

Minstrels and Maestros

Grads make perfectly pitched careers

By Jason Weigandt '00
Photos by Craig Terry

Jason Weigandt '00, an '01 masters degree candidate, participated in music and theatre before being bitten by the writing bug. Jason Weigandt '00, an '01 masters degree candidate, participated in music and theatre before being bitten by the writing bug.



The livin' is easy when Robin Wilson '80 sings the bluesy showstopper "Summertime" in *Porgy and Bess*. But the easy life in the spotlight comes with thanks to those who helped her get there. "I've been lucky to get great support from my family, my friends and my teachers," she says.

Wilson, a soprano and a professional opera singer, has starred in numerous productions including as Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschera* and Annina in *La Traviata*. She also sang as a soloist in Brahms's Requiem with The Manhattan Philharmonic. Her rendition of the song "Summertime" has been recorded on one of her two CDs with the Orchestra of St. Peter by the Sea, a music group she has performed with for four years.

Wilson started singing in church as a child, and thanks to great tutelage from her high school chorus teacher, she knew music was an obvious career choice. "I enjoyed chorus so much that I wanted to be a choral teacher," she says today from her home in Clayton.

For two years, Wilson studied at Westminster Choir College, but blending in with the crowd was not for her. "I discovered my voice was different than oth-

ers," she says. One of her professors suggested she pursue a career as a soloist.

She left the choir-exclusive Westminster and auditioned for Professor Eugene Simpson. "I had heard about him before I came to Rowan, so I was really excited to study with him," she said. At Rowan, she won a slew of vocal competitions.

After graduation, Wilson continued her studies at the prestigious Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. "The Academy doesn't charge tuition, so the competition to get accepted is fierce," she says. "Getting in there was a big boost for my career."

Wilson's next triumph came when she won the Metropolitan Opera Competition. She explains, "Winning the competition meant that the Met would support you financially for five years, allowing you to perform as much as possible." After performing in Philadelphia and New Jersey, Wilson headed to Europe to join the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria. "My work there helped me get an agent," she says.

As Wilson built her reputation in Europe, she frequently traveled overseas to participate in new performances. She eventually moved to Austria for seven months, bringing her two children with her. "The transition for my kids was very drastic," she says. "People in Austria weren't used to seeing black families, especially ones from the United States. People would just walk up to me and ask 'who are you?'" But despite the adjustments, she enjoyed living abroad. "They have a tremendous appreciation for the arts in Europe," she says. "Every town in Austria has an opera house. The people in our town looked at us like celebrities."

When she returned to the United States, Wilson joined the Orchestra of St. Peter by the Sea, a group run by her old

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elementary school teacher, Rev. Alphonse Stephenson. It marked the first of many opportunities to work with her former teachers. After college, Wilson kept in touch with Eugene Simpson. “He helped me learn Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony,” she says. “It’s very challenging for a soprano, but he helped me discover the right key for it.”

Wilson also ran into some old Rowan friends while recording a CD. “When you record, you usually each sing your part one at a time, so you often don’t see the other singers. But as I looked at the names of the other singers on the CD, I realized that every single one of us came from Rowan,” she says. “It’s a real testament to how strong the program is.”

Today, Wilson finds plenty of opera work to stay busy, but she also has some loftier hopes. “My ultimate goal is to sing for the Metropolitan Opera Company,” she says. And she’s ready for when the right agent is there. “No matter how big or small the performance might seem, I always give it my all,” she says. “You never know who might be in the audience listening.”



“We teach music, and we teach attitude,” says Denis DiBlasio ’79. “We want students to leave here with one of the best jazz educations in the country.” DiBlasio and George Rabbai ’79, former roommates and now faculty colleagues, have returned to build Rowan’s jazz department with the lessons they learned in the real world. “We don’t just teach music,” says DiBlasio. “We teach accountability.”

Both professors place a premium on students being on time and prepared for

class. “It doesn’t matter how well you play,” says Rabbai. “If you don’t memorize music and show up on time for every performance, no band will want you.” DiBlasio adds, “Music is an art, so you don’t get jobs through résumés, and you won’t find much job security. You get work through your reputation.”

DiBlasio and Rabbai spent most of their undergraduate days at Rowan together. They shared a Mansion Park apartment and played together in the music department. DiBlasio, whose first instrument was the clarinet in second grade, earned a degree in music composition from Rowan. While studying for a master’s degree from the University of Miami, he met a few members of the world-renowned Maynard Ferguson band. The band picked him up, and he spent five years traveling the world with them. He wrote songs, performed in concerts, conducted clinics and was featured on a number of Maynard Ferguson recordings. He eventually released nine jazz CDs of his own.

