The Music Academy
OF THE WEST

By Hillary Hauser

As the warm summer sun filters through the windows of Lotte Lehmann Hall at the Music Academy of the West, Christine Abraham, a soprano, and Robert Chionis, a baritone, take the stage. Both singers are quiet, erect, serious, ready. Their accompanist, Vicki Kirsch, adjusts herself at the piano.

The show begins. The performers first read the English translation of the words they are about to sing—five Greek folk songs by Ravel. From the fifth song, which is Robert's to sing, one phrase stands out—"You have fine legs, use them!" Then the singers are off and making music, in French.

The performance is brilliant. Nevertheless, with the last note of the galloping ("You have fine legs") finale, the singers' coach, Judith Beckmann, leaps to the stage. "I have an idea, a crazy idea!" she announces. "Robert, you're Greek, do you do any Greek dancing?" Robert nods. He does a step or two to prove it. "Good!" says Beckmann. "Now, Christine."

Christine and Robert, holding hands, perform the Greek dance steps together.

"Now, the two of you do that," Beckmann counsels. "Vicki, play the song faster and faster. I want it to get excited!"

The performers begin again, Robert and Christine dancing and singing at the same time. As the song speeds up, they bungle the steps and Robert forgets to dance. Beckmann stops the show, includes Vicki in the dance, makes them all start over, makes them *dance*. The audience roars with laughter.

JURGEN HILMER

"Now why did I do that?" Beckmann asks. "It loosens you up! You should probably always sing and dance at the same time!"

Next on stage is Pei-Ning Ku, from Taiwan, singing Donizetti's *Me voglio fa' na cosa*. With a crystal voice, she sings beautifully .

Responding to this, Beckmann says, "If everyone sings in this world there will be no problems. Here we are, from Taiwan, singing a Neopolitan song—in Santa Barbara!"

But just as she has counseled the others, Beckmann wants from Pei-Ning more joy, more fun, more dancing.

"You have the most wonderful personality," she says. "Let it come out, let go more! Feel the music, have a great time with it! You smile so wonderfully. Do it again!" ➡

At the academy, *an atmosphere of serenity contrasts with the lively master class sessions. Above, instructor Judith Beckmann encourages her students to dance through their music, (from left) Vicki Kirsch, Robert Chionis and Christine Abraham. At right, in-the-know music aficionados enjoy Jerome Lowenthal's inspired instruction.*

Pei-Ning starts again.

"More joy!" Beckmann says, and with that she herself bursts into song, almost singing herself off the floor.

This is a voice master class at the Music Academy of the West. Lotte Lehmann Hall is packed. After all, musical artists rarely display their talents quite like this.

For eight weeks every summer—every day, almost all day long—two-hour master classes in voice, piano, violin, oboe and a host of other instruments go on at the Music Academy. Open to the public, the classes, according to Santa Barbara's music aficionados, comprise the most special part of the academy's annual music festival.

A Montecito estate, called Miraflores, just off Channel Drive near the Biltmore Hotel, provides the stunning showcase for so much talent. Its ten acres of emerald, Alice-in-Wonderland gardens that overlook the blue Pacific comprise a musical paradise, a flowered sanctuary where a violinist can practice trills and arpeggios in the shade of a vine-draped arbor.

By winter, this magnificent Mediterranean-style sanctuary is quiet, a spot for weddings and occasional philanthropic fund-raising events. The Santa Barbara Garden Club, which oversees the landscaping of the academy grounds, holds its flower show here. There's a May Madness Sale, an auction of interesting collectibles that benefits the academy, and other small events, too. But the main building of the academy, with its lofty ceilings, tiled foyer and courtyard, along with the more modern practice rooms and Abravanel Hall, are mainly at rest.

Then, as the weather warms and the sun climbs higher in the sky, you can almost hear the place tune to Hertz 440, or A, the note to which an orchestra tunes. Throughout the year, gifted music students have auditioned in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere to get in, and their musical energy very nearly precedes them. Many of the students have earned scholarships to cover the $1,575 tuition.

