



"I'm so committed to finding opportunities for St. Olaf students," says Janis Hardy, a fixture in the college's Music Department since 1985.

# ALL WITH WORLD'S A STAGE (LYRIC)

BY CARL SCHROEDER '05 PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

**Y**OU NEVER KNOW what the free-spirited Janis Hardy will sing next. Equally at ease performing Mozart arias with the Minnesota Opera, crooning Irving Berlin tunes on *A Prairie Home Companion* or premiering new works with VocalEssence, she has built a reputation as one of the Midwest's most accomplished and versatile mezzo-sopranos.

And yet, Hardy may be most admired for a role she created: teacher and mentor of St. Olaf voice students for more than 20 years.

"Janis brings a professional point of view to St. Olaf," says Music Department Chair Dan Dressen. "Her teaching reflects an innate knowledge and experience from her many years of actively performing across the United States."

Although she is not a St. Olaf graduate, Hardy's Ole roots extend back several generations. Family legend has it that her maternal grandmother, Velda Edwardson, made a vow after attending a performance of the St. Olaf Choir in Owatonna, Minnesota, in 1909. "She was pregnant with my mother at the time," says Hardy, "and she said, 'My daughter is going to be in that choir.'"

Gladys Edwardson Rice '31 did just that, becoming the first in her family to attend college. She later taught voice lessons out of her home in the northern Minnesota town of Roseau. There, Hardy first explored her love of music, crediting her mother as her first great influence. "I've always been surrounded not just by singing but by the teaching of voice," she says.

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Hardy attended St. Olaf as a music student for the 1964–65 academic year before leaving to pursue professional opportunities. Soon after, she found herself in the right place at the right time to secure a position with the fledgling Minnesota Opera (then known as Center Opera). "The premise of that company was to change the nature of opera to where drama and music were equal partners," Hardy says, a philosophy she retains today.

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Hardy performed in more than 30 productions during 12 years with the Minnesota Opera, taking on leading roles in many world premieres. Concurrently, she was a frequent guest performer with the Minnesota Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and with dozens of other major music organizations around the country. She also served as an alto soloist at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis under the direction of Philip Brunelle, with whom she also lent voice talents to a new public radio program hosted by the young writer and humorist Garrison Keillor.

Today, Hardy laughs about the frenetic, loosely scripted early days of *A Prairie Home Companion*. “Philip and I would be sitting backstage, and Garrison would hand us a piece of paper and say, ‘We want you to improvise a scene about a Russian immigrant and his wife coming to New York,’ and we would do it.”

Hardy returned to St. Olaf in 1985, this time as an adjunct voice instructor. Two years later she was invited to join the faculty full time, an offer she accepted knowing it was a “big decision, since it is very difficult to be a full-time singer and a full-time teacher.”

Despite her responsibilities at St. Olaf, Hardy has managed to maintain a robust performing schedule. Recently that has included leading roles at the Frank Theatre and Theatre de la Jeune Lune, solo work with VocalEssence and a starring role in the annual Sopranorama musical review at the Southern Theater with singers Maria Jette and Molly Sue McDonald. Imagine the music of Willie Nelson and the Boswell Sisters paired with Renaissance motets.

It’s all part of the variety show that is Janis Hardy’s life. “There are absolutely no lines in her world,” says P.J. Lambrecht, a writer and longtime friend who first met Hardy when they performed together in the Manitou Singers in 1964. “She lives music and loves music and spreads music.” Fittingly, music rekindled their relationship years after they lost touch. Their daughters, Traci Lambrecht ’89 and Louise Hardy Matson ’89, met in the Manitou Singers in 1985, the same year Hardy started teaching at St. Olaf. After Traci became one of Hardy’s first voice students, the two sets of mothers and daughters became a close-knit circle of friends. “It’s like [Janis] has unlimited amounts of love, and she gives it freely,” says the younger Lambrecht, who now writes novels with her mother under the name P.J. Tracy.

Hardy strives to create new ways for St. Olaf students to perform on the lyric stage. In addition to directing an annual Broadway review almost every year since 1991, she played a lead role in a 2000 campus staging of Stephen Sondheim’s notoriously difficult musical drama *Sweeney Todd*. Along with Associate Music Professor James McKeel and Assistant Music Professor Justin Merritt, she currently is coordinating the spring 2006 staging of two student-composed one-act operas.

Four decades after arriving at St. Olaf as a student and 20 years after returning as a teacher, Hardy again finds her past and present mingling. When her mother passed away in 2004, Hardy and her siblings, Louise Rice Mackay ’64 and Jerome Rice ’59, requested that a portion of the memorials be directed to St. Olaf’s lyric stage program. “My mother loved putting on shows and she loved coming to things at St. Olaf,” says Hardy, “and so my brother and sister and I thought this would be a great memorial for her.”

This year, those funds have supported the addition of new lighting equipment in Urness Recital Hall that will make the space more viable for mixtures of music and drama.

Hardy maintains a voice studio of about 30 students and teaches “Acting for the Lyric Stage,” among other classes. An expert in vocal technique, she also offers students real-world advice in establishing professional musical careers. “It’s a tenuous proposition to support yourself as a singer,” she says.

“The only people who should try to do it are people who can’t imagine being happy without at least trying it.”

Hardy’s passion for music and her presence and voice have left their mark on Minnesota’s classical music scene — as well as on St. Olaf College.

“Janis Hardy is a singer who loves to communicate with people,” says Brunelle, founder and artistic director of VocalEssence and a St. Olaf Regent. “With her beautiful voice, her marvelous wit and her wonderful way of sharing herself with an audience, Janis is truly one of our region’s treasures.” ■

Carl Schroeder ’05 is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer and composer.

#### GETTING PERSONAL

Associate Professor of Music Janis Hardy has given voice lessons at St. Olaf since 1985. She lives in Golden Valley with her husband, Al Hardy, who is retired, and their two dogs, Bear and Jack. Although none of their four adult children, Frank, Louise ’89, Christopher and Maren, has pursued a musical career, family singalongs remain frequent holiday occurrences. In her spare time, Janis enjoys spending time with her family, gardening, going on long walks and reading “voraciously.”



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