

## Coaxing the Students to Find Their Voices

**Edith Diggory, D.M.A.**  
Adjunct Faculty  
Music, Theatre and Dance

*recipients of the 2002 Teaching Excellence Award, to reflect on her teaching.*

*The Teaching & Learning Committee invited Instructor Diggory, one of two*

When one starts studying voice, one embarks on an adventure of self-awareness and self-understanding that is truly unique. I can think of no other discipline that requires such intimate self-knowledge and trust. Learning how to sing well involves understanding how the instrument works, a difficult task because it is internal; learning how the body works since it is the instrument; learning how the mind works-figuring out both how we learn and how we learn obstacles for ourselves; learning about and developing empathy for the human condition. People and their life situations are what we sing about. If we are going to connect emotionally with people when we sing, we have to connect emotionally with them in life.

My job, teaching people how to sing, is very much like that of the leader of a mountain climbing expedition-up Mt. Everest. I dispense information, I guide, I direct, I act as cheerleader, I protect, and, of course, I show students the right path. But they must do the work. To many students, learning how to sing is a very scary proposition because they have managed to get by in life without really tapping into or exposing to view their inner selves. When you sing in front of people, you bare your soul. A very risky business.

First of all, a student must learn how their vocal instrument actually works. It's quite simple really. Air moves up from the lungs and sets the vocal folds (also known as the vocal chords) vibration. This causes pitched sound. Most of

the rest of learning how to make good sound is learning how to get out of the way of this air/sound flow. This involves making the optimum amount of space in order to maximize the resonance potential of your body.

It is during this learning process that I find the most fundamental and profound changes in the students' approach to learning occur. Since the instrument, the voice, is internal the student must develop a keen awareness of what he/she is feeling and doing inside his/her own body. Very little about the voice is visible- only some symptoms. Developing this internal awareness is extremely difficult.



The second most significant shift in students' thinking occurs with the understanding that **making** the voice happen is counterproductive, **letting** it happen is the way to go.

Remember those "handcuffs" you had as a child made out of woven bamboo? You put two fingers in either end of this tube, pull and pull and the "handcuffs" get tighter and tighter. The way to release them is to relax and let go. This is much the same process as singing. But it sure doesn't sound that way when you listen to Pavarotti, for example. How can he just be letting go of all that sound?

Most students are astounded at the sound that comes out of them as they learn to let go. Many are unsettled. I have told many students, as their true voices have revealed themselves, that this process is a little bit like finding out that you were adopted. In an instant everything you thought you knew about yourself changes, and yet you remain the same person.

This part of the learning process, while I find it the most interesting and exciting, is only the beginning of what a singer needs to learn. There is, of course, the nuts and bolts process of learning to read music. Since everyone can sing, many singers with great voices have never had the opportunity to learn to read music. But once we get past these fundamental issues of making sound and reading music we have all of the interpretive issues to deal with.

### —INSIDE—

**2003 Educational  
Development Grant Proposals  
Page 2**

**2002-2003 Teaching  
Excellence Nominees  
Page 3**

## 2003 Educational Development Grant Proposals

The Senate charge to the Teaching and Learning Committee is "to promote the teaching and the learning process." In accordance with this charge, the Committee invites the Oakland University faculty and staff to apply for grants in educational development. Funding may be requested for projects whose primary purpose involves one or more of the following:

- Development and/or use of new teaching techniques.
- Development of a new instructional approach.
- Faculty development related to curricular responsibilities.
- Investigation of a teaching/learning problem.
- Evaluation of a method of teaching.

Individual awards will not normally exceed \$750. Student labor in conjunction with preparation of teaching materials may be funded. The Committee will not fund preparation for accreditation or program reviews nor will it fund faculty salaries or travel costs. The cost of food, food services and photocopies will not be funded. The grant is not intended to support the purchase of software or hardware unless it is incidental to the development of the educational process.