For eight weeks (this year from June 24 to August 19), the 150 students who make the grade will live and breathe music here, all day long every day, studying and practicing with renowned concert artists. Rooming at Cate School, the students attend private lessons and master classes at the academy, which culminate in chamber music recitals, Opera Night, Concerto Night and

The lunch group plotted a solution: a music academy in Santa Barbara, out of reach of Hollywood glitz and exploitation.

Among these planners was the great operatic soprano and *lieder* interpreter Lotte Lehmann, who was to become a major force in establishing academy standards.

These patrons wasted no time. After a furious fund-raising drive, on July 7, 1947, the first Music Academy of the West summer season opened at Cate School in Carpinteria. The faculty for that session included, besides Lehmann, composer Ernest Bloch, violinist Roman Totenberg, pianists Harry Kaufman and Mildred Couper and voice teacher Richard Bonelli.

With more money and help—from Ronald Colman, Jeanette MacDonald, Walter Pidgeon and Nelson Eddy, among others—the faculty expanded to include composers Darius Milhaud and Arnold Schoenberg, cellist Gregor Piatigorsky and Metropolitan Opera baritone Martial Singher. Igor Stravinsky and Martha Graham came on as advisors. It was obvious that with such a stellar list of near-immortals the Music Academy was to be no light folk song—it meant business.

Now came the need for a permanent home, and out from the wings entered an extremely generous patron, Miss Helen Marso, who for 36 years served Mr. and Mrs. John Percival Jefferson as their personal secretary. The Jeffersons were music lovers, and they filled their house, Miraflores, with music ever since they bought the estate in 1915. When Mrs. Jefferson died in 1950, Marso received a large bequest from the Jeffersons. With part of her inheritance, she purchased Miraflores from the couple's niece, the inheritor of the estate, and donated it to the academy.

Activity swelled at the campus when Maurice Abravanel, conductor of the Utah Symphony, came to the faculty in 1953. Lotte Lehmann and Abravanel combined their unique talents to stage operas each summer—not just a few scenes without sets or costumes, but fully staged and costumed productions of near-professional stature. These are the popular opera productions that continue today.

Although talented artists of all musical persuasions have passed through academy doors, the institution has probably earned most of its international fame in the area of voice. Lotte Lehmann led the way, not only as an artist of international stature, but as a dynamic, poetic genius who devoted much of her later life to putting the academy on its feet.

Santa Barbarans hear Lehmann's name over and over, and those who don't remember her era or her fame may wonder what all the fuss is about. Some clues: her audiences stood up when she came on stage; she had a voice of silver; and those who heard Lehmann sing say she was so deeply involved in what inspired the composer that she would bare her soul with open arms to her audience, embracing her listeners to get the message across.

One of Lehmann's students was Judith Beckmann, who has taught voice at the academy during the summers that she has a respite in her busy schedule as an internationally acclaimed lyric soprano. In 1986, when Beckmann gave a memorial recital in Santa Barbara to commemorate her late teacher, she began her performance by saying to her audience, "Come, let us live this song together!" When Beckmann advises her students to dance! have fun! create more joy! one can almost see Lotte Lehmann smiling down in approval from the rafters of the academy recital hall that bears her name.

Today at the academy, all the music departments offer glittering instruction. This summer, Jerome Lowenthal and Edward Auer are teaching piano. Stuart Canin and Zvi Zietlin are coaching violin. James Pellerite (flute), Harry Sargous (oboe), Bodo Igesz (opera) and Gwendolyn Koldofsky (vocal accompaniment) round out the list.

Lawrence Leighton Smith, the high-energy powerhouse who conducts the Louisville, Kentucky, orchestra, comes to Santa Barbara each summer to lead the academy orchestra (formerly called Philharmonia Accademica and now called the Festival Orchestra). Smith, who has guest-conducted the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Moscow Philharmonic, takes his academy students seriously. The results are electrifying.

