

Miss America, Arts Advocate

When **Nia Imani Franklin** was crowned 2019 Miss America in September, music and the arts got a new champion. As Miss America, Franklin has made music and arts education her social-impact platform—and she means it. She’s involved with ArtistCorps, which places artists in public schools to help high-need students, and with Sing for Hope, a nonprofit that aims to create a better world through music. She’s a member of the National Association for Music Education. Franklin has sung and composed all her life—she’s written over 100 pop-style songs, plus a chamber opera—and her rendition of Musetta’s “Quando mèn vo” from *La Bohème* wowed the crowd at the Miss America competition. Following her undergraduate degree in composition from East Carolina University, she earned an MFA at the University of North Carolina’s School of the Arts, and won a fellowship at Lincoln Center Education in New York. Franklin is often spotted in public-school classrooms and underserved communities, engaging everyone in the transformative power of music. Here, Franklin discusses the value of access to the arts for all.



Miss America

It’s so important that people have access to music and the arts. First and foremost, they help you to be more sensitive to those around you. In high school, music and the arts gave me a place where I felt like I had a community. I wasn’t the popular girl or the cheerleader in school. But the arts—specifically my chorus classes—gave me a place where I could stand out. Music was a confidence booster for me, and I know it is for others, too.

I took visual arts classes too, and I wasn’t the best visual artist. But there were students who excelled. Even if they didn’t become visual arts majors, that was something they could turn to when they needed to express themselves or a place where they could have a support system.

I would like to see classical music not feel like some remote thing that’s different from regular music. I can write a string quartet or an orchestral piece, but I can also write a Stevie Wonder bop. I don’t want to put myself in a box. There are days when I want to listen to Mozart, and days when I want to listen to Stevie Wonder—or maybe something by Caroline Shaw. Or Beyoncé, or hip hop. We don’t need a hierarchy of what music is,



At left above, Nia Franklin sings with the Bay Atlantic Symphony at the Landis Theater in Vineland, New Jersey in December 2018. At right, Franklin meets students at the Pennsylvania Avenue School in Atlantic City, New Jersey while participating in the school’s Thanksgiving food drive.



and classical music is better or classical music is worse than another genre. We should be open-minded to all types of music.

Children should have music in their lives, in the same way that they have to learn their ABCs. There are so many children in our country with no access to the arts, simply because of their demographic or if their parents don’t have the opportunity or the resources. Some schools don’t have music programs, much less music programs that give

children the insight into the arts that they deserve. I have gone into schools where the kids didn’t know what a piano is until I pulled off the cover and dusted off the piano that had just been sitting there. It might not be in tune, but at least they can understand what that means musically. When I taught music in a preschool, I saw that children who might start with very short attention spans learned to focus. There were big gains in their attitudes and understanding—and that happened through music. **S**