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conBrio

THE JOURNAL OF THE DEPAUL SCHOOL OF MUSIC

*Living Voice
to the future*





PRELUDE

Giving

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A very old joke contends that the biggest job in the country is wheeling West Virginia, though a fraternity brother of mine suggested that a far bigger task was flushing New York. As you can see, "old" doesn't necessarily translate to "good."

In schools of music such as ours, the most difficult job may well be the one faced by every young opera singer — creating absolutely compelling characterizations on stage while singing fully and with highly developed vocal technique, clear diction, and thoroughly expressive artistry. When it happens — when it all comes together — there is real magic in the house. Making it happen, though, requires extraordinary focus and an absolute and fearless commitment to the moment. Altogether, it's a great deal to ask of young musicians who came to us just because they love to sing!

Voice to the future

Enabling these developments within student singers is a very demanding challenge for the vocal pedagogues, opera coaches, and opera directors alike at nearly every collegiate music unit, excluding only those who have decided not to pursue opera or other musical theatre. And bluntly, few seem able to meet those challenges with any significant success.

What is it, we ask, that some few seem to understand and apply to such good effect, and so many others seem not to know? That's the question we ask and seek to answer in this issue of *Con Brio*. To get there, we've invited commentary from Harry Silverstein, the acclaimed director of DePaul Opera Theatre; Scott Gilmore, director of the opera program at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt; Sasha Gerritson, Opera Director of Northeastern Illinois University; and Jay Lesenger, newly appointed director of the Opera Program at Northwestern. We also hear from some working opera singers, and some vocal pedagogues.



What emerges, we think, is a realization of the size of the challenges associated with bringing a character to life — something that will invite a new respect for opera and opera education. We humbly offer these thoughts and conclusions to each of our 8,000 readers, as we do all our work — with spirit.

DEAN DONALD E. CASEY *DePaul School of Music*

Becoming A



MICHAEL BOYAJIAN AS NJEGUS IN FRANZ LEHÁR'S
THE MERRY WIDOW, DEPAUL OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2007

Singing Actors

BY HARRY SILVERSTEIN

“**W**hat is the difference between singing and acting?” This is the question that I pose to my freshman class of prospective opera singers. I do so because my class is often referred to as an acting class and it is filled with young singers. I do so because the question in fact perpetuates a myth of sorts, the suggestion of a bifurcation between acting and singing. The statement suggests that the act of making sound is singing, while the actual nature of the communication is acting. It suggests that it is somehow possible to sing but not act. After the end of a long discussion of text, notes, rhythm, pitch, heightened reality, freedom to adjust, length of pauses, and any number of other things that one might consider part of one but not the other, I bring the class to a basic understanding that we will all have to live with together: **There is no difference.** Singing without acting is just bad singing.

The process of training a singer to perform opera is a challenging one. Most of our undergraduate students have come to us from high school, where they have performed in choirs and perhaps appeared in the school musical. They have learned how to reproduce what they have been shown, sing with music in their hands, and perform in a fashion that their parents and friends will enjoy and respond to. We must take these talented individuals and expand their knowledge and understanding of the art form, as well as liberate them to make the kind of performance that is only possible with excellent preparation, outstanding skills, and the ability to express themselves with abandon.

It is vital that young singers learn the difference between artistry and craftsmanship. Having said this, I must point out that it is vital that singers are excellent craftsmen, as it is not possible to create any of the magical things that can happen on the stage if they are not able to be heard, or cannot sing in tune, or are not capable of any other of the physical and emotional aspects of making a performance. Doing all of these perfectly, however, is never enough to make the kind of exciting performance that we all long for in the theater.

My favorite metaphor for this is the piano. Here is an instrument played by hammers striking strings. How is it possible that anyone who becomes a competent player is any different than any other? In fact, I would imagine that there are some players here at DePaul who are able to play faster, louder, and with more exact precision than the late Vladimir Horowitz at the end of his illustrious career. Yet I am certain that they are not likely to move me in the same way. Another favorite comparison for me is having the computer play a piece with the Finale program. The piece will be perfectly reproduced — and perfectly boring.

So if it is not craftsmanship that makes the artist, what might it be?

When teaching students to become artists, we must encourage them to make their performing personal, vital, and exciting. This requires that the young singers have a clear picture of what they are trying to communicate with their performance, and create the capacity to transfer these ideas to their audience.

Performing at this level requires three successful achievements.

The singer must be able to study the original work effectively, so that he or she may make decisions informed by knowledge, wisdom, and experience regarding the intentions of the composer and librettist, and recognize the effect that the music and words should have on the public.

The singer then must be able to personalize these intentions in a way that makes the performance a beautiful, clear, personal statement of this communication that has been discovered. Finally, the singer must hone the skills using the voice, gesture, movement, and visage that will communicate these ideas to the heart and soul of the audience. A singer must be at once a musician, actor, dancer, mime, psychologist, and physicist.

Allow me to close with an exercise that I use with students that I am meeting for the first time: *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. What song could possibly be more simple, more mundane, less likely to move an audience? I have the student stand and sing this song as they remember it; sometimes we must even remind them of all the words. It is usually a lovely but less than exciting experience. I then ask them to try again. This time I suggest that they pretend that they have been blind since birth and have recently undergone a new fantastic surgery that has given them sight. They have not been allowed out in the bright daylight. But at dusk they are taken outside and the bandages are removed. The very first thing they see is a star, and they sing this song. We discover that this is not a song about a star, but a song about wonder. Often the singer and class are moved to tears. We understand what it means to be an artist.

HARRY SILVERSTEIN is professor of music and director of DePaul Opera Theatre.



AMANDA DEBOER, AS ZOZO, WITH THE OTHER
MAXIM GRISETTES IN FRANZ LEHAR'S *THE MERRY
WIDOW*, DEPAUL OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2007

PHOTO BY DAN REST

CHARLES HART AS DON JOSE AND
ERICKA SCHMIESS AS CARMEN IN
GEORGES BIZET'S CARMEN, DePAUL
OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2004



PHOTO BY ROBERT KUSEL

From Studio to Stage: Nurturing the real thing

BY ROSALIE HARRIS

European elementary and high school classes end in the early afternoon, leaving time for music (and sports) programs. There, centuries of church, folk, and family traditions nurtured singers such as Caruso, who moved in with his voice teacher's household; Pavarotti, who joined his father in the choir when he was a small boy, and Bartoli, whose mother remains her one and only voice teacher.

