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Vladimir Chernov

Professor Extraordinaire

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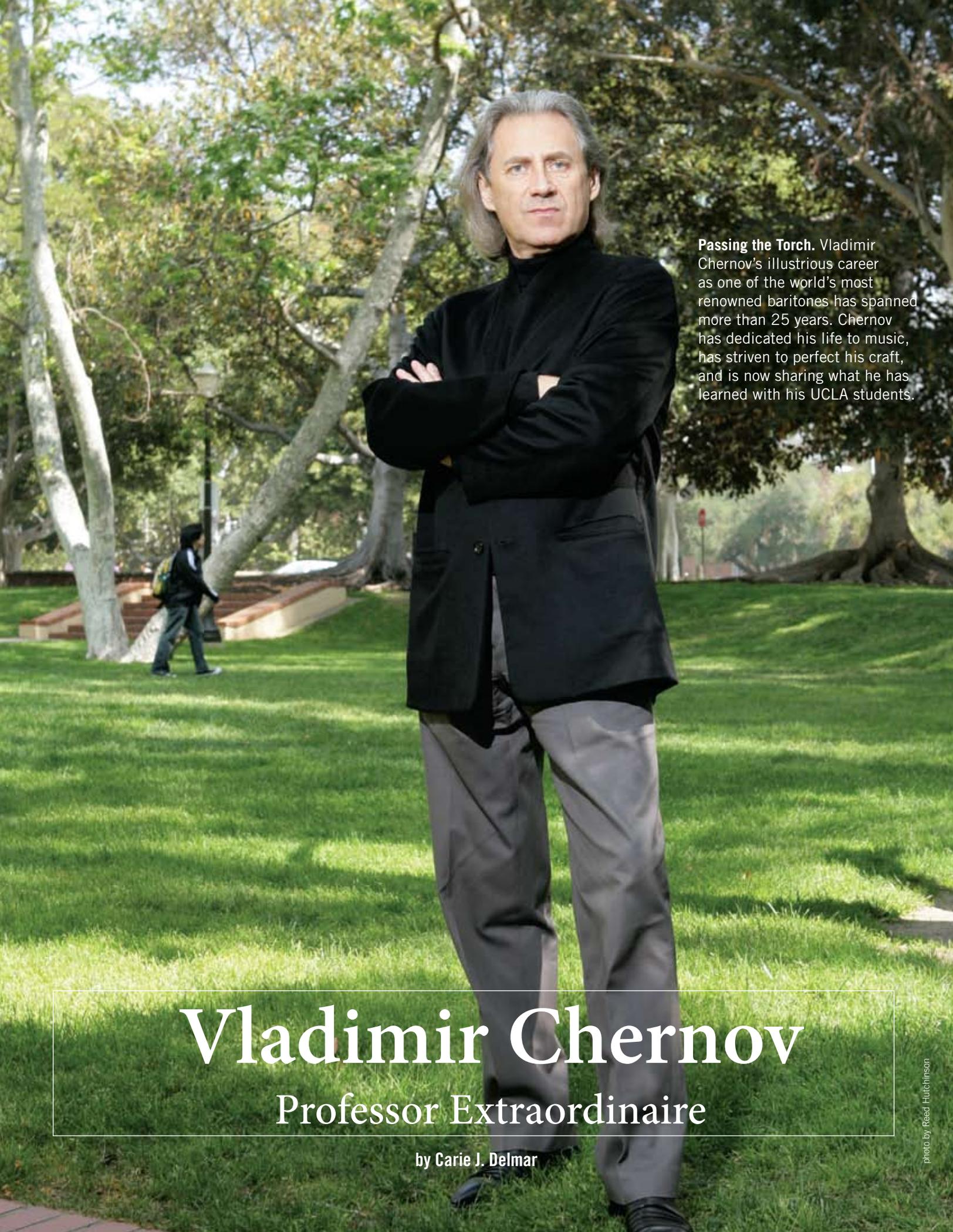
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A full-page photograph of Vladimir Chernov, a man with long grey hair, wearing a black turtleneck and a black blazer over grey trousers. He stands with his arms crossed on a lush green lawn. In the background, there are large trees and a person walking on a path. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Passing the Torch. Vladimir Chernov's illustrious career as one of the world's most renowned baritones has spanned more than 25 years. Chernov has dedicated his life to music, has striven to perfect his craft, and is now sharing what he has learned with his UCLA students.

