



Reginald Smith Jr., a UK sophomore vocal performance and music education major, is from Atlanta, Ga., and was a Schmidt Competition winner.

Photos: Tim Collins

UK Opera Theatre: Helping Students Develop Their Voices

Since 1995, UK has produced 15 district level winners of the prestigious Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, four regional winners, and one national winner, tenor Gregory Turay '96, who has performed 10 consecutive seasons with the Metropolitan Opera.

By Robin Roenker

When Daytona Beach, Fla., native Julie LaDouceur came to the University of Kentucky in fall 2008 to pursue a master's degree in voice, she knew how to sing. But she hadn't yet found her voice — or at least the best way to use it.

That knowledge has come quickly, though, since LaDouceur joined UK's Opera Theatre Program and began training with Professor Noemi Lugo.

"She has been the best voice teacher match for me that I've ever had," said LaDouceur, who received her undergraduate degree in voice from Stetson University. "She actually helped me discover my voice. Before I came here, I knew vocal technique. I knew how to sing, but I didn't really know what worked best for me."

With Lugo's guidance, LaDouceur shone last semester in lead roles as Ann Rutledge — believed by some historians to be Abraham Lincoln's first love — and Lincoln's sister, Sarah, in UK's world premiere production of the opera "*River of Time*," which tells of Lincoln's coming of age.

But LaDouceur's story isn't unique. Helping students find their voice is what UK's Opera Program is all about.

Ever since Everett McCorvey joined the UK faculty in 1991 and took over the opera program in 1996, the program has worked toward a single goal: *Becoming the best young artist vocal training program in America.*

Walk into the Schmidt Vocal Arts Center on Rose Street, where the opera pro-

gram just unveiled a new, state-of-the-art 1,500-square-foot rehearsal hall, and you'll see those very words posted right on the door.

But as the curtain fell on "*River of Time*" in October, Joan Rue, UK Opera Theatre program coordinator, remembers turning to McCorvey and saying, "Maybe we need another goal. I think we're there *now*."

On the Map

By many measures, the UK Opera Program has indeed already established itself as one of the country's best.

Consider UK students' success at the prestigious Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, viewed as the premier competition of young opera talent in the country. Since 1995, UK has produced 15

district level winners including UK doctoral candidate Eric Brown, who won at the most recent district competition held annually at Memorial Hall; four regional winners; and one national winner, tenor Gregory Turay, who graduated from UK in 1996 and has gone on to a world-class career, including 10 consecutive seasons at the Metropolitan Opera.

While Turay's star shines the brightest, several other former UK students have launched impressive performance careers in their own right: Brandy Lynn Hawkins is now performing with the Washington National Opera's young artist program; Corey Crider is at the Chicago Lyric Opera; Patricia Andress is a regular performer at Oper Bremen in Germany; Judd Perry is at the Hessisches Staatstheater in Wiesbaden, Germany; Norman Reinhardt is in Leipzig, Germany; and Reshma Shetty starred in the first Broadway tour of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Bombay Dreams* in 2006 and now has a leading role in the USA Network television series *Royal Pains*.

In addition, the program's Alltech Vocal Scholarship Competition, which awards free tuition and over \$300,000 in prize money and stipends annually to graduate and undergraduate winners, allows it to annually attract the nation's best singers to Kentucky.

"We've got students coming from all over the country, even from Canada," said McCorvey. "And we hope to begin bringing even more students from Europe and other places. I think the word about the program has gotten out."

This year, UK gained even more recruiting appeal when it lured renowned lyric soprano Cynthia Lawrence to join the faculty as the Endowed Chair for Vocal Performance.

Lawrence, known as one of America's best "singing actresses," has shared the stage with opera luminaries Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo and she stars often in principal roles, including acclaimed appearances as Lady MacBeth, Madame Butterfly, and Tosca at the Metropolitan Opera and other revered companies throughout the world.

It was a visit to UK's campus in late 2008 that convinced Lawrence to make the leap from full-time professional performance career to academia.

"When I worked with the students, I found such amazing talent here — and voices — and eagerness to learn," said Lawrence, who teaches at UK while continuing to perform actively.

