

## Shared Voices program aims to help HBCU student performers grow

By Corinne Dorsey  
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The Howard University Chorale performs during an event for Shared Voices, a classical music student exchange program created by opera star Denyce Graves. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

Opera star Denyce Graves was in her first year of teaching at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University when she says she met a graduate student with a beautiful voice.

The student was a hard worker, Graves said, but wasn't getting the opportunities to perform that she felt she should have. She didn't get into the opera program and was upset and disillusioned.

Graves says she sat with the student and cried and hugged her. It led her to want to do more to help other students.

"How are we preparing [students] to be successful out there in the world when they've got no context and no industry connections and no opportunities?" Graves said. "It became so clear. It was crystal clear that something had to be done about that."

The experience led to the creation of Shared Voices, an effort launched by the Denyce Graves Foundation that brings together students at four historically Black colleges and universities, four music conservatories and the Metropolitan Opera. The cohort includes students from Howard, Fisk and Morgan State universities and Morehouse College.

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A kickoff for the program was held Friday in D.C. at Howard's Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts with a reception that included the 16 inaugural cohort members and performances by the university's choir. During the ceremony, Graves received a presidential Volunteer Service Award and greetings from the office of Vice President Harris, a Howard alumna.

Other institutions participating in the program are the Juilliard School, Manhattan School of Music, Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins.

"The Shared Voices program will offer them access," Graves said. "They have the opportunity through the program to take the best from all of the institutions."

Ava Paul, a participant in the inaugural cohort and a second-year vocal performance and politics student at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, said Graves emphasized to her that there is nothing in the world without connection. It's a basic part of thriving in the performance world.

"We need to view ourselves as so much more than singers," Paul said. "We need to be, you know, entrepreneurs and most especially for me, champions of social justice, because I think there is so much representation that just isn't performed and isn't celebrated for the excellence that it is."



Mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, right, receives a hug from a supporter. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

Following a morning reception Friday, there was a panel discussion and concerts. The foundation also hosted breakout sessions for students, including a meet-and-greet with the cohort and a training on starting an artistic career.

Simone Brown, social media manager for the Denyce Graves Foundation performed "Take My Mother Home," by André Previn, during a recital.

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“I haven’t sung in front of Denyce in like two years or so. I did my master studies with her and she was my teacher,” Brown said. “I still get to study with her every once in a while, but this was the first time she’s gotten to hear me in a while. So that was special for me.”

The Shared Voices program will give participants the ability to have individual coaching, classes, rehearsals, performances and other activities across the partnering universities. The Metropolitan Opera will also offer master classes as part of the program.

“The students, they were the ones who really gave birth to this, because when I would sit in my sessions and in my lessons with them, they would tell me what was going on and what was needed,” Graves said.

Cohort participant Travis Guillory said the classical voice world “can be very overwhelming for marginalized groups.” “This program just really makes me elated because I know that there are some people out there that look like me that sound kind of similar to me,” Guillory said. “I hoped that out of this program, I would get a sense of community. And that I can have the resources to do whatever I want to do in the classical arts world.”

“I’m just so honored to be in it. I’m just going to soak everything up,” cohort participant Hannah Jeané Jones said. “I hope to gain a sense of where I stand in this industry. I will learn more about myself and learn more about my people.”



A program is held during the event for the Shared Voices classical music student exchange program. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)