During an orchestra rehearsal at the Lobero, you will find the maestro with shirt sleeves rolled up, intent expression on his face, hair a mess, perspiration a permanent feature of his brow, booming out last-minute instructions.

"You sound a little scared!" he might say. "This is an orchestral *tutti*, it should be more sound. When you have a chance, play out! Here we go!"

He indicates lightness of the music with airy, birdlike movements of his arms; for the tempestuous moments, he presents to his players a gruff look and big shoulders, like those of a football star in the midst of a bone-breaking tackle.

"More! More! It's such a wild thing!" he'll say.

During a rehearsal of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, Maestro Smith stops, wipes his forehead and begins to count measures out loud. "We're all not together. Again, please!" The swirling strains of the music flow again from the stage, rising to the lofty ceiling of the Lobero.

During rehearsals, a trumpet player who looks more like a California surfer than an orchestral musician reads *East of Eden* while he awaits his turn to play. A dark-haired woman in Hawaiian print shorts considers her bass fiddle. Into the celestial music making enters the viola player, wearing an Einstein T-shirt. Another violist wearing a gold earring in his left ear plays with all his heart. And another beach boy in a Quicksilver shirt strums majestically on his cello.

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Although dressed casually, these young people are more interested in dotted rhythms than the size of the waves at nearby Butterfly Beach; they have no time for recreation or swimming or sightseeing or fooling around. To them, music means everything. It is their life. Spending eight weeks at the academy is like being turned loose in a candy store, and these kids are out to get all the bonbons they can.

"This place *contributes*," says Charlotte Hellekant, a twenty-six-year-old mezzo-soprano who performed Benjamin Britten's *Phaedra* during the academy's 1988 summer season. "You can perform at Eastman [School of Music], but you don't get the spontaneous, unselfish appreciation of the audience." Adds Hellekant, "I'd never had that before."

Predrag "Pedra" Muzijevic, a twenty-five-year-old pianist from Yugoslavia who performed Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto no. 1 for the 1988 Concerto Night, says that studying at the academy allowed him to live and breathe music for eight weeks uninterrupted.

"Here, we live our lives together," Pedra explains. "At home, we're all grocery shopping. All you have to think about here is music."

The competition-winning sister and brother team of Gianna and Nico Abondolo (Gianna, twenty-three, plays cello, and Nico, twenty-five, double bass) say that they like the intimate size of the academy's summer session, and that their time here has helped them plan their careers. They know about music festivals: the two have studied at the Academia Musicale in Chigiana, Italy, and they've participated in the prestigious Aspen Music Festival.

But Nico, hired by UCSB's music department to teach bass, says, "In Aspen you can get lost. Here, you can work with everybody. We like playing in intimate groups—it's a lot of fun."

Almost all of the young musicians express great appreciation for the master classes, which not only allow them to perform for informal audiences, but to interact with them, too.

To the public at large, a master class might sound like dry stuff—too much Bach, trills and drills. But many Santa Barbarans have discovered that the classes ($5 each, $3 for seniors and students) are a glorious means by which to secure in their hearts an immortal piece of music. A typical class consists of
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Lotte Lehmann
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adds, "We didn't have an educational background of the European tradition. Now, how could I, corn-growing-out-of-my-ears Kay, learn unless I used the tool of imitation as well as imagination? We weren't imitating in a bad way. We were trying to get inside this incredible spirit."

Despite the students' enthusiasm for them, Lehmann's master classes did not always go smoothly. Looking back on an audition with Lehmann, then-student Luba Tcheresky, who now teaches voice for Lincoln Center's Fordham College, laughs nervously and admits, "I sang my song, and the first words she said to me with her German accent were, 'If you ever sang that with a conductor, he would kill you!'"