Rabbai started playing trumpet with his father, a professional trumpet player. “I started playing weddings with my dad’s band when I was in junior high,” explains Rabbai. “Truthfully, I wasn’t very good, but I learned quickly because of the constant exposure to professionals.”

After receiving his degree from Rowan, Rabbai started jamming with professionals again. He traveled with the Woody Herman orchestra and played trumpet in both PBS epic series “Baseball” and “The West.” He also performed with such greats as Rosemary Clooney and recently finished an album with Michael Feinstein.

Music took DiBlasio and Rabbai around the world, but the duo never moved too far from their Glassboro roots. “Actually, we should both give credit to our wives, or our girlfriends at the time,” explains Rabbai. “Denis and I traveled, but they stayed in the area. When we decided to settle down, we knew Glassboro was the right place for it.”

Teaching music at the University provided the means to stay. “I always



enjoyed teaching and demonstrating music,” says DiBlasio. “And the more things I learned, the more things I had to share.”

DiBlasio, who has worked with All-State Bands from 35 states and taught at Temple University and the Philadelphia School of the Arts, is now chair of Rowan’s Maynard Ferguson Institute of Jazz. DiBlasio’s friendship with Ferguson prompted the renowned musician to give the University permission to use his name for the jazz program. The University also has added a master’s program in jazz composition, and a music education degree with a jazz specialization. It’s all part of the process of establishing the department as one of the nation’s best.

Rabbai, an adjunct professor, knows his early experiences playing with professionals made him a better musician, and he tries to create similar experiences for his students. “We bring pros in and let the students hold their own against them,” he says. “Some handle it better than others, but everyone learns.”

DiBlasio and Rabbai are still learning today. “We both still play a lot,” says Rabbai. “I host a lot of clinics at Penn State, and I still pick up gigs in New York and Philly when I get the chance.” DiBlasio also travels on weekends to keep his skills sharp, because he knows “you teach better when you play.” Rabbai explains, “We want the students to know what we’re teaching them still works today.”

The road trips have a side benefit as a recruiting device. Each performance by the professors spreads the word on the Rowan program, helping the music department attract better students.

Rabbai says, “We want students to know this is a great place to learn music.”



Playing in a jazz band took Thom Gambino '64 around the world. While he now runs his own music company in New York City, he never forgets what living on the road taught him. “Every new place I would visit added a new dimension to my life,” says Gambino. “And it also allows you to see your home with fresh eyes.”

That perspective helped him envision Sunrise Artistries, Gambino's music publication company. The Trenton native founded Sunrise in 1972 to focus on both music production and promotion, “running the full gamut of music publications,” says Gambino. Sunrise offers a range of promotional services and advertising for artists, musicians and merchandisers.

Along the way, Gambino started the company to give his own work a fair chance at success. He says many publishers will reject a song and then produce a similar tune not too much later. Gambino wasn't the only musician battling the business end of the music industry. He found a camaraderie with other performers struggling to get their chance. Sunrise grew from that shared struggle, as much of his business comes through connections with friends.

Many of those friendships were formed when he was on the road. In 1970, he joined the Lionel Hampton Orchestra as an alto/soprano saxophonist, flutist and arranger, and toured the United States, Canada, Europe and the

former Soviet Union. His Soviet experiences, especially, taught many humbling lessons. “The American Embassy in the Soviet Union treated us to a dinner one night, and they told us the story of how Russian artists got together to create an art gallery in a field. The artists simply hung their paintings from clotheslines. But suddenly a bulldozer showed up and crushed all the paintings. The kgb came in and destroyed everything,” he says.

Witnessing Communism's oppression of the arts motivated him to take advantage of his opportunities in the United States. When he returned to the U.S., Gambino settled down with Sunrise. He picked up desktop publishing skills along the way, and combined them with his art background to create promotional publications and instructional music books.

He chose New York as his home base, fulfilling a lifetime dream of living in the Big Apple. After teaching music at Trenton and Pennington High Schools, Gambino knew New York would provide a jazz musician constant new gigs and access to other musicians. “Being in New York opened up so many opportunities,” says Gambino. “There's a tight network of people involved with music here and we all help each other out and collaborate on projects.”

Gambino's quest for a peaceful network of people also led him to create a foundation for world peace, unamo. The Italian translation of human being, unamo was inspired by the ideas of a 19th century Italian judge named Gaetano Meale. The judge, tired of throwing people in jail, devised a scheme for a world government, one that would promote harmony and equality among all nations. Gambino conducts the foundation's orchestra, a 26-piece band that performs songs from all cultures and nations with a jazz and fusion spin. It's the musical equivalent of the world harmony unamo hopes to create.

