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The Chorus Newsletter

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Better Bindings

You may have noticed that the score for the Sea Symphony does not lie flat.

If you want to have one that does lie flat, go to Staples, where we were told the price is under \$4.00, or Kinko's where they will convert your perfect-bound score into one that has a spiral binding and will lie flat; one that will be much easier to handle. We did that, and they were able to make the change in just a few minutes. They charged us \$5.79 including tax at Kinkos.

Thanks to Ellie Briscoe for tiping us off on this idea.

— ed.

Elixir of Love

Debbie Peetz tells us that she is in the cast of Elixir of Love, Donizetti's Comic Masterpiece. The Victorian Lyric Opera Company will present performances on February 15, 16, 22, and 23 at 8 P.M. and February 17, and 24 at 2 P.M. at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theater, Rockville, Maryland. Tickets are \$20 for adults and \$15.00 for seniors/students. Debbie says she is involved in a dispute with another character over the affections of a third character. Sounds interesting!

Christine Hagan

[For those members of the chorus who are new this semester, we give you an introduction to our accompanist, Christine Hagan —ed.]

Christine Hagan, the NOVA Community Chorus' accompanist, started piano lessons when she was six years old. She wanted to be able to play, "In the Wigwam," the piece her big brother David was learning. When she was in high school, she "went pro," playing for a local church, and giving piano lessons instead of baby-sitting.

Chris became adjunct faculty at NVCC in the early 1970's, when the music department was in the Bisdorf Building, with some classes at Baily's Crossroads.

"We had four practice rooms and one classroom, and recitals were held in the cafeteria, with the vending machines in the background," she says. After Mark Whitmire joined the faculty, at one point his usual accompanist (wife Virginia) was not available for a recital, so he asked Chris to play, and that was the beginning of their long working relationship. She has played for his Saturday repertoire classes and private classes and has also accompanied other singers, such as Rex and Grace Gori. As Dr. Whitmire says, "Chris makes the very difficult look easy. Without her, all of our jobs would be harder...."

By Ellie Briscoe

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Musical
Humor

The
Alto



MUSICAL HUMOR

Ad libitum — Free Advertising

Bourree — The person being bored

Con brio — With cheese of a certain sort

Courante — A tart fruit

Etude — Modern slang greeting

Fine — To pay a speeding ticket

Grave — Where everyone ends

Liberamento — memory of freedom

Lied — Told falsehoods

Missa — Young female

Mit — A Massachusetts college

Morendo — Very long codas

Nach — "of course"

Poi — An Islander's food

Score — How to win a game

Sino — Referring to China

Tanto — Lone Ranger's side kick

Real musical terms — phony defs.

The Alto

So, just how did it come about that the lowest female voice in the chorus is called *alto*, the Italian word for "high" from the Latin *altus*?

As with the origins of the term *tenor*, we travel back to the medieval origins of polyphony. The first independent part added above the *cantus firmus* was referred to as *contratenor altus* simply because it sang counterpoint against and above the Gregorian Chant melody. As polyphony continued to develop and more vocal lines were added above and eventually below the original melody, the name *alto* stuck to the one just above the tenor line and, in time, to the voices that sang that part. Alto parts in choral literature generally call for a range from the G below middle C to the second F above it, although there are many examples of composers asking altos to sing higher.

Outside of choral music, this voice is generally called *mezzo soprano* (half soprano). More important than the difference in range, however, it is a mezzo-soprano's somewhat darker vocal color that distinguishes the voice from sopranos. The roles of Carmen in Bizet's opera or of Delilah in Saint-Saens *Samson et Delilah* provide good examples of a true mezzo soprano parts, relying as they do on the rich, warm, sultry qualities of the voice. Mezzo-sopranos are not classified with the same hair-splitting specificity applied to tenors. There are mezzos with lighter voices who have cultivated the flexibility required by Mozart and Rossini; these often sound much like second sopranos and share much the same range. Others have the larger, darker voices essential to the music of Verdi and Wagner. Verdi's later operas call for a heftier, more dramatic *mezzo-soprano* for roles including Azucena in *Il trovatore* and Amneris in *Aida*. Outstanding examples of great mezzo sopranos would include Marilyn Horne and, of course, Grace Gori.

Those voices that are most comfortable at the lower reaches of the alto range and which are yet darker in color are called *contralto*, perhaps the rarest of all voice classifications. Some contraltos are even more comfortable singing the tenor line in choral music. Not surprisingly, there are few operatic roles written specifically for contraltos. The sorceress Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, the earth goddess Erda in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, and the daughter-in-law-elect Katisha in Sullivan's *The Mikado* call for contralto voices. In the 20th century, Marian Anderson stood out as an example of a true contralto.

Contributed by Bill Brown, bass

The Chorus Newsletter welcomes news, articles and photographic contributions. Are you planning a recital? Tell us when and where and we will get the word out. Call the editor, Bob Trexler at 703 978-9171 or e-mail at Rctrex@aol.com.

The Chorus Newsletter contains information about and for members of the NOVA Community Chorus. It is privately published monthly except during June and July. The College has no responsibility for its content. Members are encouraged to contribute articles and news about musical offerings and musical topics to Robert Trexler, editor and publisher, at Rctrex@aol.com