The deadline for applications is 5:00 P.M. on Friday, March 14, 2003

Please print or type proposals. Forms (four pages) are available in the Office of Grants, Contracts, and Sponsored Research, 520 O'Dowd Hall, or may be obtained electronically. To receive the form electronically, send an email to [wiencek@oakland.edu](mailto:wiencek@oakland.edu); please specify if the form should be attached (as an MS Word document file) to, or copied into the body of, the email reply. Completed proposals will be accepted in hard copy only using the Committee form.

Each award recipient must file a final report at the conclusion of the project describing its purpose, activities and outcomes.

Successful EDG proposals from past years can be reviewed in the Grants Office, 520 O'Dowd, 370-3222. Questions and comments may be directed to Joyce Wiencek, 370-3076, [wiencek@oakland.edu](mailto:wiencek@oakland.edu) or Jerry Compton, 370-2331, [compton@oakland.edu](mailto:compton@oakland.edu)

Applications will be accepted in the Office of Grants, Contracts, and Sponsored Research, 520 O'Dowd Hall, until 5:00 P.M., Friday, March 14, 2003 (the contact person is Barbara Kooiman). Applications require the signatures of the head of your unit and the appropriate dean. Please provide ten (10) copies of the proposal.

## 2002-2003 Nominees for Teaching Excellence Award

The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee is delighted to announce that 21 faculty members were nominated for this year's Teaching Excellence Award. The list of nominees includes include 13 tenured and tenure track faculty members and 8 non-tenure track nominations. The list of nominees and their departments follow.

### Tenured and Tenure Track Nominees

Djamel Bouchaffra	Computer Science Engineering
Shawn Lombardo	Kresge Library
Lynetta Mosby	Sociology and Anthropology
Stafford Rorke	School of Health Science
Karen Sheridan	Music, Theatre & Dance
Mark Simon	Management
Lorenzo Smith	Mechanical Engineering
Mary Stein	Teacher Development & Educational Studies
Craig Taylor	Chemistry
Flavio Varani	Music, Theatre & Dance
Jacqueline Wiggins	Music, Theatre & Dance
Margaret Willard Traub	Rhetoric, Communication & Journalism
Rasul Chaudhry	Biology

### Nontenure Track Faculty

Maureen Dunphy	English
Phil O'Dwyer	Counseling
Alan Epstein	Political Science
Linda McCloskey	English
Tushar Oza	Rhetoric, Communication, & Journalism
Mark Stone	Music, Theatre & Dance
Phyllis White	Music, Theatre & Dance
Mary Frances Zeppelin	Teacher Development & Educational Studies

The Committee wishes to offer **Congratulations** to all of the candidates for their dedication to **Teaching, Learning and Students**. The Teaching Excellence Award winners will be announced in April.

**Voices, continued**

Each time a singer sings a song, he/she re-creates a world - specifics of time, culture, gender, and personal circumstances. I often ask the students to describe to me who is singing, where are they and what just happened to them to make it necessary to sing this song? In order to answer this successfully we often get into discussions of literary interpretation and historical context. What might it have been like to be an uneducated person in Russia in the 1840's whose eighth child just died? Some of these answers need a little investigating, some need a little personal projection and empathy and lots of imagination.

As singers, of course, we deal with the issue of language constantly. What is the original language of the piece we are performing? Most trained singers become proficient singing in English, French, German, and Italian. Learning the correct pronunciation is not enough. One must understand the words as they go by. One must be able to supply a subtext - what one is actually thinking that colors the sound of the voice and the words one is actually saying.

My goal as a teacher, then, is partly to dispense information, but more importantly to help the students uncover their true vocal potential and to give them the skills needed to become excellent performers.

**2002-2003  
TEACHING & LEARNING  
COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Joyce Wiencek, Chair  
Susan Awbrey  
Jerry Compton  
Cynthia Miree  
Ravi Khattree  
Kay Palmer  
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**INSIGHTS & IDEAS  
NEWSLETTER**  
Joyce Wiencek (Editor)