

Lauren Kunkel steps into the spotlight

St. Joseph High School senior performs as part of LMC's Hanson Living Room Series

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Lauren Kunkel has two passions — math and singing. “My parents are both engineers, so no one knows where the music came from, but we do know where the math comes from,” Kunkel says. “Performing was kind of a surprise. I would sing all the time at home with the piano, but I never really performed until the sixth grade when I did the variety show. After that, I loved it and I haven’t stopped.”

Kunkel, a senior at St. Joseph High School, began taking voice and piano lessons from Mike Koch as a freshman. Since then, she has performed in annual recitals at the Box Factory for the Arts, in high school variety shows, including a featured solo accompanying the SJHS jazz band, and in area cabarets, including Christmas concerts and jazz performances at The Livery, fundraisers for the OutCenter, and Storyline religious services.

Musical theater fans may recognize Kunkel's name from her portrayals of Little Red Riding Hood in “Into the Woods” at Southwestern Michigan College, Natalie in “Next to Normal” at Twin City Players, Ursula in “The Little Mermaid” at SMC, and Molly in “Peter and the Starcatcher” at both Lake Michigan College and TCP. In March, she also will star as Wendla in LMC's production of “Spring Awakening.”

On Friday, however, she will be front and center at LMC's Hanson Theatre for Paul Mow presents Lauren Kunkel & Friends with the SJHS Chamber Ensemble conducted by Burke Lokey. The concert, which is the second installment of the school's Hanson Theatre Living Room Series, will feature Kunkel along with guest vocalists Cameron Hampton, Leo Carmody, Mike Koch, Maddie Schrock and more.

“I do a lot of Paul Mow & Friends concerts, but I thought she was ready to push her to the head of the class and program this herself,” says Mow, who is producing and directing the program. “I



Photo provided / Michael Koch

St. Joseph High School senior Lauren Kunkel performs Friday at Lake Michigan College Mendel Center as part of the Hanson Theatre Living Room Series.

love to promote and present new talent, and there's no one more talented than her right now. She's a spunky kid with tons of gifts and I'm excited to see what she does next. She's an incredible little juggernaut.”

Since moving to St. Joseph from Cincinnati with her family when she was in the sixth grade, Kunkel has steadily made a name for herself in performance circles.

Besides voice and piano, she also plays flute in the high school band. She has been section leader for three years in the marching band and has been first chair flute in the high school Wind Ensemble for two years.

“This concert is really highlighting all the people who have helped me grow as an artist and been close to me along the way,” Kunkel says. “Cameron, Maddie and Leo are my best friends from theater, and I wanted to show them off. I also have Mike Koch because he's one of my biggest mentors and Paul is putting this together because he's my other mentor. I really wanted to show the talent that has helped me and capture a wide variety of

music, so there's a little something for everyone.”

The concert will range from contemporary pop numbers such as Twenty One Pilots version of Elvis Presley's “Can't Help Falling in Love” and Beyoncé's “Halo” to musical theater numbers such as “Elephant Love Medley” from “Moulin Rouge” and “The Next Ten Minutes” from “The Last Five Years” to classic arias such as “Il Bacio (The Kiss).”

Kunkel also will perform at least two original songs — “The Man” and “Spotted Girl” — which are featured on her new self-titled CD, recently recorded at LMC.

“I use songwriting as an outlet or an escape so there's a lot of personal stuff in there,” she says. “‘The Man’ is a classic heartbreak story, but ‘Spotted Girl’ is probably my deepest piece. It's about the issue of self-harm and anxiety. I've always had a personal struggle balancing everything. I know from personal experience and from other people who I know and I am good friends with that self-harm can be a big issue. So I really wanted to get a message out there. It's not al-

IF YOU GO

What: Paul Mow presents Lauren Kunkel & Friends with the St. Joseph High School Chamber Ensemble conducted by Burke Lokey

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Hanson Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$15, \$10 for students, seniors, veterans and members

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

ways the happiest stuff, but it's real.”

The 22-member St. Joseph High School Chamber Orchestra will back Kunkel on “The Man” and “Elephant Love Medley,” which features a new arrangement by director and conductor Burke Lokey.

The chamber orchestra also will perform Edvard Grieg's “Two Elegiac Melodies,” Antonin Dvorak's “Two Waltzes,” John Corigliano's “Voyage for String Orchestra” and Antonio Vivaldi's Concerto for Strings in G minor, RV 156.

Kunkel, meanwhile, who is in the middle of college audition season, also has been thinking about her post-high school career. So far, she has narrowed her choices to University of Michigan, Indiana University, University of Miami, Berklee School of Music in Boston, and Belmont University in Nashville.

Wherever she lands, she does still plan to double major in contemporary vocal performance and mathematics.

“I like math because there is one specific answer and solving each problem is like solving a new puzzle thrown your way,” Kunkel says. “You have to think around it and work with them for a while, and when you understand it, it is a really great feeling.”

It's the same feeling Kunkel gets after performing on stage — a feeling she hopes to share on Friday.

“I want to sing music that moves people,” she says. “To me, that's really been what it is about. I'm looking forward to that more than anything.”

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