At one time in the United States, too, music was pervasive. The family parlor was the setting for the piano and singing. Elsa Charlston, born and raised in northern Minnesota, played the piano for her family's songfests. "Everybody in the family could sing," said Charlston, who will retire in June, after 15 years on the DePaul voice faculty. "We sang Schubert, all the fine composers. I had a great music education. I played and sang in school, church, and home." And yet, Charlston never considered a career as a singer. "I was raised to love music, not to make a living at it." It wasn't until the mid-'60s that the former mezzo discovered "this astonishingly high voice" that eventually took her from secretarial jobs to an international career most renowned for her interpretations of 20th-century music.

How likely is it that the career paths of the European opera greats or an Elsa Charlston can be repeated today? "It's almost impossible," said Charlston. With public school music programs in decline, families scattered, religious choirs diminished, and the world's fast pace, it's almost a miracle that the slow and deliberate discovery and education of a voice still occurs.

Even the magnificent mezzo of DePaul vocal coordinator Jane Bunnell, daughter of a New Jersey high school music teacher, wasn't discovered until her junior year at Indiana University. Now she is a frequent and favorite singer at the Metropolitan Opera and other prominent stages around the world. "I started out playing piano, then switched to the oboe, to get into the high school band," she said. "I entered college as an oboe major. Then I performed the role of Nettie in Rogers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, and changed majors. I think you can come to voice a little later and pick up steam, especially if you have a music background."

Many college freshmen, however, have no idea what it really means to be a voice major. "They've been told they have a nice voice, they like to sing," said Charlston, "and no one can really predict who has the talent, temperament, and tenacity to make it to the opera stage."

Bunnell and Charlston agree that the level of freshmen coming to work with the DePaul faculty gets higher each year. However, they say, with rare exceptions, 17- or 18-year-olds don't have the voice, maturity or judgment to make a career of singing. When the teachers feel students don't have what it takes, they encourage them to identify other interests, without discouraging the students' love for music. Faculty members diplomatically help students find something else to care about. More often than not, they become happy, music-loving students in other departments.



"But every once in a while, you hear something in an incoming student, especially in a young woman, since the voice of a young man is more unsettled. You can tell that these students have had that voice since they were 12. They've got the anatomy, a genetic advantage, and musical instinct. And you think to yourself, 'That's someone with a voice,'" said Charlston. "The joy, the endless joy, of teaching is when the 'lights come on,' usually between sophomore and junior year. You learn how to teach by teaching and by living it. I'm a process singer — by that I mean that I've studied how singing works. For years, this was a mystery. But the scientific studies about breathing technique continue to dispel the mystery. We know how to teach correct breathing, which takes many months and years to master. And, eventually, a singer actually feels that it's right."

How do you teach a young voice student who has both the gift and the desire? Repeating words attributed to Hippocrates, Bunnell replied, "First do no harm." If you see the seed in a freshman — the quality of sound, the potential, the heart and soul, the connection — you need to remember that vocal chords still are developing, as is the maturity of the student. You need to pick the right repertoire for the right age and teach students how to sing when healthy, sick, tired or distracted. You need to protect them from the danger zone.

"Professionals will have an entire career to look to their voices and repertoire, and the best of them understand that they're ultimately responsible for performance choices. The fact is

that people who cast roles don't always know what's best for a singer, who should turn to his or her manager, coach, and voice teacher for advice."

The voice faculty has a responsibility to recommend next steps to graduates. "There are many graduate programs with excellent teachers," said Charlston, "but some students can skip graduate school." DePaul faculty members are well connected with various options, including credible young artists' and apprentice programs.

The latter, according to Bunnell, have become ubiquitous in the last 10 years. They are not without controversy. The concern, said Bunnell, is that some programs use students in roles they're not ready for. "Graduating students aren't yet solid in their techniques, and it's easy for them to overtax their voices." Scott Gilmore, who heads the opera program at Roosevelt University, said "For many students, going to Europe and learning a language is a good idea, either before auditioning for a young artist program, or as an alternative."

There are many young artists' programs that gradually introduce participants to appropriate roles. The positive experiences and worldwide contacts that result can be of lifelong value. Many recent DePaul graduates are thriving in such programs, other alumni have taken other routes. (Just a few are profiled in this issue.)

While recordings, videos, and computers are valuable tools that DePaul students enjoy today, Bunnell declares that a unique benefit of being a voice major at a Chicago institution is the city itself. "There's nothing like a live performance," she said. "Our students take advantage of everything they see and hear, and seeing and hearing are wonderful teaching tools."

JACK COTTERELL AND BERGEN ELLIS IN FRANZ LEHÁR'S
THE MERRY WIDOW, DEPAUL OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2007



PHOTO BY DAN REST

*"Every once in a while,
you hear something
in an incoming student.
And you think to
yourself, 'There's
someone with a voice.'"*

High C's of opera programs



Put together four directors of Chicago university opera programs and you get four different pictures of budgets and venues, relationships with music and other performing arts departments, and even the very goals of the programs. But among the common concerns are creating a life-altering experience for each student and, as part of that experience, presenting programs that generate excitement within the university and in external communities.

"Once the students are accepted, you have to give them all you have," said Scott Gilmore, who has held the position of assistant professor of opera and vocal coaching at the Music Conservatory, Chicago College of Performing Arts (CCPA), Roosevelt University, for two years.

Gilmore was one of the directors who recently participated in an informal roundtable discussion assembled in a DePaul audition room by *Con Brio*. The aim was to compare and contrast the programs, their challenges, and opportunities.

Gilmore's operatic credits as coach, assistant conductor, and chorus master

OLGA BOJOVIC AS SISTER ANGELICA IN
GIACOMO PUCCINI'S *SUOR ANGELICA*, DEPAUL
OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2008

include working with the San Francisco Opera, Salzburg Festival, Cologne Opera, Opéra de Lyon, and Opera Australia. He has worked with major international conductors and recorded on CD, radio, television, and video. As a recital accompanist, he has performed in Carnegie Hall, Dublin's National Concert Hall, and in numerous recitals in London, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cologne, Sydney, and Melbourne. At any given time, from 113 to 121 undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate voice students study at CCPA.

Recruited just this year as professor, voice and opera, and director of the opera program by "a very, very persuasive dean" at Northwestern University, Jay Lesenger's positions elsewhere include stage director, administrator, and teacher for more than 30 years, creating more than 200 productions. In the summer, he will continue as artistic/general director and principal stage director of Chautauqua Opera, a position he has held for the past 15 years. He also is a former faculty member at the University of Michigan, where he directed the School of Music Opera Theatre. Including graduate, post-graduate, and certificate students, Northwestern's program comprises 130 voice majors.

