

# Adopted By a

BY DIANA HARTLEY  
Photos by Robert Taylor

# Divva

The atmosphere is electric with excitement and anticipation when Marilyn Horne makes her twice-yearly visits to the OU School of Music to impart to aspiring vocal performers her expertise, wisdom and encouragement.

Marilyn Horne, widely recognized as one of the great singers in opera history, knows what it takes to make it in the highly competitive field of vocal performance. After 26 years as a leading lady at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and 39 seasons with the San Francisco Opera, she is sharing her experience, wisdom and advice with aspiring singers at the University of Oklahoma.

As a visiting faculty member, Horne travels to Norman twice each year to work with students through intimate private lessons and small studio master classes. Although she works with a handful of other universities, OU students enjoy "favorite child" status in the time and attention they receive from the legendary performer and teacher.

Her level of expertise inspires her students. Each year, she listens to thousands of singers, and with her, first impressions do make a difference. She evaluates how they look, how they are dressed.

Then she listens for the sounds of the voice—quality and properties. Next she looks for expression as they sing. Finally, she just loves a big personality.

She definitely has one.

Yet Marilyn Horne is not known as a temperamental diva, but as a hard-working team player. In his book *Great Singers on Great Singing*, author Jerome Hines says that what strikes him most forcibly is that there is no single outstanding attribute that propelled Horne to stardom, but rather a happy amalgamation of persistence, energy, intelligence and, of course, a great voice.

She is comfortable, friendly and down-to-earth. "I've been described as a no-nonsense, get-right-to-it person and I've been told people find that to be refreshing," says Horne. "I'm direct."

Since she began working with OU students in 1998, she has made it clear to them that the profession is not easy, that many great singers





Her master class performance completed, Durant graduate student Leslie Mangrum gets a pointed critique from Marilyn Horne, whose twice-early stints at OU are legendary.

never make it. "The best advice I can give young singers is they need to learn *how* to sing. I tell them they must learn the technical aspects before they start worrying about *what* they're going to sing," says Horne. Breathing is the foundation of singing, she insists. Master breathing, and everything else will come faster.

Horne mastered that and more. Her phenomenal technique, coupled with her rich, deep mezzo-soprano voice, has given pleasure to audiences throughout the world.

#### From Performer to Teacher

Horne was born in Pennsylvania and studied in California. Her debut was as Hata in *The Bartered Bride* in 1954, with the Los Angeles Guild Opera. In 1970, she made her Metropolitan Opera debut, as Adalgisa in the opera *Norma*.

The transition from performer to teacher has come easily to Horne. The public master classes she teaches during her OU visits are part recital, part lecture-demonstration and part motivational seminar. The learning experience is unparalleled for young singers appearing before an audience that includes one of the biggest names in opera. The skin gets thicker, and the voice grows stronger as Horne critiques their performance.

OU President David Boren recognized

told one student, "I'm going to have to strain to come up with something. You sound so beautiful." These positive words come with a profound level of understanding of the music itself. She speaks about the piece as if she was actually there when Franz Liszt wrote *Oh! Quand j'edors* in 1842. "Do it with focus, not so much hair," she says. "And I would like to hear you sing it at the piano level he wrote. I think he wanted it sung much softer.

"See what I'm making you do. It's more exciting that way, don't you think? Grab your air and go. Think higher. You have the relationship to your instrument."

Her private lessons begin with students demonstrating breathing. She looks to see if they have developed any bad habits. She tells singers they have to put their body into singing. She can tell when she has gotten through to a student, not only by what she hears but also by what she sees. Once a student puts it all together and gets the right sound, Horne pronounces it "just great."

And the really good students get it. Consider Laura Compton, who comes to Norman from the tiny western Missouri town of Appleton City, population 1,300. A third-year master's student in voice at OU, she also was one of 22 singers chosen to study last summer at the Music Academy of the West. Horne is on faculty as vocal program director at the Santa



**"The best advice I can give young singers is they need to learn *how* to sing. I tell them they must learn the technical aspects before they start worrying about *what* they're going to sing."**



Catlett Music Center's Pitman Recital Hall may be full of spectators, but for participants in Marilyn Horne's master classes, such as Edmond graduate student Garry Sloan, with accompanist David Bates, the focus is on the opera diva who dominates the stage.