Lawrence has a full teaching load of 30 students this semester, as she picks up students from McCorvey's studio, while he takes time off to prepare the opening and

closing ceremonies for the upcoming 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, and from Lugo's studio, while she's on sabbatical leave completing work through a Fulbright Grant in Brazil.



Photo: Tate Carlson

Cynthia Lawrence

Lawrence will be busy. But that's how she likes it.

"I like the intensity of the collective mind, of everybody sharing and working together and getting their mojo feedback from everybody," she said. "It's a very active thing, teaching and learning how to sing."

And while balancing her demanding dual-role as a teacher and performer, Lawrence plans to do her part to spread the word about UK Opera.

"The reputation is out there," she said. "If I have anything to do with it, people will have nowhere else in the world to think about going but UK."

UK celebrated the opening of the Schmidt Vocal Arts Center rehearsal hall on Rose Street.



Gregory Turay: Coming Home

Joining Lawrence as a new addition to the program's faculty this year is star alum Gregory Turay, who returned to UK to accept a position as artist-in-residence.

Over coffee, Turay spoke of settling into his new role as a teacher and of the positive changes the department has undergone since he began as an undergraduate in 1991, McCorvey's first year as a UK voice teacher.

Turay hadn't planned to become an opera star. A natural athlete who'd performed a bit in high school musicals back home in Wisconsin, he came to UK with plans to play baseball and sing a little on the side.

"We just got paired up together," Turay said of McCorvey's mentorship. "It was fate. From the beginning he said, 'You should be an opera singer.' I didn't know what opera was. I don't think I'd ever listened to it. ... But things took off really fast."

Since then, Turay's career has been every performer's dream: traveling the globe working with the world's best conductors and orchestras, selecting only the choicest roles.

But, he admits, it isn't an easy lifestyle in which to raise a family.

Every role has him on the road and away from his wife and three young children for as long as eight weeks at a time.

"The main reason I accepted the position at UK was to be home more and be more of a figure in their lives," he said.

Turay will continue to perform actively while teaching at UK. He also hopes to use his time here to complete his master's degree in voice.

This semester, in addition to a two-month performance run in France, Turay hopes to begin offering some master classes for UK students, sharing tips and techniques and his first-hand knowledge of the business side of the performance world.

"It's been a bit challenging to wear three hats" as a teacher, performer, and student, he said. "It's a lot to balance. ... But working with the younger kids, where they're so open and so willing to try new things, it's been really fulfilling."

With a little over a semester as a faculty member under his belt, Turay has been amazed at how far the department has come since his days as a student here.

"There are 125 vocal majors now. I bet there were 30 or 40 when I was here," he said. "I auditioned with a verse of 'The Star Spangled Banner' and 'Silent Night.' That's how I got into the program. That would never be accepted today."

Turay credits the transformation to the leadership of Everett McCorvey, who still serves as his voice coach and mentor. Even while Turay was based in New York, the pair talked at least weekly.

"You're always learning," Turay explained. "As opera singers you can't hear your voice the way everybody else hears it. ... You always need another set of ears, someone to say 'You're pinching here,' because you can't hear those things for yourself."

Turay admits that McCorvey's presence at UK was another reason coming back was so attractive. "Honestly, if Dr. McCorvey hadn't been here, I don't think it would have interested me as much," he said. "We've kept a real close friendship all these years."



Greg Turay moved the crowd during the Alltech Celebration of Christmas Carols in Victorian Square, receiving fabulous applause for his performance.



Students entertained visitors during the opening of the renovated section of the Schmidt Vocal Arts Center. Left to right are Holly Dodson, Holly Flack, Nicholas Provenzale, Arianna Afshari and Scott Thomas.

A Professional Experience

Everett McCorvey runs UK Opera Theatre like a professional opera company.

By design, he works to give students ample opportunities to work with professional directors, production managers, conductors, and set designers. He knows they'll be ready to take the next step after graduation — landing a role on a professional stage.

With 125 vocal majors, McCorvey feels UK's program is the perfect size.

"I'm not interested in being a factory. I want to be a high-quality, mid-size program that is selective in terms of the best young potentials out there," he said.

For graduate student Holly Flack of Minnesota, who's in the first year of her master's degree program at UK, coming to Lexington has been the perfect choice.

