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Vocal point

If a singer's voice needs a tune-up, Marlene Arden is just the woman for the job

Story and photos by Pam Ashley

Given a choice, most people would elect to stand naked in the town square rather than sing a song in public. Keep your shirt on, urged Lake Havasu City voice teacher Marlene Arden.

"Most everyone who has the desire to sing can learn how to sing, and sing well. It takes time and practice, but it can be learned. It's never too late," Arden explained.

"I've worked with a lot of people who never thought they could sing, mostly because someone told them when they were younger that they couldn't sing. They say things like, 'My choir teacher told me I was terrible,' or 'My parents said I had an awful voice.' Sometimes the trouble is more of a confidence problem than a bad sound problem."

Those who believe they are tone-deaf truly are not, she added.

"If you know you're off-key, then you're already halfway there. Recognizing that you're not hitting the notes means you can learn to find them. Part of the work we do is train your ear so you won't be off-pitch," Arden said.

Once students are singing in key, Arden can help them eliminate other bad habits, such as sounding nasal, volume control or poor phrasing.

"A lot of people sing too loudly, they rush through the song or their voices are wobbly. They can learn to control the quavering, so there's not so much vibrato. That kind of pseudo-operatic over-singing is like too much frosting and not enough cake," she said.

"Some of my students come to me because they want to sing at a wedding or some special occasion. With other people, singing is a secret desire — or they just want to learn a couple of nice ballads so they can do karaoke once in a while. We can do that, but the real point is to help them to build a better tone and keep it consistent — to develop their own natural sound."

Now in her third year of training with Arden, Nicole Matheson said finding her own sound was pivotal to her growth as a vocalist.

"For years, I'd sing along to songs on the radio, but all that time, I tried too hard to sound like them, to sound like whoever was singing a particular song. I still sing along, but now I sound like me. It's been a lot of work, but I'm happy with the progress I've made so far," said the 22-year-old soprano.

Matheson has appeared in local musical theater productions, including "South Pacific," and most recently, "The Wizard of Oz." Her lessons with Arden have been a genuine confidence-builder, she noted.

"There was a time when I wouldn't sing in public. I didn't think I could ever do it because I didn't feel like I had a pleasant-sounding voice," Matheson recalled.

"She was timid at first, but Nicole had a good ear for music and was willing to work hard. She has such a beautiful, free and natural sound now," Arden said proudly.

Improvement is what drives many students to seek out Arden's expertise. Richard Barron, a 16-year-old Lake Havasu High School senior, is putting himself on track for a career in musical theater. His Havasu credits include roles in nine GraceArts live theater productions, including playing the Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz."

"I work with Marlene to polish my skills — my sound, my timing, my range. I want to be able to get a piece of sheet music from a director and know what's going on," Barron said.

Arden boasted that Barron has significantly widened his range, which she described as somewhere between a baritone and a tenor. The versatility is critical to Barron's aspirations.

"I'm auditioning next month for U of A's (University of Arizona) musical theatre department. I have to do two songs and two monologues," he said. "I want to improve as much as I can, to be ready for my audition."

Improvement is also on student Mali Lombardi's to-do list. The 15-year-old Lake Havasu High School freshman appeared in the local "Wizard of Oz" production and intends to build on her performance resume.

"Mali's working on building her range and her stamina and projection," Arden said of the young soprano.

"I've been working with Marlene since the beginning of the school year. I practice about an hour every day, and I can tell the difference. I can hit higher and lower notes, and hold out notes longer," Lombardi said.

Arden's youngest student, 7-year-old Felisha Schooley, usually records her lessons for practicing at home. In addition to being an aspiring songwriter, the second-grader at Jamaica Elementary School said she has a fairly simple reason for taking voice lessons.

"I don't want to sound ugly. I want to sing pretty," she said.



After doing a series of warm-up exercises, student Nicole Matheson (left) and her vocal teacher Marlene Arden work on the finer points of "I Couldn't Be Happier" from "Wicked." Below, student Richard Barron sings the Tin Man's song, "If I Only had a Heart," from "The Wizard of Oz."



Music-Music-Music

If she's not teaching, Arden is performing in Havasu and beyond

Marlene Arden was practically born with a song in her heart. Her musician parents — dad was a big band leader in the Chicago area and mom was a classically-trained violinist — weren't surprised their daughter chose a career in music.

"I got my bachelor of music degree from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. After that, I spent five years (on the faculty) at the Sherwood Conservatory of Music Chicago. I've been teaching voice for almost 30 years," Arden said.

Helping others learn to sing better is actually a side interest. First and foremost, Arden is an accomplished performer.

"For years, I performed with my own band — in the U.S., Europe, Southeast Asia and on cruise ships. Then about four years ago, I met Phil Conti," she said. Conti is a Lake Havasu City-based pianist who performs and also teaches piano.

The fortuitous meeting had been arranged by their respective booking agents — Arden needed a pianist, Conti needed a vocalist. One song became two, two songs became four, and soon the duo became a couple both on and off the stage.

Arden relocated from Chicago to Lake Havasu City.

"We seem to stay busy performing — mostly cruises right now, and the occasional performance in the Havasu area. We also just made a CD," Arden said.

The 13-song CD — "S Wonderful" — showcases Arden's smoky three-octave range and Conti's considerable skill as an accompanist. The easy-listening mix features favorites such as Cole Porter's "Night & Day," Van Morrison's "Moondance," and the Gershwin's brothers' "S Wonderful."

As of this writing, Arden and Conti are at sea, performing aboard a cruise ship that sailed from Australia last week. The route will take them through the South Pacific and on to Japan.

"It's a fun way to make a living," Arden said. "But we always look forward to coming home to Havasu. Performing is great, but we like teaching, too. I've got my voice students, Phil has his piano students — for us, it's like living in the best of both worlds."

To contact Marlene Arden or Phil Conti, visit www.marleneandphil.com.

- Pam Ashley



Now in her third year of training with vocal coach Marlene Arden, Felisha Schooley, 7, has been inspired to pen a few songs of her own.