Barbara, California, institution. "Laura had a fantastic summer, worked very hard and took giant steps," says Horne. "She is quite special. It will be good to watch her and see where she goes."

During the OU master class with Compton, Horne could barely contain herself, looking like a proud parent as she watched Compton sing what Horne calls "a test piece." She has taught *Sein wir wieder gut* by Richard Strauss numerous times, and when she saw it on the list Compton was willing to sing in her master class, she told her "if you had the guts to put it on your list, then I'm going to make you sing it."

Horne saw a new level of confidence in Compton. "Laura knew she could nail that aria. Singing that song gave her a big dose of self-belief. It's really what every one needs in life."

#### Building A Great Program

Horne believes the University's voice program is beginning to produce some excellent opera and classical singers. "I know because I've given lots of private lessons since first coming here," says Horne. Her commitment to teaching OU's students is mainly because of her friendship with President Boren and Molly Shi Boren.

"I can't remember the exact first time I met them. I think it was in Guthrie when I was performing a concert. I remember

they were instantly friendly and likeable. We just clicked." Some time later when she was in Washington, D.C., for a concert at the White House, her visit included a grand tour of the Senate chambers and capitol area by then-Senator Boren. "We've been friends ever since."

When he asked her to become a visiting faculty member, she could not say no. "He has made tremendous physical and academic changes since coming to OU. You can build wonderful buildings, but you also have to fill them with great teachers. And he has done both. He has made it quite clear that OU will have a major opera program."



"See what I'm making you do. It's more exciting that way, don't you think? Grab your air and go. Think higher. You have the relationship to your instrument."

Horne is extremely impressed with the renovation of Holmberg Hall as part of the new Donald W. Reynolds Performing Arts Center and believes its completion will be a tremendous boost to all the arts at OU.

The director of OU's opera program, William Ferrara, agrees. "Her presence, along with the opening of the Reynolds Performing Arts Center, presents us with the opportunity to build one of the finest opera training and performance programs in the country."

He considers Marilyn Horne to be one of the greatest singers of our time and is honored to have her on the faculty. "She brings great prestige to our voice



Music students continue to benefit from an early friendship formed between opera star Marilyn Horne, left, OU President David Boren, right, and First Lady Molly Shi Boren.

and opera program and helps attract students from all over the country. She is also a wonderful teacher—a great musician, interpreter and technician.” Ferrara could not be more pleased that Horne has taken a personal interest in the development of OU’s opera program.

### Lady Luck

Although her career is the result of hard work, Horne also believes in luck. “I’ve been lucky in so many ways, and you’ve got to have a certain amount of luck,” she says. She feels lucky at age eight to have found a wonderful voice teacher in her little Pennsylvania hometown of 10,000. Then her family moved to California when she was 11, and she studied with a series of teachers before her last formal teacher at the University of Southern California, William Vennard.

But perhaps the person who had the greatest influence on her career was her former husband, Henry Lewis, who gained wide respect as a conductor, instrumentalist and pioneer in the classical music world. Horne’s “teacher and right hand” taught her about expression and

what to do with it. “He really put me in gear,” she says. “Henry made the difference between a really good career and a great career.” Horne believes conductors make great coaches, and although Lewis died in 1996, she says she can still hear herself saying the exact things he always said to her.

The students and faculty at OU are reaping the benefits of Horne’s career, including the influence of her former teachers. These influences continue to shape voice students at OU today.

Marilyn Horne’s association with the University and its outstanding voice program were the reasons California native Joanna Taber chose to pursue her master’s degree at OU. “Studying with her is amazing because of the wealth of knowledge she has and all the wonderful stories she tells from her

past,” says Taber. “She’s encouraging, but realistic. She’s passionate and wants you to do your very best and nothing less.”



**“You can build wonderful buildings, but you also have to fill them with great teachers. And he has done both. He has made it quite clear that OU will have a major opera program.”**

Taber admits she was a little nervous the first time she met Horne. She wanted to be perfect for her, but had to remember it was a lesson. “I wanted to make a good first impression, but I was kind of star struck . . . she is Marilyn Horne. I even rented a DVD of her from one of the Ed Sullivan shows. She is amazing.”

### Worldly Influence

Horne’s influence crosses international borders as well.

