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Four Top Minnesota Musicians Named 2025 McKnight Fellows

(June 18, 2025 – Minneapolis, MN) — MacPhail Center for Music is proud to announce the four recipients of the 2025 McKnight Fellowship for Musicians: **Zach Baltich, Mark Billy, Rachael Kilgour, and Nakara Forjé.**

A total of 111 people applied for the fellowship, submitting recording samples, artist statements, and resumes. Nine finalists were named by a four-member panel of experienced music professionals, and four were subsequently chosen to receive the \$25,000 McKnight Fellowship for Musicians. **More information about each of the 2025 McKnight Musician Fellows follows on pages 2-5.**

In addition to the four recipients, five remaining finalists will receive \$1,000: **Darius Dotch** of St. Paul (Voice – Hip Hop), **Aby Wolf** of St. Paul (Voice – Pop, Chamber, Electronic), **Xina** of Minneapolis (Voice, Guitar, Piano, Production, Folk Harp – Alt-pop, Hip-Hop, Jazz), **Siana Matuzungidi** of Minneapolis (Guitar, Thumb Piano, Kongoma, Lokole, Percussion – Traditional Congolese, Soukous, Congolese Rumba), and **The OK Factor** of Minneapolis (Cello, Violin – New Classical Crossover).

MacPhail Center for Music administered the McKnight Fellowship for Musicians, a component of the McKnight Artist & Culture Bearer Fellowships, for the 29th year. Founded on the belief that Minnesota thrives when its artists and culture bearers thrive, the McKnight Foundation's arts and culture program is one of the oldest and largest of its kind in the country. Support for individual working Minnesota artists and culture bearers has been a cornerstone of the program since it began in 1982. The McKnight Artist & Culture Bearer Fellowships Program provides annual, unrestricted cash awards to outstanding mid-career Minnesota artists in 15 different creative disciplines. Program partner organizations administer the fellowships and structure them to respond to the unique challenges of different disciplines. Currently, the foundation contributes approximately \$2.8 million per year to its statewide fellowships. For more information, visit mcknight.org/artistfellowships.

About the McKnight Foundation

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, advances a more just, creative, and abundant future where people and planet thrive. Established in 1953, the McKnight Foundation is deeply committed to advancing climate solutions in the Midwest; building an equitable and inclusive Minnesota; and supporting the arts and culture in Minnesota, neuroscience, and global food systems.

About MacPhail Center for Music

MacPhail Center for Music transforms lives and strengthens communities through diverse and relevant music learning experiences, delivered by extraordinary faculty. Annually, MacPhail

reaches 15,000 students of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities at its locations in Minneapolis, Apple Valley, Austin, Chanhassen, and Madeline Island, and through dozens of school and community partnerships. For more information, visit <https://www.macphail.org/>.



Zach Baltich (Duluth)

Percussion, Piano, Synthesizer, Sound

Processing/Sampling

Instrumental Percussion, Experimental Folk

Duluth-based percussionist and composer Zack Baltich creates with a marked purpose: to inspire curiosity in the creation of sound; to instigate empathy in the form of emotional resonance; and to bring satisfaction that comes from long-form music weaving to a clear landing point. In addition to his personal work, Zack has collaborated with Mathew Jazcewski's Arena Dances, folk band Ginger Bones, MN, superproducer Lazerbeak, and many others. Past projects have been supported by the American Composer's Forum, Cedar Cultural Center, Minnesota State Arts Board, and Prairie Ronde Artist Residency, and Loghaven Artist Residency.



Mark Billy (Minneapolis)

Voice (Baritone)

Classical, Opera, Indigenous, Clarinet, Native Flute

Mark Billy is the leading Indigenous baritone of his generation. He is a Verdi baritone, clarinetist, and Native flutist of Indigenous (Choctaw tribe) ancestry from Finley, Oklahoma. He enjoys a multi-faceted career in opera, recitals with piano, concerts with orchestra, and Indigenous classical music education. Mark is at the forefront of the current musical movement which combines the sacred cultural music of the Indigenous peoples and Western concert music. Mark created the lead baritone role of Inki' in the first ever opera written in an Indigenous language, Chickasaw: Loksi' Shaali' (Shell Shaker) written by Chickasaw composer Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate.