Vladimir Chernov

Professor Extraordinaire

by Carie J. Delmar

Vladimir Chernov | Music Articles

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Vladimir Chernov Professor Extraordinaire



A few years ago, Russian baritone Vladimir Chernov was enjoying a thriving operatic career singing roles such as Eugene Onegin and Prince Yeletsky in the most prestigious opera houses in the world, including the Mariinsky Theatre, the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, the Met, the Opera National de Paris-Bastille and the Wiener Staatsoper. He was performing under the batons of James Levine, Valery Gergiev, Seiji Ozawa, and Claudio Abbado, and had sung with the world's greatest artists, including Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, Mirella Freni, and Kiri Te Kanawa. Becoming a university professor was the farthest thought from Chernov's mind -but in July 2006, he became a professor of vocal studies at UCLA.

UCLA held a national search for a professor of voice about four years ago, according to Ian Krouse, chairman of the music department, and Juliana Gondek, who heads the division of voice studies.

During that time, they became aware of Chernov, who was interested in teaching masterclasses at the university. At first, they didn't know whether they should consider him for a tenured position, since he was in the midst of a successful career. After Gondek spent many hours talking to Chernov, however, she discovered he was receptive to the idea and would be committed to sharing his knowledge and experiences with students. Another applicant, however, also was qualified and able to sit on faculty and doctoral committees, edit dissertations, and contribute to the overall bureaucratic administration of the department: American bass-baritone Michael Dean. The university wanted both of them.

Gondek envisioned a team-teaching paradigm that would allow students to work with herself, Chernov, and Dean without feeling technically conflicted. "There was an agreement in our approach to teaching most of the basic vocal skills, such as breath management, development of a concept of tone, how to achieve a well-balanced resonance, and the flexibility to sing coloratura," said Gondek. "These are the basics of good vocal technique. I had found two colleagues like me, who had learned to sing with a rather old strain of Italian Bel Canto, such as what was taught by Giovanni Battista Lamperti . . . which was passed along throughout the 20th century"



Vladimir Chernov: Professor Extraordinaire



Photo by Patricia Williams

UCLA invited Chernov to become a Regents' lecturer for the winter quarter in 2005. He gave several public masterclasses, taught hours of private lessons, and performed in recital. In 2006, he was invited to return as a visiting lecturer.

"He completely won over the hearts and minds of the faculty and the students," said Krouse.

Daniel Neuman, who had been dean of UCLA's School of the Arts and Architecture and then became the executive vice chancellor of the university, made additional funding possible so that the music department could turn Gondek's team teaching vision into a reality, with both Dean and Chernov as faculty members. "We were in a position to hire both of them," Gondek said.

"Vladimir is a beloved member of our department at this point in time," added Krouse. "Although I am not a singer, I have had the pleasure of spending a lot of time watching him teach, and I don't think I've ever seen a teacher as charismatic as he is with the students, as physically and emotionally involved as he is with them. He believes very firmly in the fundamentals of vocal production and voice technique, and he has an uncanny ability to demonstrate what the students need to do and to get them to do it, and he does it in such a supportive and non-threatening way that the students put themselves under his spell, if you will, because from my view as an outsider, he has them doing what seems to be very unorthodox things with the voice and body, but he's clearly successful. You can hear the results after 30 minutes. He is so convincing and so assured that his confidence is imparted to his students."

Krouse explained that Chernov is often on leave performing, and during those times, his students work with team teachers Gondek and Dean. "When he's here, he devotes himself 100 percent to his students," said Krouse. "He teaches phenomenally long days. Sometimes he stops by to see me after he's been teaching for eight, 10, 12 hours straight, exhausted, but he's very passionate and enthusiastic. He completely gives himself to his students and that is

one of the qualities that they love about him.”

From Chernov's Point of View



Before interviewing Chernov, I spoke to the people with whom Chernov works to find out how he became a professor and to hear their impressions of his teaching. Then, at the beginning of the spring quarter, I walked into Schoenberg Hall, peeked into the Jan Popper Theater (where I had taken a musical comedy workshop when I was a theater major at UCLA), and made my way downstairs to Chernov's new studio.

The baritone greeted me warmly. He looked much like his photographs. His hair, which has become his trademark, was still long, almost shoulder length. He was dressed in black with a European-looking, knitted, embroidered vest and boots. He introduced me to Daniel Suk, a young tenor who had been studying in Italy but felt destined to study with him in Los Angeles. The lesson began with exercises.

