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**Big voices, big honors – UW-Stevens Point’s opera program is making its mark**

Written by University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point

Just like the big voices that fill the stage during a performance, opera is making a big name for itself at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point on the national and international level.

From ranking highly in national competitions for its annual Opera Workshop performances to study abroad opportunities at a prestigious international academy, the voice program is setting the stage for student success, said Matthew Markham, a professor of voice in UWSP’s [Department of Music](https://www.uwsp.edu/music/department-of-music/).

“Our voice area is really strong,” he said. “We have fantastic talent, with about 50 students enrolling by audition each year. It’s exciting to see our students grow as artists through creative productions and professional experiences, and then be recognized for it.”

UWSP’s 2023 Opera Workshop production of “Dial M for Moore Menotti” won second place in the National Opera Association’s nationwide competition for undergraduate opera productions, as well as was named a 2024 national finalist for both The American Prize in Opera Performance within the college/university division and The American Prize Ernst Bacon Memorial Award for the Performance of American Music.

The show was created as a 50s radio broadcast, connecting three different operas with commercial jingles that highlighted five local businesses who sponsored the show. Mathew Buchman, a UWSP professor and director of jazz studies, wrote the music and lyrics for the jingles. Kristin Ditlow, a faculty member at the University of New Mexico, assisted with vocal coaching and piano accompaniment and percussion student Matthew McEwan created sound effects.

“It was a clever production,” said Markham. “It gave more students roles to sing, and audiences loved it. Our students also told me how much fun they were having with the show.”

In addition, more than 20 UWSP students have attended the prestigious International Lyric Academy in Vicenza, Italy, during the summer since 2018, when Markham was invited to teach as a voice instructor. That first year, eight UWSP voice students were accepted through an audition process.

Students attend the academy for 3-4 weeks, taking master classes and performing with high school, college students and emerging professionals from across the world. They also immerse themselves in Italian language and diction, which helps them with Italian operas.

“The ILA program has been impressed by UWSP students,” Markham said. “They represent themselves well and are recognized for their preparation, performance, talent and work ethic.” UW-Stevens Point has also recruited students from ILA attendees, he said.

“Studying at ILA gave me a deeper understanding of diverse operatic repertoire and practical performance experiences which are essential for a successful career in opera, but also as a future teacher,” said Jaden Richards, Montello, a choral and general music education and voice performance major. “The connections that I made with fellow students, faculty, and industry professionals have opened up so many future doors for me.”

Irene Wilson, a choral and instrumental education major from Hartford, said attending ILA this summer gave her the opportunity to learn from a variety of skilled voice teachers with different perspectives.

“It shifted my entire approach to singing and elevated my sound in a way I had never experienced,” she said. “I feel much more confident now in my ability to learn and perform a show quickly, meaning I’m more prepared for future opportunities. I can’t wait to start implementing what I learned and sharing that new knowledge with my classmates.”

Zak Palmer, a December 2023 vocal performance graduate of UW-Stevens Point, also attended this summer and enjoyed the networking opportunity it provided, as well as the chance to perform in “The Magic Flute.”

“The connections with people all over the U.S. and parts around the world helps us further with employment as well as references,” he said. “I also felt much more comfortable with the process of international travel. Having a production as prestigious as ‘The Magic Flute’ on my resume may help me with opportunities in the future.”

The students hope to help with the UW-Stevens Point Opera Workshop’s performance of “The Magic Flute” at UWSP on April 10 and 13, 2025. Audiences will recognize some of the music in the production, which relates to growing up and appeals to people of all ages, said Markham.

Many UW-Stevens Point opera students go on to attend master’s programs, necessary for a career in performance, Markham said. It gives them additional training in voice, acting, languages, theory and music history as well as the additional time needed to develop their voices as they develop with age.

To sing opera, students need to not only have vocal skills, but also those in musicianship, linguistics and acting. There is also the “It Factor,” he said, the stage presence needed to bring the songs to life.

“Opera is really storytelling,” said Markham. “It portrays the human experience in a big way and takes audiences out of the mundane. You will laugh, you might cry. You will relate to it.”

One of the best things about the voice and music program at UWSP is a near conservatory-quality education at a state school price tag, said Wilson.

“All of our professors are extremely knowledgeable in their fields, and they care deeply about their students. They want to see each of us succeed and do everything in their power to get us there.” This can include impromptu “therapy sessions,” she said, or introductions to challenging music to make you a stronger vocalist. “The best part is, at the end of the day, the music department feels like a second home and my colleagues and professors feel like my family.”

For Palmer, opera is fulfilling because it offers him the opportunity to give to others.

“Satisfaction comes from entertaining people who are seeking a distraction from the real world,” he said. “If people come up to me and say they had a positive connection to the performance, it means the world to me.”

Markham recognizes the hard work it takes for his students to perform opera.

“As I watched the Olympics this summer, I was reminded of the tremendous work ethic, talent, skill, passion, discipline, and determination that goes into sports,” said Markham. “Singers are vocal athletes, and coming out to see an opera means that you get to bear witness to students who are pursuing this craft, and who are executing skills of the highest artistic and technical demands that are required of opera. It is an elite art form.”