No matter what Gambino does, from playing overseas to producing a new song or conducting the unamo orchestra, he always draws from where his journey started, as a music education

major at Rowan. “Not a day goes by when I don't look back on what the professors taught me and really use it,” says Gambino.

They didn't plan on seeing their names in lights, but Karl Jurman '78 and Mary D'Arcy Jurman '77 didn't plan on failing, either. “When we started this we were young and fearless,” says Karl. Mary adds, “I felt like I had nothing to lose, so I went for it.”

Today, Karl conducts for The Lion King. He has been a conductor and pianist for many Broadway shows such as Beauty and the Beast and On Your Toes. Mary, a former Miss America runner-up, is an actress. Her resume includes Camelot, Singin' in the Rain, and Phantom of the Opera.

The couple met at Rowan and shared a life-long love for music. Karl, who started singing at age 8, was performing at weddings by 16, forming his own rock band, and starring in his high school musicals. He enrolled at Rowan as a contemporary pianist and moonlighted in the theatre department. “I came in 1972, part of the first gang to have classes in the brand new Wilson Hall,” says Karl. “I really came along at just the right time.”

Mary entered one year later and emerged as the University's first-ever



Professional Applied Voice major. Active in her high school theatre productions, she took so many theatre classes that she declared herself a theatre minor before the department even offered such a program.

Mary loved being on stage, but she planned to attend graduate school and become a teacher. To find scholarship money, she entered and won the Miss GSC pageant. That qualified her for the Miss New Jersey pageant, which she also won. Her talents carried her all the way to a second runner-up finish in Miss America 1977. Her pageant success gave her the funds she needed, yet it also reminded her how much she loved performing.

Mary moved to New York to study acting, and with a recognizable name, she quickly found work in commercials. "I was very fortunate to get the commercials, because it allowed me to support myself between plays," she said. "That's a freedom many don't have."

Karl was right alongside her. After playing every gig Glassboro offered, from concerts at Wilson and plays in Bunce to jam sessions with his rock band, Montage, in front of the Student Center, Jurman saw New York as his next musical goal. He landed in a cabaret, then got his big break when he was cast in the Broadway revival of *The Music Man* in 1980.

Mary received a role in the same show as a member of the chorus. But before rehearsals started, the woman tapped for the lead role of Marian the Librarian left for another play. Auditions reopened, and Mary's agent told her to try out for the role just to get audition experience. She wound up getting the part. "It was just amazing to get the lead in my first-ever Broadway show," Mary says. "I learned that everyone has doors open for them, but you've got to go through them when they are opened."

While Mary's talents have impressed many casting directors, she claims the happiest members of the Broadway community work to please themselves. "I learned the more you put into something, the more you get out of it," she

says. "In this business, you're always on trial and dealing with rejection. If you put in your best effort, you will be happy even if you don't get the part."

Now, Mary is taking a break from theatre life, singing with a charity organization, Holiday Express. The group performs for homeless shelters, AIDs hospices and the Special Olympics.

"Volunteering is the greatest thing I've done in my whole life," she says. "The whole atmosphere is very relaxed. I just love brightening people's day by singing."

Karl is grateful to Rowan for helping him excel. "The Rowan professors showed there's more to music than what happens in class. They showed me there's a great big world out there," he says. "I'm glad to be a part of the Broadway community." Mary also thanks the Rowan music department for "setting the foundation for everything I've done professionally."

The Jurmans, who live in Weehawken and Spring Lake, are living out a dream. But as much as they love seeing their names in playbills, they know there's an even greater satisfaction from being on Broadway. Mary says, "I don't know what the definition of 'making it' is, but I know all musicians get a lot of satisfaction from expressing themselves through their instrument. We get to do that every night, and I think that makes us pretty successful."

"A conductor is like the coach of a team," explains Sal Scarpa '76. "You're responsible for the direction, for coordi-



nating talents, for getting the best out of your group. But you're not even playing."

Scarpa, an accomplished conductor, teaches the Rowan University Orchestra. His experience in music started by watching his dad, an accordionist. Scarpa started playing drums in elementary school, and he picked up his current instrument, the trombone, during high school in Vineland. He enrolled at Rowan as a music education major, sang in the choir and opera and even conducted two opera performances. "I had a wonderful experience playing and learning at Rowan," he says. "The school really created a lot of opportunities."

After teaching part time in public schools for one year, Scarpa moved to New York and joined a Latin band. Once he started writing arrangements with the band, he decided to study jazz and contemporary media at the Eastman School. "I learned how to become a better writer, but I was also exposed to a lot of conducting," he says. "Everyone teaching there had classical music experiences, so they shared a lot about conducting."