"Relax the shoulders and drop your jaw on your chest," directed Chernov. "Wake up the shoulders, then go back down. Sense the muscles."

"Breathe through the nose," he said. "The nose is like a filter. This air will never dry your vocal cords."

Later Chernov spoke of mimicking a predator ready to pounce on its prey. "First the animal is relaxed," he described. "Then it attacks."

Chernov also spoke of creating a diminuendo with the tone and a crescendo with the diaphragm.

Exercises and a few scales followed. The two moved from the piano to the mirror on the wall and back. Then an accompanist entered, and Suk and Chernov sang the duet, "Solenne in quest' ora", from *La forza del destino*. "Sing with pain," Chernov directed, "begging."

After the lesson, Chernov and I sat in front of his desk. He showed me some old papers that he always keeps near -descriptions in Russian of the technique he espouses that he learned in Russia from Tamara Denisova. Although quite fluent in English, he spoke with a decidedly Russian accent, leaving out adjectives here and there, which only served to enhance his charm. He spoke of his youth, his career, and his technique.

"I was born in little village south of Russia that is 1,400 kilometers south from Moscow," he began. "Very beautiful landscape. My mother, my father -they were not just ordinary people. My father was teacher in school. He taught children everything possible because after war, many resources were deficit, especially in the provinces. In my classroom, I had six, seven kids only. We had three, four teachers including my father. We had 120 students in eight classes. The intensity of attention was extremely powerful -rich, if you will. My capacity to

visualize, to analyze why I am here, belongs to me since I open my eyes, since I recognize that I am living creature, that I have mother and father.

"I have one sister and one brother. No one was musician, but my father and mother used to play several instruments. My father was great actor, fabulous dancer, comedian. I could not stand his false singing, though. My grandmother was main person [when Chernov was very young] who taught me singing, but not the technique of singing. My mother, my father -they left this world at very early age. My mother was 55. My father was 59, and that was a huge loss for me. I still miss them every day, every night, every second, so I try to connect my childhood with my life of today.

"You do what you do because of something that happened in your childhood. This point often helps me to understand my characters, like Onegin, for example. I came to conclusion that Onegin missed love of parents in his early childhood. Every child was belonging to tutors in time of Aleksandr Pushkin. Onegin was trying to recognize sensations of love, and he could not, because he missed the feeling of love as a child."

"When did you start to sing?" I asked.

"My grandmother told my father when I was 6 or 7 years. She said, "Nikolay, this is extraordinary boy. He is very talented, and he is not going to live here in this village. He will fly away very soon." At age 7, maybe 9, I been singing with my brother on the school stage. Then came several children's competitions, festivals. I made only eight classes [years] of school. In Russia, this is basic. Then if you want, you can study two years more. Then I went to college in capital city of Maykop, to study furniture design, because at age 15, you are not ready to study voice. Woodcarving for me was passion. I grew up with a little chisel and knife in my pocket.

"I met very beautiful musician at this college. His name was Dunayevsky (not the composer). He played accordion like God, and of course, I start to sing with him. After I receive baccalaureate in furniture production and design, I went to military service, where I been trying to build kind of vocal, instrumental band ensemble. I met highly intellectual people who said, "Vladimir, you have to study seriously voice technique. Don't just sing for people, drinking wine, vodka and then singing again. That's not for you. You are different." So after military service, when I was 21, these musicians and I moved to city Stavropol and made exams for musical college."

While there, Chernov studied for two years with Mikhail Chugenov.

"The teacher of my teacher was student of Maestro Camille Everardi, one of the greatest Italian voice teachers who came to Russia and never left. I am still using this basic knowledge of vocal technique today," recounted Chernov. "Then I was accepted for five years at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. I was a student of Gyorgi Selesnev and Gugo Tiz. In

Vladimir Chernov as Figaro, Los Angeles Opera, Barber of Seville, 2002



1981, I was like in Young Artist Program at Mariinsky Theatre.

"After conservatory, I went to study at La Scala school in 1982 for one year with Guilietta Simionato. That was the period in my life that gave me deep and full knowledge of Italian tradition. One piano coach was responsible for Bel Canto repertoire, the other was for Verdi, and the third was embracing everything else. I start to listen to old recordings and understood technique was different then from today. One hundred years ago, vocal technique was not belonging to one nation only. Manuel Garcia, a Spanish man, was one of first inventors of basic vocal rules. His students brought this technique to Italy and to other European countries and America.

