



# Vocal Wisdom

**A decorated teacher hears the soul through the singing voice.**

Story Dale Smith  Photos by Nicholas Benner

**YOU'D THINK that Ann Harrell, an associate professor of music, would be the perfect person to sit with at her students' voice recitals. She could offer all sorts of insight into the rarified world of opera singing. Truth is, though, that when her students sing in her studio or in performance, she gets antsy. At times so engaged — swaying with the music, mouthing words from memory, even taking breaths at appointed times — she appears to be giving the concert herself from the 20th row. Especially early in her three-decade career, Harrell says, "I was anxious and wanted them to do well, and I was trying to make a name for myself."**

Harrell has more than made a name for herself. In 2014 alone, student Anna Bridgeman, BM '13, won the Music Teachers National Association's prestigious Young Artist Performance Competition. The accomplishment of training one champion would appear at the top of any teacher's résumé, says former colleague David Rayl, now director of choral programs at Michigan State University. Harrell has tied the national record of training four winners. Also in 2014, she won MU's top teaching award, the Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence. Says Rayl: "Ann is among the best of the best."

## A Teacher's Art

Teaching fine art singing, such as opera, requires a varied skill set. Students who set out to learn the material are in for years of study. Receiving the counsel of a great teacher accelerates progress and fosters greater artistry, Rayl says.

For Harrell to equip her students with the basic toolkit of a fine art singer, she must go far beyond

vocal technique to impart skills in acting, and understanding and pronouncing foreign languages. Singers must interpret not only the song text but also how the composer reacted musically to the poem. Then they must make the song their own.

The lengthy gestation of fine art singers has partly to do with physical development, says Harrell, who earned a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College Conservatory of Music in 1974 and a master's from the University of Texas at Austin in 1979. Female singers' technique and musculature typically don't mature until their mid-20s, and males ripen even later. Singing is athletic, but its most exacting physical aspects are internal and hence invisible. They include the diaphragm, a muscle under the lungs that flexes downward to draw in air; abdominal muscles; and the vocal folds in the larynx. All the bits above — throat, mouth, soft palate, tongue and lips — compose the vocal tract.

"It takes a lot of a certain kind of energy to sing well. But it's not like weightlifting," she says. A singer's energy is an air column that flows from lungs through vocal cords, which vibrate in the larynx. Those vibrations resonate in the throat and mouth with tongue and lips shaping the words.

Pop vocalists use amplifiers to fill concert halls with their voices. But for singers who project their voices from an opera stage, unamplified, to the back row of the balcony, native talent isn't enough.

## Forming the Formant

The key to that opera house sound is a type of resonance called the singer's formant, a ringy-sound-



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## Fine Fellows

Spring 2015 marks the 25th class of MU teachers to win William T. Kemper Fellowships for Teaching Excellence, which come with a \$10,000 bonus. Ann Harrell was one of the five to receive the award in 2014. Kemper, a 1926 graduate of MU, was a Kansas City banker and civic leader who worked to improve the human condition through the arts, education, civic improvements, and health and human services. In 1991, the fellowships program launched at MU with his foundation's \$500,000 gift to reward outstanding teachers.

ing boost in energy at around 3,000 hertz on the sound spectrum. It's not about volume. Because an instrument's size and shape generates its sound, fine art singers train the vocal tract into shapes that produce that ringing resonance. In contrast, orchestras' greatest energy is down around 500 hertz. That difference allows singers to make themselves heard in the frequencies above.

To create the special resonance, Harrell teaches a raft of techniques. Here's one example. To create an instrument with better resonance, the larynx must remain low. But in untrained singers, the larynx rises as pitch rises. To experience this yourself, with a finger on your Adam's apple, sing "ooh" on a low note, then slide up on "ee" to a high note. When the larynx rises, the resonating space gets smaller and produces high notes that sound thin and strained.

Harrell must foster vocal tones that the singers themselves cannot accurately hear. "Nobody sounds like what they hear inside their own head," she says. So, although singers must listen for tuning and blending with others, "to listen to the actual tone is a path to nowhere." Instead, they navigate by feel.

## Feeling the Sensation

Singing causes vibrations in the body. Try this: With lips lightly closed, hum until your nose vibrates. Then, push your tongue to the roof of your mouth and hum an "ng" as in "hung." The sensations differ because the shape of your vocal tract has changed. Particular sensations correspond with particular sounds, so Harrell teaches students to cultivate sensations that the best sounds produce. This skill takes the place of being able to hear one's own singing voice directly.