"There's such camaraderie between the coaches [the accompanists] and the voice teachers here," said Flack, who received an Encouragement Award at the district Metropolitan Council Auditions in November.

"Everyone is so well-versed in voice. It's a multi-talented faculty."

The last two years have seen the Opera program and its students soar to new heights with the premiere of *"River of Time,"* the performance of *"Our Lincoln"* at the Kennedy Center, and a recording of *"Hotel Casablanca"* in collaboration with the San Francisco Opera.

This March, the department will present *"Die Fledermaus"* by Johann Strauss. McCorvey plans to produce *"La Bohème"* in the fall and *"Porgy and Bess"* next spring. He plans the department's production schedule at least a year in advance, tailoring it to meet the needs of UK's students.

"We look at our student population. We figure out which student is ready to be highlighted, and we find an opera for that student," he said. "We think that's the healthiest way for the student and for the program to grow. Other programs just hire professionals to come in for their leading roles if they want to do some of the bigger operas."

That kind of support is what's made doctoral student Eric Brown, one of the winners of this year's district Metropolitan Council Auditions, so glad he chose UK for his graduate training.

"UK is a great place to really dig in and learn about yourself as a performer, as a person, and as a singer," said Brown, who's currently teaching voice part-time at Asbury College.

And, like Turay, Brown credits McCorvey with guiding his career.

"I really think of him as a father figure. And like with any family, there have been times Dr. McCorvey has had to pull me aside and say, 'This is a good idea. This is what you should do.' Or, 'Maybe that's not the best idea,'" Brown said.

"He teaches an approach not just to singing, but an approach to living," Brown said. "He is a 'living performer.' He eats, sleeps, and breathes this business."

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Upcoming Performances: UK Opera Theatre is scheduled to perform Strauss's *"Die Fledermaus"* in March at the Lexington Opera House. Its annual production *"It's a Grand Night for Singing!"* will be held in June at the UK Singletary Center. For more information, go to www.uky.edu/FineArts/Music/opera or www.ukoperatheatre.org

Schmidt Opera Outreach Program

Through a generous donation from William E. and Casiana Schmidt, the Schmidt Opera Outreach Program, UK Opera Theatre is helping introduce opera to young students throughout Kentucky.

“Our goal is to introduce the students to opera and to cultivate an understanding and appreciation for opera,” said Marc Schlackman, director of the program.

Each semester the outreach program’s touring troupe, including former UK opera students as well as opera graduates from other area colleges, performs as many as 60-70 times during a 10-week schedule. They crisscross the state, stopping at elementary and high schools.

Most of their elementary school shows are based on familiar fairy tales, like the “*Three Billy Goats Gruff*” or “*Little Red Riding Hood*.” They’re then set to classical music and infused with an important life lesson. The “*Billy Goats Gruff*” opera, for instance, is a story about bullying. And “*Little Red’s Most Unusual Day*” teaches about never talking to strangers.

High school crowds are treated to shows with a

history bent, like “*Freedom Trail*” which details African Americans’ struggle against slavery.

This spring, the group will perform “*Get Stuffed*,” a lesson in nutrition featuring singing fruits and vegetables.

To date, the program has brought opera to more than 100,000 students in 67 Kentucky counties. It’s the only arts program to have been named part of the UK Commonwealth Collaborative Program, one of 23 projects begun at UK to improve Kentucky’s schools, business climate, environment, health care, and lifestyles.

The performances always receive wonderful responses. One, in particular, touched Schlackman and his troupe. “Last fall, after performing “*Billy Goats Gruff*,” a teacher from Bardstown Primary wrote: ‘Upon discussing the message of the show — bullying — our very own class bully stood up and apologized to his friends.’”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to do,” Schlackman said. “We want to introduce opera to the children of Kentucky and make it accessible. But at the same time, convey a message to them that reaches them on a personal level.”



UK celebrated the opening of new rehearsal space in the Schmidt Vocal Arts Center on Rose Street. Speaking to attendees were Casiana and William E. Schmidt, whose generosity is responsible for the Schmidt Opera Outreach Program; Everett McCorvey, director of Opera; UK first lady Patsy Todd; and Ben Arnold, director of the UK School of Music.