Before Scarpa could finish his studies at Eastman, he joined the Paul Anka band and spent a year and a half traveling as a player. He returned when an Eastman professor told him about a teaching position opening up at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Scarpa quickly finished up his graduate degree and filled the position.

Scarpa eventually returned to his home area to play professionally in Atlantic City and Philadelphia. "My model was 18th century musicians who did it all. Specializing is a more modern approach," he says. While playing, he took a one-year teaching job at Rowan when Professor Eugene Simpson of the music department took a year sabbatical. At the end, he never left. "When Dr. Simpson was out, I conducted the choir," explains Scarpa. "He returned, but I stayed to conduct the wind ensemble, and then the orchestra."

Scarpa enjoyed the challenge of teaching and conducting where he originally learned how to conduct. "You

must do a lot of things here, because I not only have to conduct the students, but I have to teach them how to conduct too," he says. "You learn what motivates each person. You have to respect all of the musicians, but you must also realize where their individual talents lie."

As Scarpa sees it, playing in an orchestra is an entirely different experience than simply playing an instrument. "All musicians must have the ability to both play and think," he says. "You can't just play your notes, you have to listen and understand what everyone else is doing. It's a lot of information to compute at once, but it's necessary to be successful in an orchestra."

Scarpa finds conducting such a challenge that he doesn't even get to enjoy the full extent of his performance. "When you're out there conducting, you're only thinking about what you have to do for the musicians. It would be nice to take a second and soak in what's happening, but in my experience, just when you back off and think everything is going well, something goes wrong," he laughs.

Scarpa keeps his skills sharp by conducting professionally. He works with the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Bel Canto Opera Company in Philadelphia, and the Atlantic Brass Band, a troupe that rehearses at Rowan and travels around the country for competitions.

Whether he's conducting professionals or students, Scarpa always enjoys bringing out the best in performers. "I like being of service to others, enabling musicians to turn great music into genuine musical moments," he says. "There are times when it's all just magical and the music takes off on its own, and that's when it's most rewarding."

Despite writing more than 800 songs, lyricist and composer Gene Grier '68, '70 probably couldn't have written the tale that places him where he is today. The Rowan distinguished alum-

nus and Grammy-nominated songwriter didn't even plan on going to college at first. "Dr. Pfeleger recruited me during high school, and I received a scholarship from the school," says Grier. "But I just didn't think college was for me."

Grier dropped out after one semester, but after working as a truck driver and a Santa Claus, he realized he should pursue his talent for music. "I essentially learned about all the jobs in the world I wouldn't like to do," says Grier. He came back to Rowan and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in music education.

Today, Grier is president of his own lyric and music writing and production company, Music Unlimited. Now living in Michigan, he also owns several publishing companies that focus on music



publications and works as a freelance songwriter. He specializes in jazz and sacred music and wrote 45 songs in 2000 alone. His most recent children's musical became his ninth to be considered for a Grammy nomination. For 23 consecutive years, he received an award for outstanding songwriting from the American Society of Composers Publishers and Authors.

Grier takes the lessons he has learned and teaches them to young musicians at his own voice-training camps in his Vocal Arts Academy at Rochester University in Michigan. "I don't do that for profit—I do it to keep in touch with young people," he says.

Like the children he teaches, Grier started playing music at a young age.

Playing instruments in school helped him develop his talent, but his career took off when he recognized music's complexity. "It wasn't until I started to really sit down and think about music that I realized there was a lot more to it than just playing a guitar and singing a song," he says.

Grier learned to become a composer and a friend. "Music is a people industry," he says. "You build friends through your work ethic, so it's good to work hard and always treat people as you would like to be treated," he says. "It's very difficult to get published as a songwriter, and I learned that having friends at publishing companies helps." Grier keeps those same philosophies in his current business pursuits. "I have to look at music as a business now," he says. "I always operate with a strong code of ethics."

Keeping in touch with friends helped Grier get started in the music business. After graduating college, Grier spent a few years teaching in high schools, and continued to perform, mostly as a singer. His contacts led to a job offer with Philadelphia's J.W. Pepper Company, the largest music distributor in the world. He worked his way up to vice-president and general manager of the company, and then kept moving to where he is today.

Grier attributes much of his success to his Rowan experiences. "People like Dr. Miller and Dr. Pfeleger formed lifelong influences on everything I've done," says Grier. His credentials have led him to visit and lecture at hundreds of colleges and universities, "but if I had to do it all over again, I would still pick Rowan for my education," he says.

At any given moment across the country, whether it's a church choir, a children's ensemble or a jazz group, Grier's talent can be heard. His success makes his decision to pursue a music career even sweeter. He says, "I'm grateful for the opportunity to do what I love for a living." ■