Harrell says the physicality of singing sometimes puts her literally in touch with students. "You can't teach somebody to sing without touching them." For instance, at a lesson with Bridgman, who now studies at Boston Conservatory, Harrell heard something amiss in her student's voice. Harrell knows the edgy sound that a tight jaw adds to Bridgman's singing, but this timbre was different and its source elusive. Harrell stood behind her, laid hands on jaw and neck, and asked her student to sing again. Her diagnosis: Tightness in some neck muscles was diminishing the vocal tone.

The intimate nature of such interactions aligns with the status of voice as the most personal of instruments. "When you come into a lesson and start to sing, it's your voice, your soul, and you are just throwing yourself out there to get criticized," says Kaitlin Foley, BS Ed '11, one of Harrell's former students who is vocal artist in residence at

Rockefeller Memorial Chapel in Chicago. "You feel so vulnerable. You need to have a teacher you respect and trust."

## Not Strictly Musical

So, in the world of fine arts and athletics, singers are something of a special case. Students stand exposed before audiences and bare their souls using techniques they cannot see in order to utter sounds whose true character they cannot hear. Learning to sing turns out to be an exercise in trust, a leap of faith that the teacher's every sensibility — musical, literary, linguistic, theatrical — is spot on.

And that is why the keystone of Harrell's teaching talent is not strictly musical. Students and colleagues alike cite her gift of knowing what each student needs and mustering the response that provides it. But perhaps most of all, she connects with students in ways that launch the leap of faith in their abilities. This trusting connection is the fertile ground that allows nascent artists to progress, often at remarkable rates.

"We laugh about my being part mom, part psychologist, part best friend and certainly part voice teacher," Harrell says. "I start out pretty no-nonsense because I want to make sure the line is established between student and teacher. Students are different, so I'm not the same person, the same teacher, with each one of them. Some need encouragement, and some need a little more tough love."

One of her champions, Neal Boyd, BA '01, who won the NBC show *America's Got Talent* in 2008, needed a lot of work on pronouncing foreign languages, for instance. And he was overly emotional on stage. "She was always telling me to suck it up or rein it in," says Boyd, a touring singer who is at work on his second album.

Another of her champs, Emily Bennett, BM '08, now performs with the Lyric Opera of Kansas City chorus and studies for a doctorate in vocal performance at the University of Kansas. When she arrived at MU as a freshman, she had limited musical background, Harrell says. "Her first year here was very hard, but she's a smart girl, and she had to figure out that she was smart enough to do it. So I needed to nurture her and allow her to feel good about herself."

Students who aspire to perform or teach in college have gone on to graduate schools at Indiana University, New England Conservatory of Music and Northwestern University. Those who earn a bachelor's degree in music education often teach in Missouri's public schools. The placement rate for MU's music education program is "near perfect," she says.



Sometimes Harrell takes students' problems home with her. "A student may not get the opera role they wanted, or they may have family problems, and I worry about them. That might seem like a downside, but to me it's the richness of life, being able to experience students' highs and lows along with them."

### Gut Check

Despite possessing warmth and lightheartedness in musical matters — Harrell has been known to dance in the kitchen with her husband to rock 'n' roll oldies — the native Texan can deliver a serious gut check. Her typical lessons are a steady flow of singing and feedback, so students vividly recall the discomfort when everything comes to a halt. They shuffle nervously through stretches of dead silence as the teacher considers her next move — perhaps a posture correction or advice on forming a better musical phrase.

Michael Snider, BM '02, a former student who went on to work in administration for the Metropolitan Opera Guild, recalls how Harrell's blue eyes could open wide with intensity. Her studio class, where students take turns singing solos while she offers instruction, was occasionally a crucible. At one point, Snider says, a student started singing and stumbled through some diffi-

cult language. "She stopped and just came apart. She said, 'I'm really sorry. I'm just an emotional mess. I had a fight with my boyfriend this morning.' And Mrs. Harrell said, 'Darling, I don't care if you had a fight. Your job right now is to sing.' "

Such lessons in professionalism are not a given in all programs, says former student Jason Forbach, BM '00, an opera singer cum musical theater performer whose career includes appearances in *Phantom of the Opera*. In 2010, he toured with the 25th anniversary production of *Les Misérables* and now appears in its Broadway revival. Forbach has watched numerous talented singers whose poor work habits fail them. "The ones who keep working," he says, "are the ones who are smart, well prepared and have a great attitude. Those are qualities that Ann instilled in us."

### True Voice

In the end, Harrell's quest is to cultivate whatever is special to each student's talent. "I work hard to find my students' intrinsic sound and encourage it. I'm always listening for the sound I think sounds true. The phrase 'speaking with your own voice' means saying what you really mean — but in singing it's more literal than that. I believe students will sing with greater honesty if they feel like they are singing with their own voice." **M**

† Harrell works with graduate student Brandon Brown-ing, BS Ed '12.