Harry Silverstein, professor of music and director of DePaul Opera Theatre, first came to the school 21 years ago. "One of my first students just turned 40," he said. The voice program trains 65 to 70 undergraduates, graduates, and post-graduates. Silverstein is an opera director well known for productions of Mozart, as well as contemporary opera, and a number of works from the standard repertory. Venues for his professional productions include Lyric Opera of Chicago, English National Opera, San Francisco Opera, and New York City Opera. Soon after the discussion, Silverstein flew to direct Angela Gheorghiu, among others, in a production of *La Bohème* at San Francisco Opera.

The vitae for DePaul alumna Sasha Gerritson, who heads the opera workshop program at Northeastern Illinois University of Chicago, can be found elsewhere in this issue. While there are 82 undergraduate music majors at Northeastern, only eight are voice performance majors. Because the school has burnished its reputation as a teachers' college, most music majors go on to be classroom teachers.

The directors agree that the primary goal of their opera programs is to give every student a chance to perform. Silverstein stresses the high artistic quality of DePaul Opera Theatre productions that provide "an opportunity for an experience the students might not have again in their lifetime. Although this is a serious program to prepare young singers, only a few have an expectation of a career in opera. For others, there are other avenues."

All the directors are sensitive to the expectations of their students achieving lifetime careers on the opera stage. Lesenger said, "Performing careers are shorter than before and singers are forced to reach a high level very fast — sometimes even before they're 35 or 40. And with this economy, it's especially scary. Even major opera companies, very concerned about the 'bottom line,' are using young artists in key roles. While this is a great opportunity on the one hand, on the other there's a concern that singers — and voices — will burn out.



PHOTO BY BOB KUSEL

DREW DUNCAN AND SARA PTAK
IN GIACOMO PUCCINI'S
GIANNI SCHICCHI, DEPAUL
OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2008

"What our performance students really are preparing for are auditions," said Lesenger. "That's the reality." He counsels students to be themselves as they proceed in the audition process. "There's a 'give me your paw' mentality that college students have. 'Do it this way and you'll be rewarded.' The system beats individuality out of them. But the fact is that you can't do fifteen different auditions. You need to do the one in which you're yourself, in which you imbue every note, every word, with life. Then you've done your best, whether or not you've been selected. For those students not interested in performing but in areas such as choral direction? They, too, need to be as invested in the process as anyone."

Northwestern's opera performances are in the 1,000-seat Cahn Auditorium, the largest performing space on the Evanston campus. "I've chosen Lehar's *The Merry Widow* and Menotti's *The Counsel* for this season," said Lesenger. "The opera and theater programs are in different departments. I'm just feeling my way, but one of my goals is to explore a closer partnership between the theater and opera programs here. Another is to co-produce with a professional organization like Chautauqua Opera, with which I have very strong ties."

"Students today have grown up in a world of digital sound," said Gilmore. "There is an appalling lack of listening, even though headphones seem to be a permanent extension of their bodies. We're here to help students understand differences between performances."

Roosevelt's fall productions are free to the public. In November, the entire university building was the stage for "Opera Fest," an afternoon of operas sung in English. The Spertus Lounge, Ganz Hall, and the library were among the settings for Mozart's *The Impresario*, Rorem's *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters*, Barber's *A Hand of Bridge*, and four other works. "Our goal is to develop the singing actor," said Gilmore. "Singing is primal, you feel it in your gut. It's important to select the best opera literature so students can develop their singing and listening skills. We also need to offer seminars on 'the business' to seniors and graduate students, who live in a different world when it comes to objective knowledge and tools."

Four Scenes in Three Acts is the name of Roosevelt's Spring '09 production, which consists of Overture and Act II of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*; Antonia Act of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffman*, and Act I, scene ii and the Final Fugue of Verdi's *Falstaff*. The production will be held in Chicago's Harris Theater, the home of Chicago Opera Theater. CCPA and COT offer a two-year Professional Diploma Program that couples advanced training with full scholarship support at CCPA and professional experience as a Young Artist at COT. Singers are offered the possibility of singing a role in the fully staged performance with orchestra in CCPA's spring semester opera. At the end of the semester, participants become Young Artists at COT, covering roles, singing in the main stage ensemble, and participating in master classes, recitals, and outreach presentations.

DePaul Opera Theatre's annual fall production is performed in DePaul Concert Hall and the spring production on the stage of the Merle Reskin Theatre. The Spring '09 production will be Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. All DePaul Opera Theatre productions are performed in English. "This is a controversial issue," said Silverstein. "But my belief is that students can communicate better in their own language."

"We have a 'come and go' student population, and an older one. Our main role right now is to help students learn how to be music teachers," said Gerritson. "The challenge is having the soloists, chorus, and orchestration we need, as well as mature voices. We're embarking on an active recruitment program, which has the support of the administration."

"We believe an important aspect of college programs is making opera accessible to audiences. I believe that Northeastern students comprise the most diverse university population in Illinois, including racially and economically. So it follows that our productions must be affordable for the family and friends who so eagerly come to see the students perform. Opera at Northeastern 'is the thing.' There's tremendous respect for the program."

"We alternate between opera and musical theater. Recent productions include Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* and Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. The president brings donors and other VIP's to performances, and the community comes out in droves. We're lucky to have a comfortable 450-seat auditorium. Students are excited to be part of all this spirit. They're really engaged."

Silverstein meets with all incoming students and puts the facts on the table. "I tell them that in each of the last three years, more Americans were attacked by sharks than received their first contract to sing a major role at the Met." But he sounds an optimistic note about the audiences of the future. "Audiences for professional opera require two things: disposable income and time. This counts out most young people. But by the time many opera lovers are in their '50's, they have the income and the time. So I believe there will be generation after generation of older audiences eager to take in the talents of the students being prepared in institutions in Chicago, throughout the country, and around the world."

Editor's note: Following the discussion, the four directors, who hadn't met before, promised to keep in touch and attend each other's productions. R.H.

PHOTO BY DAN REST

KATARZYNA ANNA NOWAK AS HANNA GLAWARI IN FRANZ LEHÁR'S
THE MERRY WIDOW, DEPAUL OPERA THEATRE, MARCH 2007



"There's a 'give-me-your-paw' mentality that college students have. The system beats individuality out of them. But the fact is that you need to do the audition in which you're yourself, imbue every note, every word, with life."

