



Practicing What She Teaches

By [Jody Record](#), Media Relations September 10, 2008



During the near-hour interview, Darby Tench breaks into song at least three times.

Not an actual song; just sung words. As though she can't hold back. And she can't. Tench—she goes by Leicht here at UNH where she teaches Italian—is an opera singer. Classically trained, she has been singing since she was 15 years old.

After getting a BA in English and a master's degree in Italian, friends began telling Tench she should go into music. Instead, she went to Yale and got her Ph.D. in Italian. Then in the 1990s, she took up singing in earnest.

"I'd read one of those mid-life transition books that said, 'if you were independently wealthy, what would you do?'" she says. Tench is her stage name.

So, she cobbled together a few part-time jobs (serving coffee; working in a video store), got herself a voice teacher and began booking gigs.

"I was doing any kind of work to support my music," Tench says.

She took gigs wherever she could get them: in lounges, bars, restaurants and churches. For about five years she appeared regularly at the Mount Washington Hotel and Resort in Bretton Woods. It was there that she began to develop her comedic side.

"I started to realize I could get so much satisfaction doing the comedy first and then hitting them with Madame Butterfly," Tench says.

Her role model was Anna Russell, a singer and comedienne who was popular in the 1950s and '60s. Now, Tench's main goal is to bring people to opera through comedy.

"But I also want people who really love opera and know it because they keep me honest," she says. "My aim isn't only to do comedy but to be good enough and broad enough—everyday enough—so people who don't know opera will enjoy it.

She employs almost any technique to make that happen, including a rap song she wrote while trying to figure out the plot to an opera she was going to do.

"I used to think opera was so ridiculous. I thought the whole world of opera was stupid," she says.

Then she connected with her voice teacher, Bradley Pennington, founder and artistic director of Boston Bel Canto Opera. He is also the former teaching assistant to Signor Arrigo Pola, voice teacher of Luciano Pavarotti.

Before then, Tench wasn't sure if she wanted to focus more on jazz or opera singing. But meeting Pennington made the difference. A talented pianist, he accompanies her at most of her shows.

"He knows everything about everything," Tench says.

She also credits working at UNH with helping improve her singing.

"I sing better because of what I do here. I know how to read a poem, how to find the meaning in the song," she says. "And I get so much support from my colleagues in my department. Some of them even come to my shows."

The next step is to find an agent so she doesn't have to do all her own booking and publicity.

"There's so much to juggle. But it's worth it," she says. "Gigs force me to practice."