

Jazz vocalist strives to expose genre

Ty Russell (left), a student at Bethany College, listens Monday afternoon as Kathy Kosins coaches him during a singing workshop.

TOM DORSEY /
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By DAVID CLOUSTON
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LINDSBORG — Monday's lesson was off to a slow start. Accustomed to classical composers, such as Schubert and Mozart, and operatic works, Bethany College vocal major Sean Boller had next to zero experience with American standards or jazz lyrics.

Still, gamely, he plunged into a rendition of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," accompanied by Assistant Professor Jodi Frisbie, as visiting jazz vocalist Kathy Kosins appraised his technique.

"Hang on to the phrases a little bit more," said Kosins, who demonstrated by belting out a chorus in a soulful, smoky alto. "It's a little more conversational. Try approaching it as if you're singing it to someone personal that you know."

Just then the jangle of her cell phone — the ringtone sounding the theme from

All that jazz

Jazz vocalist Kathy Kosins is scheduled to perform a free concert at the Bethany Jazz Ensemble Concert at 8 p.m. today at Bethany College's Presser Hall.

TV's "Sex in The City" — interrupted.

If Carrie Bradshaw — the lead character in the former hit HBO TV series — had a real-life alter ego, it might be the fiercely independent Kosins, who shuns either a manager or an agent.

She's shy about revealing her age, but she does admit to singing and composing successfully for 35 years. She's a six-time winner of songwriting awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, with three CDs to her credit, and a forth set to debut in 2008.

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The Detroit native, who was named one of the top six vocalists of 2005 by the International Association of Jazz Educators, also gives concerts and yearly works with students from 15 to 30 colleges and universities.

Heart and soul

Jazz is an instrumental-based art form, and there are few jazz vocalists working today who truly receive the recognition due their skills, Kosins said.

Jazz vocalists interpret lyrics and vary the melody of a musical number from the style

in which it was written, to one derived from the artist's own heart and soul, she said.

"I'll just simply vary the melody or the rhythm a little bit. Or if the song was written as a ballad, I might do it as a swing or a Bossa Nova. If a song was written as an up-tempo swing song — take the Cole Porter example of 'I've Got You Under My Skin.' You've heard Sinatra swing it like that — but you can do a number of things with it. Jazz is like an abstract piece of artwork that one's creating."

It was that spirit, she said, that led her to being kicked out of her high school choir at 16 by deliberately choosing to

improvise rather than stick to the musical score.

"I was just an instigator and a rebellious hippie," she said, smiling.

Kosins said certain areas of the country are jazz hotbeds, as are certain university communities. The Berkley College of Music in California and the University of Miami in Florida, are examples.

"If I'm in a rural area, no. It's minor, if there's any interest at all. I'm just there to expose them to it," Kosins said.

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