For this special issue, CON BRIO contacted a few alumni of DePaul Opera Theatre who are pursuing busy, interesting and important opera careers. We asked them about those DePaul influences that most positively affected their careers, as well as their most recent and near future professional involvements. Thanks to email, they found time to respond, in their own words:

Catching On



HELEN TODD AS AUNT LYDIA IN POUL RUDER'S
THE HANDMAID'S TALE, MINNESOTA OPERA 2003

Catching Up

SOPRANO HELEN TODD ('91): BRINGING GREAT ARTISTS TOGETHER

I learned the most about my career first from Norman Gulbrandsen, my voice teacher for five years. He told me once that I should just be a bird, because I was meant to sing. At the time, I was having trouble remembering the words. He thought birds didn't have words to worry about. He brought out my natural ability and never had me complicate my singing. He also helped me find the right teacher for graduate school — Patricia Berlin at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music.

My next greatest influence was Harry Silverstein, from whom I learned the most about how to approach learning a piece of music in a foreign language. He didn't let me get away with anything. Although he saw my natural talent, he was not bowled over by it and never let me give less than 100 percent. If I didn't know what the words meant in a particular aria or scene, he knew it, stopped me, and asked me what I was singing about. When I confessed that I didn't know, he told me to sit down ... and "don't come back until you do know!" This was important. He knew I didn't have the discipline to be really exceptional. I learned more from Harry about acting and singing opera than from any director since.

There was one more pivotal moment in my years at DePaul. Linda Hirt, coach and voice coordinator at the time, asked me one day if I would like to go to the opera with her. Her husband couldn't go that night and so she had an extra ticket. I jumped at the chance. She took me to the Lyric Opera of Chicago, to see June Anderson and Alfredo Kraus in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. I had never had the money and this was the first time in my life that I ever saw a professional opera company. Linda saw in me a chance to give this gift, to see Anderson do this role. She knew that I would sing Lucia one day, and I knew from that moment on that I wanted to do this role. I will forever be grateful to Linda for that ticket to the opera.

(Note: When Todd sang the role for Opera Illinois in September 2003, the *Peoria Journal Star* ran the following review: "Soprano Helen Todd, who plays Lucia, breathes life and spirit into this scene. When the famous flute solo sounds from the orchestra, Todd's Lucia suddenly turns in recognition, almost as if she could see the music dancing before her. What she thinks she sees — in her madness — is Edgardo coming to her, calling. 'I hear his sweet voice,' she says in Italian and smiles as she makes her way toward him — staggering a little

as she walks; Lucia's mind is unhinged, unfettered. So is Todd's voice: Again and again, the flute sings and she answers, tracing wild vocal arabesques, descending and ascending, circling and darting, stretching upward and brushing the stratosphere.")

I recently had two daughters, one in 2005 and one this year. So I have curtailed my travels for the moment. I continue to teach privately and part time at Kent State University. I also produce Sugar Creek Symphony & Song, the summer opera festival I co-founded in rural Watseka, Illinois, in 2003 (www.sugarcreekfestival.org). The festival is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity dedicated to producing an operatic and classical music festival each summer. As artistic director, I love casting operas and bringing great artists together. I run a young artists program through the festival, to prepare singers for a career in opera. I thoroughly enjoy working with them, introducing them to great contacts in the opera world. Last year, DePaul soprano Laura Kachurek was a young artist at my festival. I will continue to sing, but will travel less until my girls are school age. I have a great career.

BARITONE CHRISTOPHER FEIGUM ('95): A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION

When I was investigating schools, Bill Byrne, a family friend and jazz musician for the Woody Herman Band, suggested that Chicago is one of the best cities in the world for young musicians. He said that anyone in the performing arts should choose a school with access to the broadest possible spectrum of organizations to work with.

Chicago, the third coast city, is renowned around the world for the quality of musicians and thespians that live and work here. I believed the city would give me opportunities to work with some of the best in the business, while developing "real world" connections.

DePaul certainly has the access. But additionally, the faculty included one of the best voice teachers in the country, Norman Gulbrandsen. He was the primary force in my decision to attend DePaul. What I didn't realize at the time is that DePaul has one of the best academic programs in the country. It was a challenging environment that shaped my critical thinking and provided me the necessary skills to work in a field that is 75 percent business and 25 percent music. The importance of economics, business management, and public speaking courses rounded my educational experience and continue to help me in my career every day.

Sometimes one realizes in the middle of a piece of cake, that there is a fine layer of chocolate truffle. DePaul's chocolate truffle happened to be wonderfully gifted teachers, or shall I say mentors, at the school of music. Individuals such as Tom Brown, Harry Silverstein, Elsa Charlston, and Sheldon Atovsky were working professionals who gave me first-hand knowledge of a career path that can be tenuous, at best. I will always be grateful for my time at DePaul, the friends I made there, and the mentors I will miss forever.

I performed the role of Lescaut in Lyric Opera of Chicago's opening production of Massenet's *Manon*. In other engagements this season, I will be performing this season with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra in Mozart's *Mass in C minor*; in Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* with Dallas Opera; in Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*; back to Lyric in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*; on to Tulsa Opera in Donizetti's *L'Esil d'Amore*, then, finally, to Opera Theatre St. Louis/Wexford Festival in Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

For more about Christopher Feigum, visit www.imgartists.com/?page=artist&id=386.

**BARITONE STEPHEN POWELL (MM '91,
CERTIFICATE OF PERFORMANCE '93): WORKING OPERA SINGER**

My current career profile is that of a working opera singer, which I plan to continue indefinitely, or until no one wants to hear me sing anymore!

I recently debuted at Los Angeles Opera singing the role of Sharpless in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (I debuted at San Francisco Opera in the same role last season). I sang a concert featuring the Brahms *Requiem* and Dvorak *Te Deum* at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., in late October, Orff's *Carmina Burana* with the New Jersey Symphony in early November, and Handel's *Messiah* with the Baltimore Symphony in December. My wife, soprano Barbara Shirvis, and I debut a new recital in January called *American Celebration*, featuring art songs of American composers, one of three recitals we do together. Highlights for Spring of 2009 include concerts and a recording of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*, to be released on the Sony label, with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra; a concert performance singing the role of Miller in Verdi's *Luisa Miller* at the May Festival in Cincinnati with James Conlon conducting, and returning to Los Angeles Opera to sing the role of Germont in *La Traviata*.