Celia Zambone, a December 2004 graduate with a bachelor of musical arts in voice and English, came to OU from Nice, France, as an exchange student. Arriving in Norman to study English for a semester in the fall of 2000, she saw the level of education offered through OU’s School of Music and extended her stay.

She has worked with Horne in private lessons and master classes and confesses she also was nervous initially. “Here I was singing in front of this livingencyclope-



It is difficult to tell who enjoys her master classes more, Marilyn Horne or her OU students. From left are accompanist Kayla Paulk, graduate students Joanna Taber and Leslie Mangrum, Horne, and graduate students Garry Sloan and Rebekah Kirtley-Ambrosini.

dia of vocal technique and vocal literature," says Zanbone. She had heard Horne was hard-working and found that to be true, but she would not want it any other way. "We are not inviting her here to tell us that we are wonderful. We need her knowledge to challenge and nourish us."

Challenge she does. Horne tells young singers they need to be 50 percent athlete and 50 percent musician. "I want to sing opera," says Zanbone. "Marilyn Horne has taught me it is a hard and competitive business. I am committed to focus on singing to the best of my ability and to getting closer to this goal every day as I enjoy myself making music."

### Making an Impact

Kenneth Fuchs, director of the School of Music, terms Horne an inspiration. He says it has been exciting to see the growth in quality at the school since she became a visiting guest artist. "She is one of the nicest people I've ever met. She's a fabulous artist with a nice personality—two things that normally don't go together," says Fuchs with a grin. He stresses the importance of students being

close to a great artist like Horne, who represents the reality of music as a profession. "A career in music is hard work, and the insight she gives to the students is a great gift."



*"People ask me when are you going to retire? I say retire to what? As long as I feel good and continue to like it, I will teach."*

Dolores Leffingwell has been working with students at OU for 14 years as a voice professor. She recognizes the impact Horne is having on students but also stresses the benefit to faculty. "She works with a dogged determination. She doesn't pause to relax. She moves from one technical incident to another, always weaving through the lesson the real goals which she constantly works toward," says Leffingwell. "It's just wonderful teaching, and it helps all the voice teachers."

She describes the impact on students as startling. Because students from this region have not had strong role models for operatic or classical singing, Marilyn Horne's influence is extraordinary. "Most of these students haven't had strong musical backgrounds, but they have beautiful voices," says Leffingwell. "It's been difficult to get them to see their potential. But when you have a magnificent artist



For Joanna Taber, left, a hug from Marilyn Horne, with the warmth and encouragement it symbolizes, makes the hard work of her disciplined teaching sessions worth all the effort.

working with students, they want to develop discipline and confidence. This kind of artistic presence, with the history of Marilyn Horne's performance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has just catalyzed these students to really work and accomplish more than they thought possible."

When speaking about her own accomplishments, Horne says quite humbly that she has won a few Grammys. She mentions recognition from the city of Milan, Italy, and the Legion of France, longevity medals from the Metropolitan Opera and the Los Angeles Guild Opera, and lots of honorary doctorates. And while she is quite honored by all the attention, she says the most meaningful accolades are those that honor her lifetime achievement, including the Kennedy Center Honors and the National Medal of the Arts.

Although she has been inundated with honors, she reached a point in her life—her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1993—when she decided it was time to give back, but it was difficult deciding how. She kept returning to the idea of recitals. "I've sung hundreds, but it is truly an endangered

I've worked my whole life for it."

And she would not mind one little bit if her legacy includes

being a great teacher, mother and grandmother. Her future plans include two things—grandchildren and teaching. She has had many offers for high-level positions. "I've been sounded out, but teaching—for me, is just a blast," she says. "People ask me when are you going to retire? I say retire to what? As long as I feel good and continue to like it, I will teach.

"I've been coming (to OU) for several years. I'm seeing tremendous progress, and it just warms my cockles," says Horne. "This is all about them. We all want them to achieve their potential."

The little girl from the small town of Bradford, Pennsylvania, says you never know where you will find a great teacher. And you never know where you will find a great talent. In Marilyn Horne, the University has found both.

*Diana Hartley, APR, '83 pr, '95 m joun, is a freelance writer, editor and public relations consultant.*



*"I've been coming (to OU) for several years. I'm seeing tremendous progress, and it just warms my cockles," says Horne. "This is all about them. We all want them to achieve their potential."*