

## Local singers compete to perform with 'Phantom'

### 'Music of the Night'

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The Phantom needed a Christine and Raoul. Without them he is nothing, a masked man with no love interest, no rival, no "Music of the Night."

So when the Phantom has enough time in his touring schedule to hold a master class, he tries to find two local singers to perform opposite him as the childhood sweethearts who break his heart.

With more than 2,000 performances to his name, Franc D'Ambrosio held the title of World's Longest-Running Phantom of the Opera for more than a decade. He now spends nine months of the year touring his one-man show, which includes "The Phantom of the Opera" songs that are still so much a part of him.

Singers hoping to take on the roles of Christine and Raoul submitted audition CDs last month. Tuesday, four women and two men competed for the chance to sing with D'Ambrosio in concert tonight.

The contestants were modest, grateful. Just the chance to meet and learn from him was enough, they said. But only one woman and one man could win.

The song up for grabs was "All I Ask of You," when Christine and Raoul declare their love, and the Phantom vows revenge.

Contestant Ashlee Belveal has been known to sing it around her house, annoying her younger brothers. The home-schooled high school senior recorded the duet and audition CD with Matt Stairs, a Kelly Walsh High School junior. Stairs hoped they'd be chosen as winners together. They've sung duets at weddings and for Stairs' grandparents' anniversary. Both are All-State and All-Northwest performers. And they're young, which fits the "Phantom" storyline.

Contestant Anna Hardcastle, a Casper College sophomore and musical theater major, is a leading lady, most recently starring as Maria in the school's fall production of "The Sound of Music."

And there's Gwen Colgrove, 61, a singer since the age of 5. She's performed with the Omaha Symphonic Chorus, Western Colorado Chorale and the Casper Civic Chorale, among others.

For Denver couple Monica Leotta and Chad Reagan, "Phantom" is more personal. It was seeing this musical that influenced them to pursue music. Reagan was taken with the majesty of the whole thing: the music, the costumes, the set, pyrotechnics. Reagan, 33, has performed with the Indianapolis Opera and Dicapo Opera Theatre in Hungary.



Monica Leotta, right, sings to Franc D'Ambrosio, one of the world's longest-running Phantoms of the Opera, during a contest held Tuesday at Casper College. One male and one female singer were chosen to perform a song with D'Ambrosio in concert at 7:30 p.m. tonight in the Kelly Walsh High School Auditorium. The concert is sponsored by ARTCORE WY.

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Leotta, a 29-year-old Casper native, works as a preschool teacher, but her bachelor's and master's degrees are in opera performance. She does community theater when she can. Her grandparents took her to see her first musical, "The Phantom of the Opera," in San Francisco 15 years ago.

The man who played Phantom at that show? Franc D'Ambrosio.

Performing is about the truth of the character. The best voices on Broadway are in the chorus, D'Ambrosio said, not the leads. A chorus knows how to produce music. Leads know how to merge the musical and the dramatic.

"We need your opinion," he told the six finalists. "We don't need another beautiful voice."

D'Ambrosio once studied with Luciano Pavarotti, who was impressed with D'Ambrosio's performance as Anthony Corleone in "Godfather III." D'Ambrosio sang the film's Academy Award-winning theme song, "Speak Softly Love." Now it is his turn to teach others.

He was there, in front of an audience of 50 in Casper College's Black Box Theater, to teach the singers to perform their stories, not only their notes. One by one they sang for D'Ambrosio's critique, pieces from "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," "Les Miserables," "Carousel," "Man of La Mancha," "Music Man." For two hours, he had them read the lyrics aloud, explain their meaning, sing again. He lined a row of people in front of Stairs, asking him to recite each phrase, each thought, to a different person, "because intimacy for the theater is to reveal yourself and grow in the presence of another person."

To Belveal he taught the importance of building a back story for her character, asking questions before beginning to sing because "we have to understand where we're coming from."

D'Ambrosio told Hardcastle to create her own version of the character, Leotta to engage the audience, Colgrove to focus on the story. When Reagan, a strong, booming baritone, missed a note, D'Ambrosio said it was OK, it meant he was thinking about his character and building emotion, always the key.

But D'Ambrosio left it to the audience to choose winners.

Colgrove decided not to compete. Best to leave it for the young performers, she said, those who best fit the youthful role of Christine.

D'Ambrosio paired them up for final performances of "All I Ask of You": Belveal and Stairs. Leotta and Reagan. Hardcastle and Reagan. Hardcastle and Stairs.

The couples held hands, tried to remember all the words. Some sang sweetly, others powerfully. And then, they were done.

The audience was asked to clap and cheer loudest for the couple they wanted.

The decision was about casting, D'Ambrosio said. It's never personal. He was once rejected for five shows, he said. He was too short, too tall, too loud. It's about the best couplings, who looks good together.

The audience found that in Anna Hardcastle and Matt Stairs.

