure of hearing your voice! You are at GSA because you are talented and have loads of potential, and while Mr. Frost and I have had the wonderful opportunity to meet and hear all of you, our other voice teachers are still eagerly awaiting hearing all of you for the first time!

THE PIECE YOU WILL SING FOR THE SING-OFF IS THE SAME PIECE YOU SANG FOR THE AUDITION!
PLEASE COME TO GSA WITH THAT PIECE OF MUSIC IN YOUR LUGGAGE.
EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY:

- 1) **PLEASE SEND A PDF COPY OF THIS SELECTION TO ME BY MAY 31ST so that I will be able to pass it on to the pianists who will play this session!**

Send it to brittcbenningfield@gmail.com

PLEASE BE SURE to scan your selection as one PDF file, not as individual PDF file for each page. **PLEASE MAKE SURE** that you do not accidentally chop off sections of the music (we get lots of copies, alas, with no left-hand music for the pianist!).

- 2) While it is *very important* to send the music to me, it is also *very important* for you to **review** and **sing through** the music in the days before you arrive. We want you to be able to present yourself and your voice at its best!

The Music Theory examination is **just** for placement purposes (since we offer different levels of both Theory and Sight-Singing classes). To appropriately assist your development in this area, we will need to know your strengths and challenges, and this test will assist us in determining the level at which your studies should begin. There is no studying that you need to do to prepare for this exam. We just want to know where you are with theory!

Some other things which will be very handy to have *if you already own them*:

- 1) If you possess a copy of either the 24 Italian Songs and Arias or the 26 Italian Songs and Arias, please bring it/them with you, since some of the music you may be assigned may come out of one of these collections. In general, if there are any collections of classical songs you would like to bring, please feel free.
- 2) Phones are a necessary evil in today's world, and while they are prohibited on the academic side of GSA's campus, you can have them with you to record your voice lessons, AND ONLY FOR THAT REASON!!

If you do not have a voice recording app downloaded, there are several that are free and very, very good. You can also bring a handheld voice recorder if you like. You are encouraged to bring iPads/Tablets/Laptops with you to class and lessons.

- 3) GSA Singer's Survival Kit:
 - a) one permanent, personalized water bottle
 - b) comfortable walking shoes and socks
 - c) a notebook/binder and lots of pencils!
 - d) a really good, thick sweatshirt (there is always one random room that is FREEZING)
- 4) Please be sure to bring at least one outfit that would be "appropriate" for a vocal concert. When you can sing for others, including our masterclass clinicians, you will want to **look** as well as **sound** GREAT.

Standard performance clothing for female-identifying individuals is a dress (or a skirt and blouse) with dress shoes (that you can move in without looking like a baby deer learning to walk for the first time), or dress pants/slacks with a nice top and dress shoes. Additionally, ladies, for the sake of uniformity, please note that dresses/skirts should end JUST ABOVE the knee! As a woman, I know it can be difficult to find a dress these days that hits that mark. Please please do your best to find one of this length. Dresses and/or skirts that are "significantly above the knees" **will not be allowed for these concert events. I repeat – WILL NOT BE ALLOWED.** I've attached a picture that shows what length the dress should be, just so there is no confusion on what "above the knee" looks like. You can also choose a maxidress, also shown below!



or



Standard performance clothing for male-identifying individuals is a suit, but a sport coat with dress pants is also a perfectly good combination. Additionally, please note that we REQUIRE a tie, a belt, and dress shoes for some events. If you're not sure if your tie matches your suit/jacket/belt/shoes, ask someone!

If you identify outside the gender binary and are not sure what to wear, feel free to reach out to me (brittcbenningfield@gmail.com). I am happy to help you find something that expresses who you are as a person within the classical performance format.

If you are in doubt as to the appropriateness of your choices, please consult your parents, your high school Choral Director, or please feel free, as well, to call the GSA office at (502) 566-5192 or text me directly at (270) 763-3709.

We've also included a brief message from our counselors-in-residence:

GSA is an experience like no other, with opportunities to make memories and be part of an arts community to cherish for a lifetime. In preparation for your time with us, please keep in mind a few important points for both your physical and mental health.

- Even though your brain might go into "summer mode" after wrapping up the school year, please know that the 3 weeks of GSA aren't like a typical summer camp. Every day you will work and play hard and, along the way, be challenged and inspired!
- Because our days are full of activity, be sure to try your best to prioritize rest, healthy eating, and opportunities to recharge when you can. Quite honestly, I recommend making these priorities right now in preparation, so it's a smoother adjustment.
- The GSA staff, faculty, and counselors are available to help if you ever feel out of balance while on campus. We're your go-to people to help you find the best fit in our unique community and to help with any adjustments that are needed. Don't wait to reach out because we're there to help from Day 1!
- As it applies to you, don't forget to bring any prescribed medication (we can help with reminders, but do not administer) and know that we can help with coordination of telehealth therapy sessions (with

your already established provider) while at GSA as long as it's not overly disruptive to your studio schedule.

As an alum, I know what this program means to its students. It completely changed my life in three weeks and can do the same for you! Plan to come with a positive attitude, flexibility, plenty of energy, a willingness to learn, and a healthy sense of humor. We love to have fun with music, laugh a lot, and work hard at GSA! Should you have any questions, please feel free to call the GSA office, where there is a very helpful staff ready to answer any and all questions! Also, you and your parents should always feel free to contact me directly (at the e-mail address and phone number, both listed earlier in this letter)! I look forward to seeing and especially hearing you soon! **Remember to email me (brittbenningfield@gmail.com) once you've read this letter!**

Sincerely,
Dr. Brittany Benningfield

See you Soon!