The most profound DePaul influence on me would have to be Professor Emeritus Norman Gulbrandsen, who very recently celebrated his 90th birthday. He was my first voice teacher, and it was at DePaul, through his influence, that I decided to pursue opera as a vocation. I knew him first at Northwestern University, where I completed my undergraduate studies, when I was a piano accompanist in his vocal studio. I continued in that capacity for some years after he arrived at DePaul. Mr. Gulbrandsen convinced me to audition for the role of Figaro in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* in 1991. I was given the role, and through that experience decided to become a singer by trade. I still keep in touch with Mr. G (as he is so well known) by phone, and visit him when I can.



CHRISTOPHER FEIGUM AS LESCAUT, WITH NATALIE DESSAY AS
MANON, IN MASSENET'S *MANON*, LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO, 2008

PHOTO BY DAN REST, COURTESY OF LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

STEPHEN POWELL AS SWEENEY TODD
IN SONDHEIM'S SWEENEY TODD,
CLEVELAND OPERA 2004



PHOTO COURTESY OF HERBERT BARRETT MANAGEMENT

*“The importance
of economics, business,
and public speaking
courses rounded my
educational experience
and continue to help me in
my career every day.”*

That leads me to another big influence, Harry Silverstein, whom I believe was then in his first year as Opera Director at DePaul. Working with Harry onstage, in Opera Workshop classes and through independent studies, greatly enhanced my stagecraft and growth as a performer, and helped me become comfortable, with myself and my body, onstage. I haven't seen Harry in a while, but I hope to work with him again someday.

One more wonderful influence would have to be Professor Thomas Brown, who sadly is no longer with us. His love and passion for music was contagious, and he provided an intellectual stimulation that I found very inviting. I played for his vocal literature class, and sat beside him as he provided tremendous musical commentary and insight for the students in the class. He became a good friend and I miss him dearly.

I am still in touch with Dean Casey periodically (I first met him when I was a student at Northwestern and he a professor there). I believe he has done a masterful job in leading the school of music into the 21st century and bringing the program to national prominence.

For more about Stephen Powell, go to www.stephenpowell.us/press.html.

SOPRANO JESSICA KLEIN ('05): REALIZING SHE'S HER OWN BUSINESS

I am a soprano currently attending the Juilliard Opera Center, a program for older students who show promise of a really major operatic career. I'm not certain I'm going to have a "major career," but at JOC, I am among some of the best singers I have ever heard. There are 14 of us in this program. At 25, I'm the youngest and the oldest is 34. We have few classes each week. We have Italian class (we all

know how important this language is in opera) and we have nearly constant acting and audition preparation classes. In the evening, we often are in rehearsal for the operas in which we are involved at Lincoln Center.

This year, I'm covering a role in a triple bill (three one act operas), all of which are new works, and then I'm singing Alice Ford in *Falstaff* by Verdi. I'm especially excited to sing this, as Keri-Lynn Wilson, the wife of Metropolitan Opera Artistic Director Peter Gelb, is conducting and Stephen Wadsworth, a really famous director as well, is directing. In return for the operas that we perform in and concerts we sing in at Juilliard, we receive a stipend.

In October, I sang in the Tucker Foundation Concert at Avery Fischer Hall. This is a televised concert in which Bryn Terfel, Renee Fleming, and Susan Graham, among many others, sang. Of course, I am not the experienced, famous singer these folks are, but I was excited to sing! If you see it, don't blink...you might have missed me. Then I'm singing Clorinda, the ugly stepsister, in Rossini's *Cenerentola*. It is a really small part during a duet between Cenerentola and Don Ramiro, but it will be exciting nonetheless! I'm thrilled to even see these amazing opera singers, let alone sing a little with them.

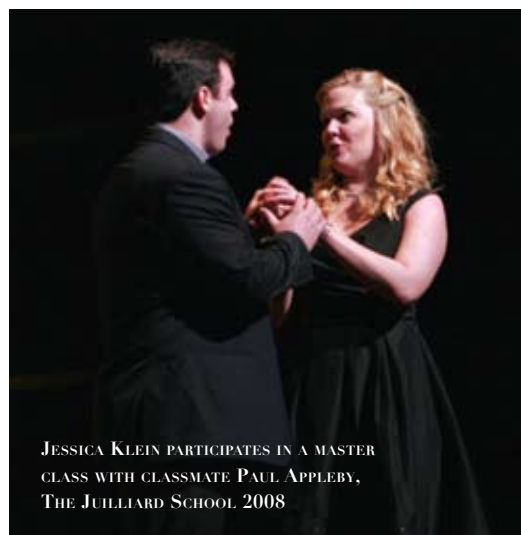
Last year, I won the New York District and Region of the Metropolitan Opera Competition. They said I was too young to sing Strauss on the final concert at the Met stage but told me to keep singing for the competition every year. I was disappointed in the decision, but respect and believe that people who know growing talent will have the singers' best interests in mind. And I did get a call this year from the Met asking me to audition for their main stage productions for the 2010 season. So, I guess the right people did hear me, and doors were opened when I thought they were shut. Also, next year, Juilliard Opera Center and The Metropolitan Young Artists (Lindemann Program) will merge. So this, no doubt, is an exciting time for me.

I will always look back at DePaul with the fondest memories. Harry Silverstein has a special place, always, in my heart. I remember the "sing thru's" of the operas that we were performing at DePaul. All of us would be so nervous because we had to be off book and prove that we knew our role before we went into staging. We were certain that we would be ousted if we didn't have it down perfectly. We were trained to "know your music when setting foot in a rehearsal." Boy, has this ever helped me. I feel that I am ahead of my classmates at Juilliard in this respect. I'm always ready weeks in advance with my music. When others are using their scores, I'm off book. I picture Harry sitting there, shaking his head behind the table, and I get to memorizing immediately! He taught me the importance of professionalism.

I was also very excited to sing with an orchestra! Many schools do not offer that to their voice students. I think this is a major, detrimental mistake. It is so important for singers to have the feeling of an orchestra under them and understand what it means to follow a conductor. Also, learning how to speak with a conductor in a professional way when agreeing on tempo, etc. These are all things Harry would address during his classes as well.

