



Photo by LIFE staff

Melrose Randell at the piano in her Lacombe home: teaching students to find their own voice

Respect your pipes, says voice coach

By LIFE staff

If you're under Melrose Randell's tutelage, best not to utter a sharp curse in her presence.

Not that the former nun is sensitive to harsh language. Rather, she's concerned about the jarring impact such exclamations can have on delicate vocal cords.

A professional voice teacher, Randell has been helping people develop their singing voices for 25 years. That includes teaching them the dos and don'ts of voice care.

"One of my responsibilities is to protect my students' voices," she explains. "You can permanently injure the human voice."

The Lacombe resident dissuades her pupils from cheer-leading, or singing outdoors in cold weather. Even coughing and the strain of weightlifting are discouraged.

For the average shower-singer, such restrictions might seem excessive. But few have Randell's knowledge of — or respect for — the human voice.

"When you study voice, you study a musical instrument," she says. "That instrument is your own body."

Randell teaches her students proper breathing, including stance and body alignment, as well as how to articulate sounds using their facial muscles, tongue, palate and teeth.

"Hundreds and hundreds" of students have raised their voices under her guidance. In addition to offering private voice lessons, she led choirs at Camille J. Lerouge and Notre Dame high schools until her retirement from teaching in 1997. She also taught voice at Red Deer College from 1999 until earlier this year.

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Voice: We're aiming for a clean, clear sound, teacher says

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Born and raised in Jamaica, Randell served as a nun for 12 years before leaving her convent to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in English at the Catholic University of America in Wash., D.C.

After returning to Jamaica, Randell met her husband Bev — a worker with the Canadian International Development Agency. She moved to Canada in 1969, but went back to Jamaica with Bev in 1971.

"That was when my music thing took off," remembers Randell.

She enrolled in the Jamaica School of Music and eventually earned a diploma from the Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music, with a speciality in teaching voice.

"I just had it as my hobby," she says of her musical training.

In 1976 Randell moved back to Alberta with Bev, and soon after joined the staff at Camille.

Despite being an English teacher, she took it upon herself to start a choir at the high school and continued to guide it over the years.

Retirement from the academic world has allowed Randell to devote more time to vocal instruction.

Her students range from raw beginners to graduates of university music programs and even professional singers. With all, the first priority is to teach them proper form.

"What we're aiming for is a clean, clear sound," she says, adding tone, texture and dynamics then follow.

Some students arrive able to mimic the likes of Whitney Houston or Christina Aguilera. But Randell urges them to develop their own "unique voice," which she likens to fingerprints. Her ultimate reward, she says, is to hear them develop that voice.

"It gives me goosebumps."
Sometimes she'll urge a particularly gifted student to move on; perhaps to study voice at university or train under a vocal coach in a larger centre. Many she'll help prepare for examinations through The Royal Conservatory of Music, not only helping them develop their voices but teaching them how to walk on and off a stage, bow and even dress.

You don't have to be a virtuoso to enjoy singing, insists Randell.

"Anyone who can talk can sing. It's a wonderful thing for people to pursue."

One limitation on the students Randell will accept is age.

"A singer's body is not sufficiently ready for the kind of training I give until 13 or 14 years," she says.

In addition to English, Randell speaks French, Spanish, Italian and German, and reads Latin.

"As a singer you must, must, sing in other languages," she explains.

She also belongs to the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the Voice Care Institute and the Canadian Voice Care Foundation, and is president of the Alberta Music Education Foundation and past-president of the Red Deer branch of the Registered Music Teachers Association.

"You have to stay fresh as a teacher; you can't go stale."

Some students arrive able to mimic