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Ann Aubry
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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In Concert



**From the classroom to the stage,
School of Music professors express a
passionate commitment to their art.**

(Above. Assistant Professor of Voice Carren Moham performs on the Westbrook stage.)

By Ann Aubry

Silence descends from the auditorium stage, a lush symphony of sound now resonating into memory.

A lonely cello emerges, uniting those strands of memory into a single musical consciousness.

Nina Gordon is evoking the tragic hero of Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote* at the season premiere of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra's Masterworks Series. When her cello (and Don Quixote) have breathed their last, dozens of feet on the stage begin to stomp — the musicians' applause forming a bass counterpoint to the hand-clapping crowd.

"I am satisfied," Gordon says a few days later, sitting in her Presser Hall office between lessons with her students.

Gordon is among several full-time faculty members at Illinois Wesleyan's School of Music who have found personal harmony in simultaneous roles of teacher, scholar, and performer. They don't describe these as necessarily conflicting demands: They say each element strengthens the other, and despite an oftentimes grueling schedule, they say they can't imagine their lives any other way.

That doesn't make it easy.



School of Music Director Mario Pelusi

“It’s a significant challenge for any professional artist in a university setting,” says Mario Pelusi, who is director of the School of Music. “How do you continue to compete in the performing world — with those who are most often full-time performers — while also teaching courses, giving individual lessons, conducting research and serving on committees? It’s a real balancing act.”

Yet without universities, music today would be left to the commercial marketplace — where little might survive that could be called “serious” music, Pelusi says.

“Prior to modern universities, artists were supported by patrons — the wealthy or monarchs who wanted to pay for musicians or painters. That’s how you survived and produced your artwork. The modern-day patron is really the university. But it’s a trade-off.”

At some universities, Pelusi says, there are occasional faculty members who don’t embrace their end of the bargain — who are motivated by a steady paycheck, not the earnest desire to teach.

“Those we have here at Illinois Wesleyan are those who are stimulated by being at the University. Teaching is why they’re here. They’re devoted to it — but they’re also performers.”

That list of committed faculty performers goes well beyond those profiled in this article. They include Susan Brandon, who shared the keyboard with colleague (now emeritus) R. Dwight Drexler in premiering compositions for two players on one piano, and ensemble directors Roger Garrett (conductor of the Symphonic Winds), Steven Eggleston (Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra and the Wind Ensemble), J. Scott Ferguson (director of Choral Activities), Vadim Mazo (conductor of the Heartland Philharmonic), and Thomas Streeter (conductor of the Jazz Ensemble and Jazz Lab Band). These professors have toured the United States and abroad, all while upholding Illinois Wesleyan’s reputation for dedicated teaching.

As the following sampling of Illinois Wesleyan’s talented musician-teachers illustrates, it’s a combination that sustains them.

A Touch of Diva

Outside, it’s a relatively warm Indian summer day. Inside her Presser Hall office, Carren Moham has a space heater fighting off the excess chill of the building’s air conditioning.

A soprano whose audiences have included a United States president and international opera aficionados, Moham’s reputation as Illinois Wesleyan’s resident “diva” proceeds her. But she quickly puts a new acquaintance at ease, punctuating her conversation with a self-effacing laugh.

Moham cannot remember a life without singing. As her mother would tell it, she was singing (in accompaniment to television commercials) before she actually talked. Mastering far more sophisticated material while quite young, she won district and regional Metropolitan Opera auditions in Tulsa, Okla., and Kansas City, Mo., at the age of 19.

A singing career wasn't far behind. Unlike musicians who make teaching a "fall-back plan" from the start, Moham came to the University after first spending years as a successful full-time performer. She made her professional debut with the Cimarron Circuit Opera Company in Norma, Okla., her European debut with the Breman Piccolo Opera, and her vitae includes a host of performances with various opera companies and orchestras, including Opera Français and the National Symphony Orchestra.

Not only did she grow tired of waking up in hotels — sometimes walking into walls in the dark because she didn't know where she was — she also came to feel that she wanted to share with others some of the knowledge she had gained.

Rapidly following this realization was the achievement of her D.M.A. from Ohio State University in Columbus in 1997. Moham's areas of doctoral study remain the subjects of her scholarly research: vocal pedagogy and black music studies.

Deriving from the latter, her 2002 IWU CD, *Sonnets on Love, Rosebuds & Death*, is a collection of songs by African-American women. She hopes proceeds will enable her to release another recording giving voice to a collection of Negro art songs — out of print since 1942 — that she discovered in the Library of Congress.

"I'm trying to get some of these songs out there — get them published, get them sung — because they're really quite beautiful," she says.

Her continuing interest in vocal pedagogy — particularly techniques for restoring vocal abilities after trauma — was prompted partly by her own experience following a hairline fracture to her jaw caused by an accident in 1992. After spending time with her teeth wired together, she had to recover from terrible jaw tension while singing.

Today, her work as a vocal pedagogue includes continuing therapy with a now-graduated student whose high-soprano range was nearly wiped out by asthma medication administered in an emergency room.

Although being a faculty member creates a world of committee meetings and other obligations, Moham's teaching schedule also affords her summers to pursue research and travel to related conferences.

Teaching also connects her with additional layers of her own identity.

"There's a part of me that just *loves* the look when (students) get something, when it just sinks in and they have a breakthrough, and they've *got* it! I just love that. I love to perform, but I also love teaching.

"One of my students last year won the Metropolitan Opera auditions (Sarah Nicholas '03 was a district winner in Champaign, Ill., in 2002). And the feeling that I had when they called her name. ... I remember the feeling when *I* won — and *I swear* I was so much more elated when they called her name."



Carren Moham's CD (above), *Sonnets on Love, Rosebuds & Death*, incorporates her research in black music studies.

Moham likes that she can offer students up-to-date, firsthand knowledge by remaining active herself in the performing world. Her impressive career highlights include a performance of “Songs by African-American Composers” at a National Endowment for the Arts Gala attended by then-President and Mrs. Clinton — but she quickly changes the subject when this event is brought to mind.

“You go and you sing for something like that; it’s great — lots of adrenalin, very exciting — but the plain fact of the matter is, you’re not going to see those people the next day. Definitely the most difficult singing I do is when I sing right here; my students are out in the audience and my colleagues are out there.”

Such performances can be not only “nerve-wracking,” she says, but also difficult to prepare for. After a full day of teaching, her instrument — her voice — is usually shot. Unlike colleagues who are instrumentalists, she simply cannot indulge in practice until 11 p.m.

Obstacles aside, having an academic career has enabled Moham to be more selective in the performance venues she accepts. She can winnow offers down to the type of performing she truly loves: more intimate concerts where she is responsible for her own performance, as opposed to opera, where many variables are beyond her control.

“I love doing concerts; I like being on the stage — by *myself*, with my accompanist,” she says, her tone taking on a hint of humor, as if acknowledging this sounds diva-esque.

It turns out she enjoys how the University environment offers her another dimension besides diva.

“I’m not always that person who has on the glittery gowns and the wigs and all the makeup,” she explains; sometimes she’s the person with an open door to students to talk about “whatever.”

“I like the fact that I have the opportunity to see this other side of myself and be something that’s not all the glitz. ... I tell people all the time, ‘I *am* that, but not all the time.’

“And I’m definitely *that*,” she says, smiling. “Must have some diva.”