

2020 GMTA TEACHER OF THE YEAR Portia Hawkins



As the recipient of the Georgia Music Teacher of the Year, Portia Shuler Hawkins wishes to pay special tribute to her remarkable parents; her father, Dr. J. Milton Shuler, a college professor at Claflin College, and her mother, Edna Williamson Shuler, an elementary school teacher.

Ms. Shuler Hawkins' early education started in Orangeburg, South Carolina, her hometown. She attended public elementary school and the Felton Laboratory School of South Carolina State College. Piano study was pursued with Mrs. Janie Jenkins, her church organist, and later with college instructors Dr. James George and Dr. Geneva Handy Southhall. Portia served as her high school choir accompanist and church accompanist for the children's choir.

After graduating from Wilkinson High School with second highest honors, she was accepted to Fisk University. At Fisk, she majored in piano, studying with Anne and Matthew Kennedy. She also served as a vocal accompanist and sang with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. After graduating from Fisk (Magna Cum Laude), Portia continued her studies at Yale University where she received her Master of Music degree in Piano Performance. While at Yale, she received the George Wellington Miles Award for Outstanding Piano Performance studying privately with Francis Whang and Ward Davenny. She later studied with Pulitzer Prize Winner George Walker, Betty Nolting and Virginia Hutchins.

She returned to her hometown to begin her teaching career at Claflin College and South Carolina State College. From there Ms. Shuler Hawkins served in teaching positions at Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Virginia State College, Norfolk, Virginia; and in the Atlanta area at Emory University, Georgia Perimeter College, Agnes Scott College, Spelman College and Clark Atlanta University.

Portia Shuler Hawkins has had the honor of performing in several east coast venues, which included numerous colleges and universities. Being featured on NPR's Performance Today performing the music of Florence Price was truly one of her most memorable performances. Her CD, "African-American Sampler," was heard for many years on WABE-FM public radio and other public radio stations across the country. Her presentation of the music of Robert Nathaniel Dett and her Faculty Recital at Georgia Perimeter College were featured on the "Atlanta Music Scene," WABE-Radio Atlanta. In June, 1992, Portia Hawkins was featured in the Atlanta Journal Constitution article, The Piano Lesson, written by AJC music critic Derrick Henry. Other performances in the Atlanta area have included The High Museum of Art, The Woodruff Mansion, The Wesley Woods, Renaissance, Lenbrook and Coventry Court Retirement Communities, Spelman College, Morehouse College, Georgia Perimeter College, Agnes Scott College, Georgia State University, Kennesaw University and Spivey Hall. She performed a collaborative lecture-recital with Dr. Oral Moses at Alpharetta Presbyterian Church in February 2020. She has performed several recitals at the Harriet Tubman Museum in Macon, Georgia.

Portia served as a consultant to BRAVO Music Camp in Savannah, Georgia for nine years and is presently a member of the Board of Diversitá Opera Arts Company in Dallas, Texas. Ms. Shuler Hawkins has been a member of GMTA for almost forty years and has served as State Certification Secretary and a GMTA Board Member-At-Large. She was President of North DeKalb Music Teachers Association and 2nd Vice-

President for Membership of North Fulton Music Teachers Association. Last year she was awarded a GMTA Teacher Grant to assist in promoting and preserving piano music of classically-trained African-American composers. She is a member and past president of the Alumni Chapter of Mu Phi Epsilon and a member of the Atlanta Music Club, the National Federation of Music Clubs and the Metropolitan Atlanta Musicians Association.

She has served as organist at First Church of Christ Scientist in Atlanta and Roswell, Georgia. She has also served as a guest musician at North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and continues to be a frequent accompanist for professional singers and instrumentalists.

Today, Portia Shuler Hawkins teaches privately in her Roswell, Georgia piano studio and frequently serves as an adjudicator for the Georgia Music Teachers Association, the National Federation of Music Clubs, and the Metropolitan Atlanta Musicians Association.

Portia is married to William P. Hawkins, Jr. and they are the parents of John Hawkins of San Francisco, California.

Georgia Music Teachers Association
Teacher of the Year, 2020 – Portia Shuler Hawkins
Teaching Tips

Teaching piano brings me fulfillment and joy. My joy is heightened when I see the growth of my students and the satisfaction they express when they have learned to play a piece that they once found quite challenging. I love hearing from my students long after they are no longer studying with me and they share positive feedback about being one of my students. Nothing is more rewarding.

My goal as a teacher is to guide my students through this journey of discovery and efforts toward a successful outcome.

Some of the most valuable tools that I utilize are:

1. When introducing new music to my students, I offer two or more choices for them to select from. I find that a student will work more successfully on a piece that appeals to them.
2. When the piece has been selected, we decide on a practice strategy to master passages that may present challenges. We determine style, a practice tempo, fingering, rhythm, identification of melody, structure and any unusual marks of expression. Slow and hands separate practice are highly recommended.
3. To further emphasize a certain style of music, I tell stories about the historical background of the music, showing pictures and describing trends of the period being discussed; thus embracing an all-around learning experience that encompasses more than just keyboard technique, but the making of music.
4. The student and I do a general analysis of the piece, looking for repeated notes, harmonic and rhythmic patterns, incorporating some basic tenets of music theory.
5. I always encourage students to work on newly-assigned pieces in sections rather than tackling the entire piece at once.
6. For challenging rhythmical and intricate finger passages, I suggest to the student to practice on a tabletop or the fallboard of the piano.
7. I record my students when they have a piece ready for performance. This allows them to hear themselves and possibly improve on areas of the piece that could use additional work.
8. Now that I am teaching remotely, I record a video showing my hands demonstrating technical passages that can be beneficial to their preparation.
9. And lastly, I always make every effort to be positive and encouraging, making positive comments during and at the end of each lesson. I try to teach my students not just how to play the piano, but lessons in self-confidence. At my recitals, I always recognize any special achievement that each student has accomplished.