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**In Tune**  
WITH TODAY'S STUDENTS



Make  
It

# Sing

THE SIGN ABOVE DAVID RAYL'S DESK SAYS,

“When all else fails, bang head here.”

Anyone else moving at Rayl's frenetic pace would have smacked his head against it long ago. But Rayl, who directs choral activities, believes that, “If you have to get out of bed in the morning, you might as well be pumped up about what you do.” He's pumped.

On any given day, Rayl might grill a student in a doctoral defense, return a dozen phone calls, write the prose for a performance program, audition prospective students, teach, conduct and serve as mentor. In his office—the Babel of the music building, where the song of sopranos mixes with the blare of trumpets in the halls and constantly ringing telephones—he talks back to his answering machine, plays an imaginary piano on his desk, conducts music in the air and holds endless conversations with himself.

And he doesn't stop for lunch.

*Choral Conductor David Rayl  
coaxes hundreds of student voices  
into one melodious masterpiece.*

Rayl is utterly absorbed in his work. He directs the University Singers, a choral ensemble of 58 of the University's top singers. He also directs the Choral Union, a non-auditioned group of about 200 students, faculty and community members. The 40-year-old associate professor supervises the graduate students who run the Concert Chorale, the Chamber Singers and Hitt Street Harmony.

Rayl does it because music generates in him a huge emotional and visceral charge. As a boy, he dabbled in guitar—"That was sort of a Beatles influence thing"—and piano. The nun who taught him the piano used to play 78 RPM records of soaring classical music after his lessons.

"I remember having this tremendous physical and emotional reaction to that music," he says. "And I still have those peak, mountaintop experiences as a conductor. Not all of the time, but when it happens, it makes you feel like nothing else."

Rayl gets into the music with his whole body—grimacing with his mouth, twitching his hands and lifting his arms like wings as he makes percussion sounds. His entire body sways.

### COMMANDING PERFORMANCE

Here's Rayl rehearsing. First, he asks the choir to sing a portion of the music, then he talks through the rhythm. After that, he goes through the piece again with a "poh poh" sound in place of the words. Then the choir is ready to pull the components together.

Nope, Rayl thinks, it's not right. "Some of you are not singing in the center of the pitch," he tells one section. "Fix that."

Yet he commands without humiliating. "He is so positive in the classroom," says Deborah Carr, who earned her doctoral degree in educational psychology in May and who spent many hours observing Rayl's work for her dissertation. "Even in his criticism, it's always clear that it's for the best of the ensemble. The students



are so motivated because he pushes them to excellence, but he does it in a very positive framework."

And he does it with humor. "Altos, you're singing the wrong note," he says, and then mimics them as they look at each other accusingly. The class laughs.

When Rayl looks back on a rehearsal or a performance, he judges its success by how well all of the parts worked together. "But the thing about music is that you can't hold onto it. It's not a piece of art you can work on and work on and then

look at and savor. When it's over, it's gone."

### THE POWER OF STORY

For Rayl, the most exciting thing about teaching is continually creating new ways to motivate students. "When I first came here, I thought I knew everything I needed to know and was simply going to dispense this information. By the second year, I learned that I'd have to keep learning. You reach into your little bag of tricks and find that it is not sufficient, so you



David Rayl climbs rows of desks into the middle of the classroom and gets face-to-face with a student. Above right, a flock of choristers follows Rayl through the cacophony of the music building to his office.

have to dig deeper to come up with new and better ways to solve problems.”

Those new and better ways come through in rehearsals, where Rayl teaches more than just the notes. He teaches music history and theory, he teaches conducting, but most of all, he teaches the



poetry behind the music.

“You can tell them louder, softer, faster, slower, but that only gets you to a point,” he says. “You must tell them the

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story, give them the background and context. You must tap into their imaginations by talking about the poetry.”

For example, Rayl conducted a University Singers rehearsal as they prepared for a production of Arthur Honegger’s *King David*, based on the biblical story of David. “Picture this as a movie like *The Ten Commandments* or *Ben Hur*,” he told them. “These armies of Israelites, having triumphed over the Philistines, are marching into Jerusalem. They’ve killed most of the Philistines and the ones they’ve captured and enslaved are in chains and you’re pulling them along behind you as you triumphantly enter the city. Sing like that.”

And they do. The sound is robust and

victorious. And—coming from students packed into a lecture hall and wearing their baseball caps backward—it is shocking.

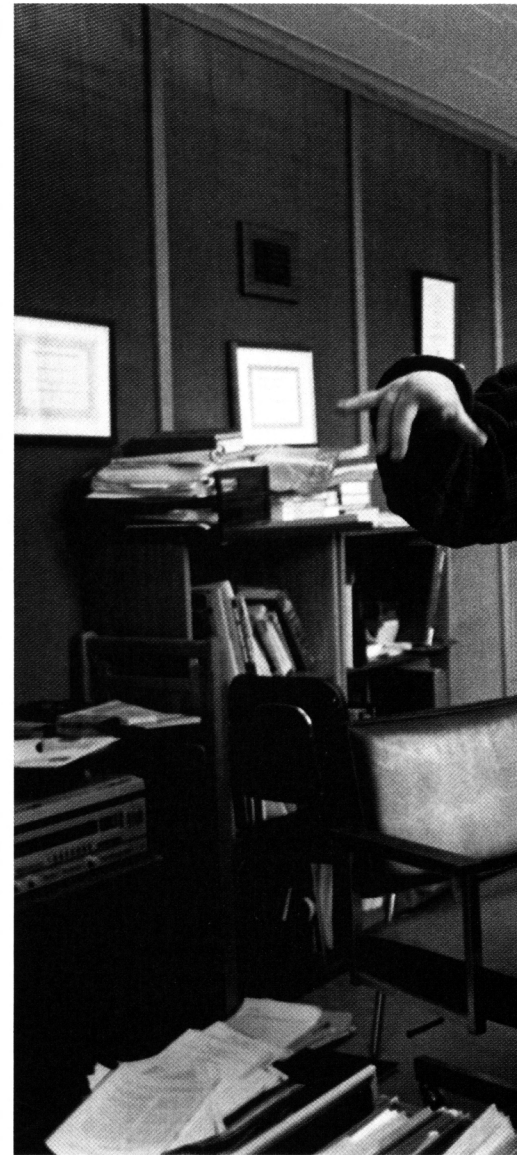
“People really want to live up to his expectations,” says former student Fred Kiser, who earned his master’s degree in music in 1994. “They get mad at him, too, but he’s one of those people who impress on you the desire for excellence. He’s the drill sergeant you curse at, but who pushes you to new levels.”

#### REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

Those levels are outstanding. The University Singers last year were invited to perform for the American Choral Directors Association meeting at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. A tape of the group’s performances was selected from among 288 entries from across the nation to fill one of only 16 spots on the program. Only five of those spots were filled by college-level choirs.

The group performs several times a year, and often is invited to perform at the Missouri Music Educators Association meeting. For Choral Union performances once a semester, Rayl conducts both the singers and the orchestra.

Rayl also teaches choral literature and



conducting. While preparing for the *King David* performance, two students took turns at the podium.

“OK, they’re all yours,” he says to the student-conductor. “I’ll just stand over here.”

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But he can’t be still. Even as he stands at the side of the room, his foot is tapping, or one finger is quietly conducting, and his body is twitching from barely contained motion.

One student is nervous about conducting in front of his teacher, so Rayl steps outside the door. Within seconds he pops back in and stalks along the last row of singers. He bunny hops down the steps, runs to the front, and poses with one hand under his chin, analyzing his student-conductor.

“Your stance is not powerful enough,” he says, demonstrating more forceful movements. “And you sopranos,” he says, turning around, “tone it down a little.”

Real-life experience is the best way to let students learn how to conduct, Rayl says.

“It is a challenge to be willing to give up podium time and let them do it, but it is the best way for them to learn how. It’s also a challenge to figure out what’s wrong and then figure out what they are capable of changing at that point.”

After class, he meets with the student-conductors. Did they feel the difference when they made a certain change? Did they hear the singers respond to their conducting?

“I try to find a way to move something a little bit differently for every phrase of the music,” he tells them. “Everything you do is going to affect the sound. I try to find open, expanding movements. Less trained singers tend to close down, so your motion needs to open them up. If I can do it, you can do it, because I’m not all that coordinated.”

Rayl has taught conducting courses at

*Left, Rayl leads the Choral Union in vocal warm-ups before a performance of Arthur Honegger’s King David. Above, Rayl conducts business his own way at the office.*

other schools. In Washington he caught the attention of University of Southern Mississippi choir director Tim Koch, who hired him to teach a group of young high-school choir conductors.

“He handled it with a great deal of humor and tact, yet he was still able to go right to the root of each individual’s major problem,” Koch says. “Some of the students were very receptive. Others were defensive, but he was able to disarm



them. All made major improvement in the short time he worked with them.”

#### THE MASTER TEACHER

Koch is not the only one who has noticed Rayl’s teaching talent. Rayl won an MU 1996 William T. Kemper Fellowship for Excellence in Teaching. His expectations are just as high in the classroom as they are in the rehearsal hall. For example, he expects his students in conducting and choral literature classes to write extensively. That’s something many weren’t bargaining for.

“He made sure there was a balance between knowing the music and knowing

how to be effective conductors,” says former student Kiser. “But he also insisted that we be good scholars and be able to write well and present information in a thorough manner.”

Rayl’s style has a long reach. “Even at the times when we thought what he wanted was unattainable, he firmly insisted that this was the standard we were going to go by to make great music,” says Chad Prewett, BM ’95, a vocal music teacher at Ladue Junior High School in St. Louis. “And now I find myself mirroring that standard in my own teaching.”

In the midst of preparing for the huge *King David* production, Rayl traveled to

Hattiesburg, Miss., to conduct a choir he’d never met for a piece that the composer hadn’t even completed.

Over the summer he served as music director of the Quad City Mozart Festival in Davenport, Iowa, and as director of the summer high-school honor choir at MU.

He is building a solid reputation for himself across the country. “It’s going to take a few more opportunities like what he had in Mississippi or Washington, D.C., where people get a glimpse of what he’s been doing,” Koch says. “He’s been doing his thing rather quietly on a national scale, but a lot of times that’s what good people do: They work hard at home until somebody notices. I think his national profile is clearly on the rise.”

#### TIME FOR REFLECTION

At least two mornings a week, Rayl slows down, stays home with his dog, Stanzi (named after Mozart’s wife), and studies the music. “I thrive on the frantic atmosphere, but you can’t learn music in 15-minute pieces,” he says. “I have to slow down and concentrate.”

Studying the music is one thing. But simply kicking back and enjoying it is not his style. When he’s off-duty, Rayl puts on CNN or NPR in the background—no doubt talking back to the correspondents—but he rarely listens to music at home. Rather, he’ll play some golf or tennis, or spend a few hours tinkering in the yard, and then have a few friends over.

“I really have simple tastes,” he says.

Simple. All he wants to do is sculpt sound, shaping every note and breath and space between. He coaxes and coaches, wheedles or whips—whatever it takes. And he creates an atmosphere where 300 singers and instrumentalists re-create the world’s greatest choral music. It’s all in a day’s work.

That rules out lunch, though. ✱