Elsa Charlston is a wonder! She was my voice teacher at DePaul for four years. She taught me so many valuable lessons with tongue tension, breath and how to get a beautiful sound

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JULLIARD SCHOOL



JESSICA KLEIN PARTICIPATES IN A MASTER CLASS WITH CLASSMATE PAUL APPLEBY, THE JULLIARD SCHOOL 2008

placement. I am thankful that such a wonderful teacher helped lead me vocally, and personally, in the right direction. I still sing for her two or three times a year because she is the only teacher who knows what natural “bad habits” I have. Even though I am happy with the education I am receiving at the moment, I still like to see Elsa because she understands where I have been vocally. I am so sad that she is retiring, but happy that she will be able to rest a little and take some time for herself.

DePaul also had an information board for singers, which was very important. The board had audition information for summer programs, as well as church jobs in the area.

I really didn't pay much attention to this during my first two years there, but I did in my junior year. That was when I got into the Chautauqua summer program and met many faculty and staff from Juilliard. Again, doors opened because I realized the importance of those postings on the bulletin board.



RACHEL COBB AS CHO-CHO-SAN,
WITH RICARDO VELÁSQUEZ AS
SHARPLESS, IN PUCCINI'S *MADAME
BUTTERFLY*, OPERA PANAMA 2008

DePaul gave me a lot of great advice. However, a singer has to be ready and willing to take that advice and run with it. This is not a profession where things are handed to you. I am realizing that I am my own business, and I need to market myself and pay attention to the signs posted. DePaul instilled that in me ... a good work ethic. It took me until my junior year to get it ... but I did.

RACHEL COBB ('96 '98): “I'M A LITTLE BUSY...”

I'm singing Cio Cio San in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* right now in Central America (Opera Panama), with opening night tomorrow, so I'm a little busy ... I'm so tired, and I hope this makes sense. I just found out that I'll be singing Mimi in *La Bohème* at Opera Duluth in June 2009, and I'm waiting to hear about an audition I made for a role in Lehár's *The Merry Widow*.

I was a special student at DePaul and the school was instrumental in teaching me how to prepare and learn roles. Harry Silverstein and Linda Hirt, especially, taught me not just to learn the role but also to create depth. Harry taught me so much about acting ... I would be nowhere without that.

NOTE: Cobb was concert soloist for Opera Panama's *Noce de Estrelles Gala*. She also performed Mimi at Opera Pacific, then at Opera on the James. As Miss Jessel in Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* at Glyndbourne Opera, she was lauded in *Opera Magazine*: “Rachel Cobb made much of Miss Jessel's tragedy without any recourse to melodramatics in one of the best impersonations I have seen.”

For more about Rachel Cobb, go to www.rachelcobbsoprano.com

MARY STOLPER'S “MAGIC FLUTE AND PICCOLO” MOMENTS ONSTAGE

When, from time to time, musicians take to the opera stage, they need to learn new skills, including characterization, stage movement, and what it's like to perform in costume. Mary Stolper — a member of the DePaul flute faculty, frequent soloist, and principal flute of both the Grant Park Symphony and Music of the Baroque — had one such experience.

In 1996, University of Chicago professor of music and composer John Eaton wrote two “pocket” operas, *Golk* and *Don Quixote*. Both were performed at Chicago's Harold Washington Library and both used instrumentalists as the singers and actors. *Golk* was a political satire dealing with high profile members of Congress and the President of the United States.

“I was the character Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*,” Stolper said, “and the six musicians were on stage the entire time. When we weren't acting, we were back at our stands. This was the hardest thing I've ever done. Not only did I have to memorize all the instrumental parts, but also the staging dialogue and singing, as well. One minute I was accompanying another performer, the next I'd break into song.

“We were coached by professional actors for our movements, which had to be in line with our ability to move and play our instruments. In one spot I was to run back and forth, upstage and downstage, while playing my piccolo. Well, I got dizzy and started to fall over, although I never fell down. The composer loved it. He asked how I knew to portray this drunk very well.”

The experience, Stolper said, was “a riot, but also very, very scary. I had a newfound respect for all opera singers — it's so much harder than it looks. The staging can be difficult to perform. Just remembering where you have to be, and knowing all the other singing parts, to interact in this way was, indeed, a challenge. It's quite different from being on stage in an orchestra, where you sit quietly. You really have to stay in the moment. In *Don Quixote*, the dialogue moved fast, and I had to stay on cue for my next entrance of music, vocal, or acting.”

What did she learn? Having to be responsible for all the singing, acting, dialogue and music. The prep work was extremely difficult for her, and accomplishing the many facets of her assignment was practiced in several stages. “Once I had a technical passage completed on the piccolo, I then had to play it while walking, or even slightly running. And while I was playing the flute, another member of the company might be singing, and when they were done, I had to immediately stop the flute part and sing.”

The best part, according to Stolper, was focusing and concentrating at such a high level, in order to keep it all working. From this experience, she learned more about herself and what she was capable of doing. “And for that,” she said, “I am eternally grateful.”



The View from



RACHEL COBB AS ROSALINDE IN *DIE FLEDERMAUS*,
DEPAUL OPERA THEATRE, FEBRUARY 1998

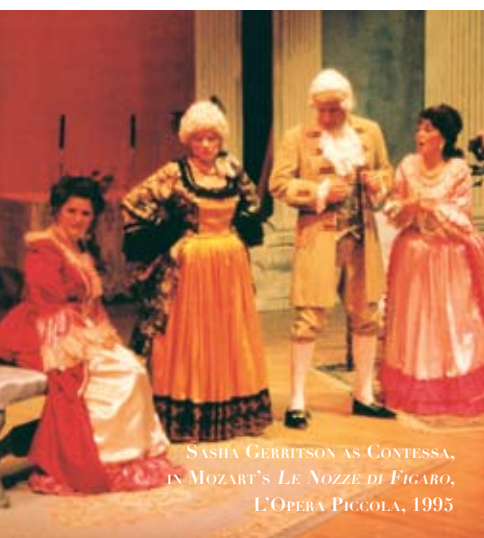
The Other Side of the Curtain

In the annals of opera singers who successfully made a transition from onstage to backstage, Beverly Sills and Plácido Domingo immediately come to mind. But compared with ballet dancers or actors, singers who care about and can control the business end of the art are relatively few. DePaul School of Music Distinguished Alumnus Sasha Gerritson, who received her post-master's certification degree in opera and Romance languages in 1998, is one such singer-impresario.

A talented lyric soprano who studied at DePaul with Norman Gulbrandsen, and now heads the opera workshop program at another alma mater, Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, said, "I believe my true calling lies in teaching and opera production."

