

# ConcordArtsQuarterly

## Pieces come together for singer/actress

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**T**here are certain phrases one doesn't expect to hear in the same sentence. Power and nuance. Technical writer and chanteuse. El Paso and The Arts. Puccini and Chekov. After a short conversation with Concord resident Karyn Levitt, however, one can see that these things fit together quite logically, especially in the context of her life.

Levitt is singer and actress known for her ability to weave music and theater together in a way that is distinctly hers. Unlike typical musical theater, Levitt's one-woman shows have combined Puccini, Chekov, and Gershwin, with a little Tennessee Williams thrown in for good measure.

"You have to follow your own impulses about things and believe that you're right," she said of her inclination to mix and match art forms. "The connections are there. They're waiting to be made."

The result of her efforts is an experience that has left audience members delighted and stunned.

"I sat mesmerized by her talent," wrote Judith Stout in a letter to the editor of the *Monadnock Ledger*, after a performance of Levitt's "Puccini and His Contemporaries."

"Ms. Levitt enchanted and thrilled an audience which overflowed into the street..." it continued.

Naturally, this is music to Levitt's ears. It is very important to her to connect with the audience. "When you can hear a pin drop, you know it's great, because the audience is with you, hanging on each word," she said.

Levitt was raised in El Paso, Texas, by parents who exposed her to classical music and art from the time she was a baby. "I was taught from an early age how to listen to classical music and shown great works of art and taken to the theater and things like that," she said of her upbringing, "so I really had an amazing education."

Her education continued in Ohio, at Oberlin College, where she majored in English. Surprisingly, although Levitt sang in various choirs throughout her life, music was not a focal point. "I wasn't really encouraged to do anything with my voice," she said, adding that in the beginning she had a "small voice." This would be difficult for anyone to imagine once they have heard the power and nuance that are the hallmarks of Levitt's singing.

Eventually Levitt came to the Boston area. Taking work as a technical writer to support herself, she continued with voice lessons, and added acting lessons as well. It wasn't until 10 years ago, however, when a trusted friend suggested



Singer/actress Karyn Levitt.

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that she switch voice teachers, that Levitt's voice became unlocked. Although she had had voice lessons since she was 16, this new experience with the Bel Canto technique was pivotal in terms of her development as an artist.

"One lesson and I was making sounds I'd never made," she remembered.

With the continued encouragement of her friends and teachers, Levitt began to combine dramatic dialogues with musical pieces in a way that would become the basis of her experience as a performer. She also began to study classical composition and swing/jazz singing. The additional training resulted in performances that displayed versatility almost unheard of, especially in their ability to deliver a wide range of song styles.

"Most classical singers perform only the classical repertoire and do not know how to stylistically switch gears from the polished classical sound of a spinning vibrato required for classical pieces to the more straight-tone, edgy singing appropriate for popular music," she said of the differences.

"Conversely, most singers of popular music are completely incapable of singing the classical repertoire convincingly because they lack classical vocal technique," she said.

Levitt's exposure to a variety of singing styles, coupled with her acting abilities, enables her to convincingly offer something for everyone. If a bride wants to hire a soloist who can deliver a heart-rending "Ave Maria" in the church and then belt out an afternoon of standards with the band at the reception, Levitt can fit the bill.

"What's amazing to me is how similar everything is. That even

though these are all externally different forms, they are all part of the creative process," she said.

Levitt's process is currently leading her through a new show that she developed, *Lyrics by Shakespeare*, where she will combine The Bard's words with new music in a way that retains the integrity of the original material while appealing to the contemporary tastes of a modern audience. Her collaborator, Leslie Hitelman, has taken some of Shakespeare's sonnets and set them to her own modern music, which has been likened stylistically to Stephen Sondheim. Levitt is understandably excited about her latest project.

"When you read Shakespeare, the language stops a lot of people," she explained. "What [Hitelman's] music does is make the words more understandable. The music actually includes some of the meaning of the words."

As, no doubt, will Levitt's powerful voice and subtle stylings. There is a scheduled performance at The Center for The Arts, Natick on April 23, Shakespeare's birthday, and at the Parish Center for the Arts in Westford on Sunday, Feb. 29.

Also in the works are bookings in Groton on Valentine's Day, and at the Mariposa Museum in May. Updated schedule information can be obtained at Levitt's Web site: [www.royalroad2000.com](http://www.royalroad2000.com).

Despite the fact that the 2004 performance schedule is itself a work in progress, audiences can rest assured that Levitt will continue to perform throughout the area.

"If you just keep yourself in lessons and you don't get out there, then you're not really a performer and you don't discover your self," she said.