



Zoellner artist-in-residence Bakithi Kumalo mentored 18 young musicians in Lehigh's Music Master Mentor Program.

## **Zoellner Artist-in-Residence Bakithi Kumalo Keeps the Music Playing**

The 18 middle- and high-school students selected for Lehigh's Music Master Mentor Program were instructed in technique, rehearsal and performance skills, composition and songwriting.

Famed South African-born bassist Bakithi Kumalo, artist-in-residence at the [Zoellner Arts Center](#), was in the midst of mentoring 18 young musicians from Lehigh Valley schools when the pandemic forced Lehigh's inaugural Music Master Mentor Program online.

Kumalo, renowned for his bass playing on artist Paul Simon's 1986 *Graceland* album, and keyboardist and composer Will Smith, began working in February with the middle- and high-school students who were selected for the program to teach them technique, rehearsal and performance skills, composition and songwriting. Also, Dan Andree, a Lehigh Valley drum instructor and music education consultant, lent his expertise and provided the drum kit on site.

The program was to culminate in a concert at Baker Hall on April 5. But following the fourth of six three-hour Saturday sessions, the face-to-face program came to a "screeching halt"

when Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf issued a stay-at-home order to help fight COVID-19, said Tahya, who facilitates the coordination of Guest Artist programming and contracts at Zoellner.

At that point, Kumalo and Smith began working with the students via Zoom. Sessions continued into the summer, with the hope that the students would be able to put on a live performance once the stay-at-home orders were lifted. As the COVID-19 crisis continued, however, the concert was indefinitely postponed. Videos will be assembled of the students' performances.

"The most important thing about working with these kids...they're unbelievable," said Kumalo, in a [video](#) created mid-way through the program. He congratulated the students, describing them as having "great talent" and being easy to work with.

"It's been really amazing," said Kumalo. "We're working together online to talk about how to practice, what songs we have to play, and what they have to work on. I open my time to them so that they can talk to me any time so we can get this music together. I'm really, really happy about these kids. They're the future. We have to help them to be the best, to be better than us, and of course, they love to play music."

Tahya said the artist mentors empowered the aspiring young musicians to make suggestions, improvise and come up with ideas about songs.

"I'm glad for this," said Ramona Slabonik, in the video. She plays the violin. "The experience participating in this mentorship has inspired me to continue my musical pursuit."

Student Donovan Fitzgerald-Adkins, also a violin player, described the program as "a lot of fun. I'm learning a lot about improvising, especially in a large group of people, and I'm learning a lot about playing different styles of music and playing with different instruments than I'm normally used to, like saxophones."

For more information about the Music Master Mentor Program, go to <https://zoellner.cas.lehigh.edu/music-master-mentor-program-bakithi-kumalo>



Kumalo in his studio at his home in Bethlehem



Kumalo demonstrates a kalimba.

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