Gerritson never has been a stranger to working — onstage, backstage, and offstage. Over the years, she's worked as a choral conductor, general music teacher, personal banker, church music minister, fundraiser, event planner, and executive director, among other jobs. She's always sung as much as she could. But comparing herself to her classmates at DePaul, she realized she didn't have the discipline or natural talent to succeed as "just one more lyric soprano." She calls singing Flora in *La Traviata* at Chicago's Athenaeum Theatre and singing newly composed works of Ronald Combs in a dance program at Ravinia the pinnacles of her career. Combs was a professor at Northeastern, where she received her bachelor's degree in vocal performance and French and her master's degree in vocal pedagogy. Now retired, Combs was her predecessor in her current position at the school.

For two years, she was executive assistant to Daniel Barenboim at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She was there when Barenboim heard Cecilia Bartoli for the first time, broke bread with the mezzo in Berlin, and assisted Domingo on the night of a recital with the Maestro. Coincidentally, it was when she was in high school, attending a performance of *Samson et Delilah* at Lyric that she became hooked on opera — and the tenor. (Her host that day was DePaul School of Music Class of '50 alumnus George Rico, her teacher at Lane



SASHA GERRITSON AS CONTESSA,
IN MOZART'S *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*,
L'OPERA PICCOLA, 1995

Technical High School, who instilled in her a love of classical music, opera, foreign languages, and music theory.) She traveled the world, saw first hand what being on the road was like, and decided it wasn't for her.

It was during the time before finishing her master's degree in vocal pedagogy at Northeastern in May 1996 and entering DePaul in September 1997 that she made a decision and bravely set upon a new career direction. "During those months, I spent a good chunk of time just waiting. Waiting for the Met to call, or the Lyric ... or something! I was frustrated by the lack of performing opportunities and, after being in every show for six years at Northeastern, I really missed being on stage. So I decided to take matters into my own hands."

With the help of friends, she put on *La Bohème* in her church gym. Thus, L'Opera Piccola was born, in the summer of 1996.

The mission of the new company was lofty: "Bringing traditional opera to the world by linking the singers of today with the success of tomorrow." But the experience "on the ground" was practical.

"We had a great time, singing the leading roles, casting all our friends and hoping things wouldn't cost too much. We did everything! I would be selling tickets at intermission, calling people to buy ad book pages in between rehearsal periods, hauling the set pieces from the rental truck because we couldn't afford a crew. I sang roles and prepared the chorus, made the supertitles, wrote and placed the advertising, raised the funds, and managed the contract negotiations. One of my friends wrote grant applications, got out the mailings and sang leading roles. Another friend conducted, prepared the soloists' music, set up the pit and marked all the parts. A third friend directed the shows and handled oversight of all the tech."

After a year, she began to realize they had a viable product — and that it was time for her and her singer friends to put aside their egos if they really wanted to be true to their mission. They stopped singing leading roles, hired guest conductors and, occasionally, guest stage directors. They cast young singers among the large, but often overlooked, talent pool in Chicago. Among them were DePaul-trained singers, cast "not because they were our friends, but because they were the absolute best for the roles."

L'Opera Piccola went from a \$5,000 show in that church gym in 1996 to a \$250,000 annual budget for large-scale performances at the Athenaeum in 2005. The operas, all sung in Italian, were performed to acclaim before packed houses. Reviewing Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, music critic Wynne Delacoma wrote, that the "stage director, Shifra Werch, has put together an attractive cast and managed to preserve the effervescence of Rossini's well-worn comic tale" Of a fifth-anniversary production of Donizetti's *Lucia di*

Lammermoor, Dan Tucker, of the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote, "Let's have another five years of *opera grande* from L'Opera Piccola ... LOP has become a muscular six-footer. Founder and executive director Sasha Gerritson and artistic director Shifra Werch deserve five years' worth of bows for its growth." And this from music writer John von Rhein, also in the *Chicago Tribune*, "The mirthful, well-sung production of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* that opened L'Opera Piccola's fifth season over the weekend at the Athenaeum Theatre suggested executive director Sasha Gerritson and artistic director Shifra Werch are serious about filling Chicago's need for quality opera in the off-season."

"It's funny the way things happen sometimes," said Gerritson, who now serves on the DePaul School of Music Advisory Board. "The growth of the company required a full time devotion to fundraising, which I wasn't prepared to do. I missed making the art. While working as executive director at L'Opera Piccola, I'd begun working full time at Northeastern, appointed first as chorus master and assistant director of their opera program, then opera director. I also was serving as the music minister of my church in Park Ridge. In 2005, I met Eugene Jarvis, who works at DePaul's College of Computing and Digital Media. We married the next year and, our son, Nate, was born last December.

"In light of all these wonderful new challenges in my life, I felt it was time to embark on a new journey and explore the next chapters in my life. I tried to find someone to take over my responsibilities at L'Opera Piccola. But because the position was largely management, and volunteer, it wasn't an easy sell. So, sadly, L'Opera Piccola closed its doors in 2005, and there are no immediate plans for re-opening. But you never know." R.H.

"I really missed being on the stage. So I decided to take matters into my own hands."

MELISSA TREINKMAN AS PRASKOWIA
AND GREGORY JACKSON AS
PRITSCHITSCH IN FRANZ LEHÁR'S
THE MERRY WIDOW, MARCH 2007



PHOTO BY DAN REST

DEPAUL FINANCE PROFESSOR'S OPERA DEBUT IS ON THE MONEY

Geoffrey Hirt, professor of finance at DePaul's College of Commerce, met his future wife, Linda, when they both were in the choir at Ohio Wesleyan University in the 1960s. She continued a career in music and is opera coach and foreign language diction specialist at DePaul. His music career, however, was cut short when he graduated from college.

He often says, "It's easier to love a musician than be one." On the other hand, he immensely enjoys the world of music in which his wife keeps him more than a bit immersed. Two seasons ago, Hirt became more involved than he'd ever dreamed of, earning a small speaking role in Respighi's rarely performed 1921 opera, *La Bella Dormiente nel Bosco* or *Sleeping Beauty in the Woods*.

The setting was Urbania, Italy, where Linda first visited in 1993, so that she could take Italian language classes through the Oberlin in Italy program. She started playing concerts, too, and the long and short of it is that they return to this city in the Marche every summer, bringing with them DePaul music students to study and perform. Geoff uses the time to work on his finance textbooks.