"The last 50, 60 years, voice technique is getting more problematic. We don't have enough time for preparation, for education. That's the difficult conditions of my pedagogy, to find in very short terms of time the possibility to make as clear as possible introduction to the voice technique I am teaching of many years ago: of Caruso, Galetti, Battistini, Amato, Ruffo, and Shalyapin."

Chernov spoke of the singer who changed his life.

"I was 33 years old when I met Tamara Denisova," he said. "I was already famous in Russia as principal baritone of Mariinsky Theatre, singing Onegin and Yeletsky there and at Covent Garden, but I felt something missing. She said to me, "You know, my son, if you leave opera for just one year, I guarantee you will be best baritone of world." I said, "I cannot. I cannot afford this. How can I survive?" She answered, "Don't worry, we will help you."

"I was not very busy at that moment on Kirov stage in Mariinsky opera house. I been singing one or two performances a month, and that luxury helped me to focus and study with Tamara Denisova. I spent with her three years, three to four lessons a week. She taught me how to use body; how to disconnect tongue, jaw; how to use vibration of soft palate -things I never heard in my life. I am teaching this now.

"When I came back to Russia after Milano, this was red wine of my life. Then in 1989, I receive contracts to Boston [Marcello], Scotland [Don Carlo, *La forza del destino*], Los Angeles [Posa], Rome [Miller], Seattle [Prince Andrei, *War and Peace*], Covent Garden [Rossini's *Figaro*] and New York, etc., etc. Valery Gergiev became principal conductor of Mariinsky Theatre, and I am so grateful to him that he gave me freedom and the chance to sing as much as possible. The political situation changed at that time. *Perestroika* came out and I received freedom.

"I never planned to leave Russia. When I came first to New York with my wife and my son, he was 7 or so. I had already contracts with the Metropolitan Opera. I start to think we should have a home in New York. For three or four months each year, I stayed in New York singing at the Metropolitan Opera. I got offers from the Bavarian State Opera, Vienna State Opera, and Deutsche Oper Berlin. Mr. Holender [director of the Vienna State Opera] gave me lots of great productions, and that's why I became Austrian citizen."

Chernov, who is also a Russian citizen, has homes in New York, Austria, Russia and Italy, and is moving his family to Los Angeles now. His son, Vladimir, is thinking about entering a film school, and his wife, Olga, teaches voice.

"Teaching is part of my nature -sharing my talent with young people. It is my responsibility,"

Chernov said. "I do not see myself as a master. I still see myself as a student, always learning.

"The natural way of singing lasts only for several years," he continued. "Then we are losing top. We are losing middle register, and voice starts shaking because voice technique is about muscle coordination and practice. I work step by step. I'm trying to introduce this technique with my own voice. That's the advantage of not being very old opera singer-teacher. Students can listen and see a result.

"There is chain. You have to find way to coordinate muscles, diaphragm. We have general organs. We have tongue, lips, jaw, and acoustical box behind. We have space behind soft palate, hard palate. We have teeth. We have also chest register, head register. You must be sure what you are doing with muscles to make this chain work. As a teacher, I have to find a way, step by step, to make function the little chain, the other part of the chain and then make long chain. It's about breath and acoustic, support and coordination of muscle, the amount of pressure under vocal cords and above vocal cords.

"When I teach, I try to teach not just what to do, but what *not* to do. How not to sing wrong way -that is part of technique. Also, you should not be dependent on acoustical environment because then, if you do not hear yourself, you immediately start to push. You are losing resonance and vibration of vocal cords. You get tired, and finally, you come to a negative result. You should be aware of your muscle coordination, feelings and sensations, not hearing ability. Also, anything negative, like nervousness, can hurt the voice. For example, if I worry that tomorrow I have to wake up at 5 in the morning, then take taxi, then fly 13 hours to Tokyo, and then next morning, I have to sing first rehearsal -10 years ago, it was a nightmare for me. Today it is like drinking a cup of tea. I have learned how to keep my body in balance"

As for advice to young singers, Chernov said: "I am very optimistic person. I would encourage every student to follow your intuition, to listen to what your entire voice suggests you to do. If you are able to chose right environment, you will be able to survive, to develop your profession and be successful."

What Those Who Work with Chernov Say

Soprano Khorī Dastoor, 26, is one of Chernov's longtime students. She first started studying with him in 2005 when he was a Regents' lecturer. She graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, earned her master's degree at UCLA, and is currently working on her doctoral dissertation. For the 2007-8 season, she will be a principal artist in residence at Opera San José, where she has been cast as Lucia, Gilda, and Pamina. In the summer of 2005, she traveled to Vienna, Austria to become more fluent in German, to coach at the Wiener Staatsoper, and to honor Chernov's invitation to study with him in his home near Vienna.