Mark has recently performed with the Oklahoma City Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, Rochester Symphony, Lubbock Symphony, Bach Society of Minnesota, Mesabi Symphony, Duluth Superior Symphony, Moab Music Festival, Madison Opera, Opera Montana, Minnesota Opera, Schubert Club, and St. Croix Valley Opera. Mark is a 2025 First People's Fund Native Performing Arts Fellow. Mark has also been the recipient of numerous awards and grants including the Music in Action Grant from the Wagner Society of

the Upper Midwest, Opera Reading Project's IDEA Fellowship, first prize in the St. Croix Valley Opera Competition and first prize in the Schubert Club Competition. Mark was a national finalist in the Ryan Opera Center auditions at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Mark has been a young artist with Hawaii Opera Theatre and with Fargo Moorhead Opera. Mark's major teachers have been George Smith, Richard Anderson, Carol Vaness, Marilyn Horne, and David Etheridge (clarinet).

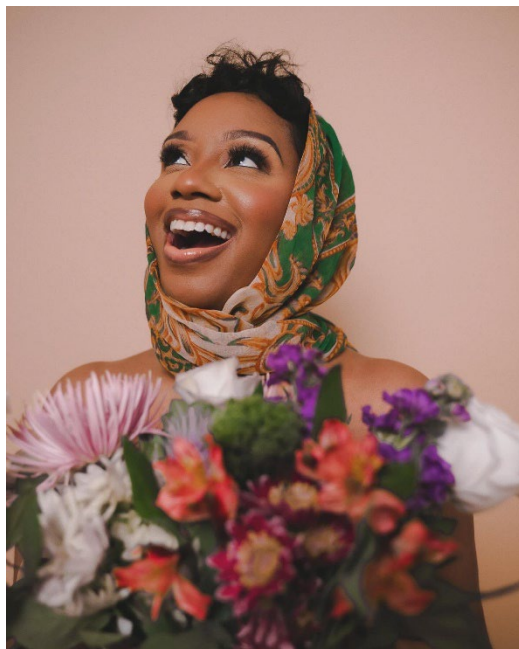


Rachael Kilgour (Duluth)

Voice (Singer-Songwriter), Acoustic Guitar
Indie Folk

Rachael Kilgour is a Duluth-based singer, songwriter and performing artist. A confessional poet at heart, her songs set out in pursuit of the universal truths within her own fears, loves and longings. Kilgour's fourth full length album, *My Father Loved Me* (2023), was written in memory of her late father. In the spare, often gutting language for which she is known, the work poses questions about belonging, inheritance, and grief and triumphantly affirms the value of one ordinary working man's life. Kilgour has toured extensively throughout the U.S. and Canada and has been featured at NYC's Lincoln Center and The Kennedy Center in Washington DC. She was an official showcasing artist at the 2025 Folk Alliance International Conference and was named winner of the 2017 Kerrville New Folk Contest and the 2015 NewSong Music Competition. Her oft-noted

"unapologetic lyrics" (*Rolling Stone*) and "master crafted indie folk" sensibilities (*Billboard*) are on full display in her latest collection of delicately woven songs.



Nakara Forjé, (St. Paul)

Voice
Hip Hop Soul

Nakara Forjé is a lyricist, curator and facilitator from the Twin Cities who shares her life experiences through clever, relatable narratives. Nakara started as a singer and poet and evolved as an emcee in 2009. She's been a published author since the age of nine and always had a passion for music. Her transparency, authenticity and soulful sound sets her apart from her peers in hip hop. As the co-founder of SWAGG LLC, she aims to cultivate healing and creativity in Black women and girls through her art in the forms of music, events and workshops.

Community work is equally as important as her music offerings, and this is evident in her work with youth and the #deependchallenge swim initiative. She's released two mixtapes, five EP's, one album and a

host of features and singles. Her latest release is the "Healed Hoochie: Toxic Pack", available

on all platforms. In addition to music and curating, she's also the author of the "7 Day Grief Journal for Hip Hop Lovers", available on Amazon.