In June 2006, Linda told Geoff about a small part involving no singing, just four speaking lines — in Italian. She offered to coach him and it struck him as a "cakewalk" — which is, in fact, how his character, Mr. Dollar, leaves the stage. In this case, the character left while dancing with a very tall, 20-year-old singer playing the Duchess.

He, like the composer, developed Mr. Dollar, an "ugly American" of his time. Hirt's spin was speaking the Italian with a Texas accent. "Day after day, I'd rehearse. I put my lines on a piece of paper folded in my wallet, so I could go over them at will.

"The rehearsals went on for hours and hours," he said. "I waited to come back on, waited to speak, and waited to learn how to dance with a woman younger and taller than I. It was very different from my last roles, in a high school production of *West Side Story* and a college production of *Camelot*, more than 40 years ago. Then, I wasn't a thespian, just part of the stage chorus.

"One day, I'd come in on cue, but miss my lines. Another day, I'd miss the cue. The director told me that if I forgot my lines, I should make something up and keep on going. Day after day, I'd rehearse. In the last two rehearsals, I finally got it right."

On the night of the performance, Hirt, heart pounding in his chest, managed to get on stage on cue. "Why am I so nervous," he asked himself. "I'm a professor used to talking in front of people!"


Forgetting his first line, he remembered the director's advice to make something up. So, repeating the few words he remembered, he got the laughs he was after, and finally settled down to get the last lines right. Audience roaring, wife playing piano in the small pit orchestra, he danced off with the Duchess, down the aisle in an "inky dinky do" that would have made Jimmy Durante proud.


For Hirt, it was, in its own way, a cakewalk.


Opera Theatre Facts


Students prepare for an opera performance **every month of the year**. The main stage opera requires the services of the **entire performance faculty, the full staff of the school of music, staff and faculty from the theater school, and as many as 35 additional staff and visiting artist employees**. Last year's main stage opera used the talents of more than **110 school of music students**. The operas combined have more than **255 hours** of staging rehearsals. The process of choosing, preparing and playing the main stage opera takes more than **one year**. The opera chorus uses as many as **40 school of music students**. The opera orchestra uses as many as **48 school of music students**. It takes **26 hours** of working time in the theater to set the light effects for the main stage opera. The **one set** for *Hansel and Gretel*, the Spring production, was built in Milwaukee. The opera costumes are often built by up to **14 Chicago artisans**. Opera music staff includes the **conductor, chorus master, rehearsal pianist and the accompanist coach, and requires the support of the entire vocal faculty**. Opera artists include the **conductor, stage director, choreographer and designers for sets, lights, costumes, wigs and make-up**, all of whom are experienced opera professionals. Students prepare musically for **five months**, have **five weeks** of stage rehearsal, **six nights** of rehearsal in the theater and make **three performances**. Opera is considered the grand art because it **requires artists from all of the classical art forms**. DePaul Opera Theatre performs in **two different theaters** each year, before an audience of more than **3,000 people**. Tickets for performances at Merle Reskin Theatre are **\$5-\$25**.


PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

DePaul Wind Ensemble performing works
by Strauss, Haydn and Tcherpnin 
January 29 at 8:00pm • *DEPAUL CONCERT HALL*

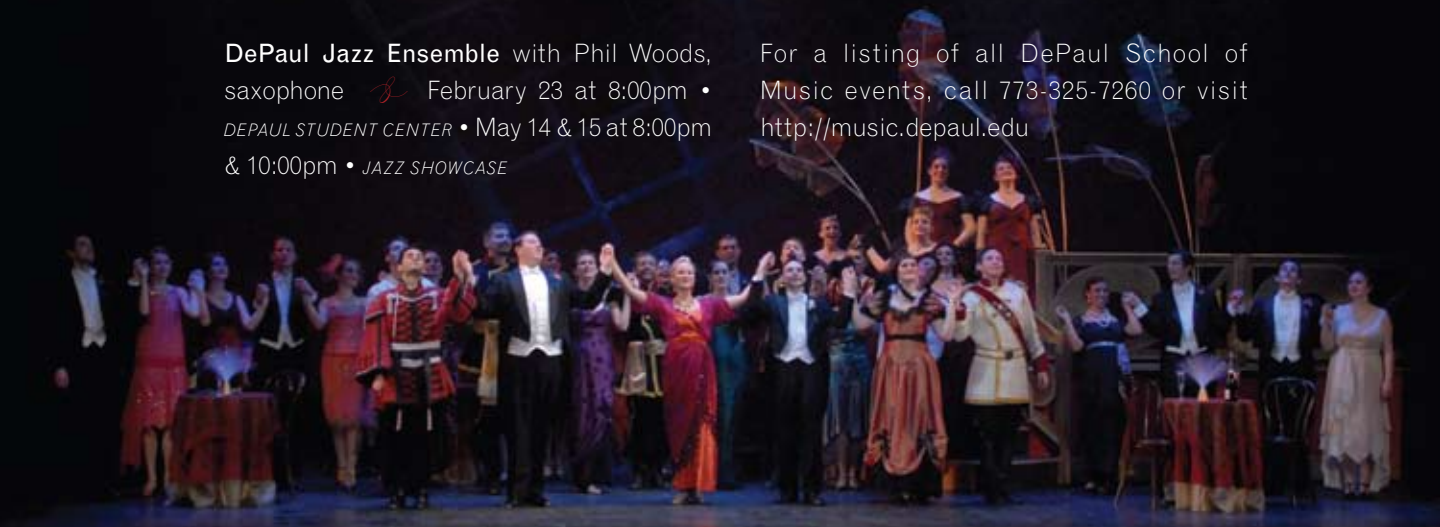
**University Singers, Concert Choir and
Chamber Orchestra** performing Kodály's
Missa Brevis  February 6 at 8:00pm •
DEPAUL CONCERT HALL

DePaul Jazz Ensemble with Phil Woods,
saxophone  February 23 at 8:00pm •
DEPAUL STUDENT CENTER • May 14 & 15 at 8:00pm •
& 10:00pm • *JAZZ SHOWCASE*

DePaul Opera Theatre presents *Hansel
and Gretel*  March 13 & 14 at 7:30pm •
March 15 at 2:00pm • *MERLE RESKIN THEATRE*

DePaul Symphony Orchestra's Annual
Joseph and Marie Grant Spring Concert
 May 20 at 8:00pm • *ORCHESTRA HALL AT
SYMPHONY CENTER*

For a listing of all DePaul School of
Music events, call 773-325-7260 or visit
<http://music.depaul.edu>



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