"We would pick mushrooms and go fishing, and we would do voice two-to-three times a day. It was an amazing experience for me," she remembered. "I really centered my trip around this opportunity to be a student of his.

"Vladimir addresses singing as a calling, as a sort of spiritual quest," she continued. "It's about creating beauty and art, and he takes that very, very seriously. It's really about what he believes to be the gift of being able to create song in a way that is close to God, or something like that. There's lots of honor for him in that. He feels that it's lifting a burden for him to be able to teach the method that he was taught. He feels like he's been given this knowledge, and he

has a responsibility to pass it on without taking credit for it.

"He's always talking about the teachers in his life and the people from 100 years ago from the Golden Age of Bel Canto and *verismo* that were his inspirations. I think he thinks of himself as sort of a prophet of that era. He's not concerned with putting a package together –that's just not relevant. He has the utmost faith that if you sing correctly, the rest will come, because that's what happened for him. As most singers, he has overcome obstacles and has built his career on his technique. He rebuilt his technique so that it is based on feel instead of hearing. I think some students can get frustrated because rarely in a lesson are you singing an aria. It's so much about body work, creating sounds, and creating positions, and he talks about using emotions to guide your sound.

"We talk about the shape of the resonance base, emotion, and about maintaining a sort of inner yawn that allows support to happen naturally. It's about when you use your whole body to sing, then you are supported. It's a lot of conditioning, a lot of strengthening of certain muscles. A big pillar of his teaching is taking the tongue and actually holding it out of your mouth to sort of force you to create space above and behind, but it's always from a place of yawning or laughing or crying, using these sort of emotional triggers to make the sound"

Another student, Jacqueline Bezek, 24, concurred. She has just completed her master's degree and is singing Violetta at the New Operafestival di Roma this summer. "It's a very slow process, and he starts you from the beginning," she said. It's all about your larynx, your palates and your tongue being in the right place. He might make a face like a fierce dog, and then he asks you to sing with that fierce face to get the right placement. He talks about support and where the breath is coming from, and he wants to make sure that your stomach is hard and that your muscles are being enacted. He has a passion for teaching and just wants everyone to be singing healthy and right."

"You learn about pure sound and tone production, and then little by little, you build up to the sound that you sing with," said soprano Karen Vuong. Vuong received her bachelor's degree at UCLA in June 2006, was awarded the CulturArte prize at Operalia 2006, and is currently a member of Los Angeles Opera's Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program. "In his lessons, he does let us sing, but he makes sure that we incorporate what we have learned in the vocal exercises. For example, with one, he tried to get me to relax and not push and create a balance of both the forward and back, because when the tone is perfectly balanced, it projects. He always makes you feel very comfortable and safe. He's very patient, which is wonderful."

Although he takes his new role as professor very seriously, Chernov, who is 53, intends to continue performing. He recently sang the elder Germont at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie-De Munt in Brussels, Don Carlo in *La forza del destino* at the New National Theatre in Tokyo, and Eugene Onegin at the Teatro Villamarta in Jerez, Spain. In January, he is set to sing Yeletsky in *Pique Dame* at the Theatre du Capitole in Toulouse, France. He has scheduled concerts, recitals, and masterclasses in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Austria, Russia, Spain, and Italy. This summer, he has been teaching at the Opera Ischia festival off the coast of Naples. His new recital program will include Bellini, Donizetti, Puccini, Verdi, and Tosti songs, and he plans to sing some Schubert Lieder in the future.

As for his new station in life: "I understand thousands of people are dreaming to get this position," he said. "When I signed contract, I start to cry. I said, "My goodness, finally in my life

happen something extraordinary. I am performing still and am in good vocal shape. But this step is like climax in my development.”

About the Author:

Carie J. Delmar writes reviews and features on opera for various publications and websites, including *www.operaonline.us*. As a freelance writer, she has written stories on education and entertainment for the *L.A. Times*. She has worked as a reporter and publicist, holds degrees in theater arts and psychology, and has studied voice, piano, acting, and dance. She recently completed a novel based on the life of her father, who was an opera singer in 1930s Vienna and Prague. E-mail the author at: operacjd@aol.com. Article Source: <http://www.emusicguides.com>