

# Montclair

A community magazine serving the residents  
of Montclair and Upper Montclair

## Neighbors

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### Holiday Spirit in Song

Patrizia Cioffi's 40+ Years  
of Music in Montclair



Best Version Media

Photo by Rita Lamar



Members of Patrizia Cioffi's Joy of Singing class perform vocal warm ups in her living room.

# A Home and Heart Ringing with Song

By Lynn Adamo  
Photos by Rita Lamar

Bel canto, Italian for “beautiful singing,” can be interpreted numerous ways, but one element transcends every translation—the technique demands a euphonic blend of more than raw talent.

Just ask soprano Patrizia Cioffi, who’s been coaching vocalists of all levels for more than 40 years.

“What makes a successful singer is an individual who cannot live without singing,” Cioffi explained, adding that besides skill, passion and enthusiasm are also essential.

After one student’s recent rendering of “Some Enchanted Evening,” she explained what made the performance so poignant.

The number, capped by hearty applause and nods of approval, was part of the weekly Joy of Singing class Cioffi has been teaching through the Adult School of Montclair (ASM) for nearly 20 years. The piece served as springboard for a lesson on engaging with one’s audience.

“I’ve never heard that song sung with more expression,” Cioffi told the vocalist and small group of singers assembled at her cozy Grove Street home. What made the performance so compelling, she explained, “isn’t just the voice; it’s the intention. You inspired me to find my true love.”

Embracing one’s true nature is crucial to making performances compelling. “Be who you are on stage,” she told the class. “Don’t try to be a bad imitation of someone else.”

## More than voice

It’s a reminder Iris Prcic has heard repeatedly over the 26 years she’s studied with Cioffi.

“Pat influenced me to go beyond just thinking about my voice,” Prcic said. “She always says to stay true to yourself as an artist. Don’t copy what others do!”

Cioffi’s methodology is encapsulated in three simple words—breathe, lean, sing—but it’s the involuntary part of vocalization that can be hardest to tame. Considerable time is devoted to teaching singers how to use the breath to achieve the best results.

“She taught what no other teacher taught me, and that was (proper) breathing,” said Prcic, who moved from California to study opera and was led to Cioffi through the instructor’s ad in *Classical Singer* magazine. “After about three lessons, I improved dramatically.”

Other students acknowledge the importance of Cioffi’s seemingly simple advice to “Breathe!,” the centerpiece of her bel canto technique.



Iris Prcic, Cioffi's student for 26 years, prepares for her lesson.

"So much of singing is breathing and while one would think it's easy, really remembering to breathe deeply must be mindful and conscious," said Montclairian Emy Kamihara, who's been studying with Cioffi for four years.

**Strong as an oak**

Outside Cioffi's quaint Dutch colonial, there's a large oak tree—strong, solid shelter for an array of migrating songbirds. Inside, from a former closet-turned-powder room, replete with bequeathed chandelier, crown molding and vivid floral wallpaper, even overhead, to a living room regularly ringing with song, her house has become a mecca for budding

vocalists eager to express themselves.

Joy of Singing through ASM "is affordable to people who are either dabbling or looking for a career," she said.

In ASM classes at Temple Shomrei Emunah and in her home, Cioffi focuses on existing foundations—both physiological and architectural—and building from there.

"I haven't renovated. I've restored," she declared during a conversation in her living room. "I didn't change the footprint. And the thing I like about this house is the oldness of it."

It's been "gently used," she proclaimed, with the original locks and kitchen sink still in place. The house is a landmark in multiple ways.

"I'm a veteran of Montclair and was here for the bicentennial," she recalled. "I live on a piece of landmark property. I've forgotten who lived on this site, but there was a plaque (here) during the celebration."

One recent evening, as seven Joy of Singing students gathered in the home's living room, Cioffi's two small, sandy-colored dogs, Angus and Sasha, curled up on the rug as they often do during lessons. This night, Sasha punctuated the class' vocal warm-up with an occasional yip.

"She's singing along with us," one student quipped.

While Cioffi's direction can be strong, a bit like that oak tree, her intention is to work with each student's vocal grain, not against it. Her aim is to identify the right songs for a singer's range and style.

"She can listen to a person sing and know that person's 'fach,' or range, and which kinds of music are best suited for

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## 5 things I love about Montclair

1. The Clairidge Theater: "It's my favorite place to go. The movies are well chosen."
2. Kings: "The workers are pleasant and helpful."
3. Palazzo's, TS Ma and Di Nuovo: "All places you can hear yourself think."
4. "The township architecture."
5. "Several parks, three major shopping areas and tree-lined streets that are mostly beautiful with well-kept, lovely old homes."

that person," Kamihara said. She also "knows when a singer is not singing the right lines to an aria, even without looking at the music."

### Finding their voices

Cioffi's especially interested in helping women find their voices, both in class and in life, just as she did as a single mother raising two daughters.

"It never occurred to me that I could rely on anyone but myself," she said. "But this is what people do. What a curious notion. I was a feminist before Betty Freidan wrote 'The Feminine Mystique.'"

Her advice to women?

"Seek to be a self-possessed full person," Cioffi said. "Don't ever give up your personal power, your hopes and dreams, and be willing to work hard to achieve them. Stay focused, walk a narrow path of discipline in everything you want to accomplish. Do not let yourself become distracted. One diversion from your goals can waste precious time. Take care of yourself."

### Inspired by her father

As a lifelong lover of music, and daughter of a U.S Navy chorus baritone who performed with Gene Krupa and Marian Anderson, Cioffi's journey as vocalist was inspired, first and foremost, by her father, Ralph Cioffi, then by Ben Vereen in "Pippin" and international tenor George Shirley.

"I was just a mother taking care of my kids and a house, but I was so taken with him (Vereen), I said 'I want to perform,'" she recalled.

It wasn't long before she was leading her daughters' endeavors at Grove Street School, in international folk dancing and summer arts programs. Her daughters, Gina, a singer and equestrian, and Jen, an exercise physiologist and nutritionist,



Cioffi with Emmy- and Tony-award winner Tyne Daly, one of many luminaries with whom she has crossed paths.

live nearby. Her grandchildren are musicians—one a harpist, the other a drummer and guitarist.

Landing in Montclair was a short logistical trip for Cioffi and her then-husband, but a seemingly long philosophical journey from Glen Ridge where, growing up, Italian-Americans weren't always warmly received.

"It was more diverse here (in Montclair), pretty progressive, and I wanted my kids to have that," she recalled. "It was, and is, a real melting pot. The people were lovely, welcoming, kind, gentle-natured. There was no sense of ethnic polarization."

When in the 1970s she realized her marriage wouldn't stay together, Cioffi began strategizing on how to make a living.

"What do you do when you have two kids and no job?" she asked. "I wanted to become independent enough that I could take care of my children."

After a turn managing the Cheery Aides at Mountainside Hospital, and business managing the Whole Theater company, under the artistic direction of Olympia Dukakis, later her voice student, Cioffi founded the Dance Arts Center and single-handedly led the non-profit.

### 'Don't ask me how I did it'

Her collaboration with Shirley, whom she called "the Jackie Robinson of opera," expanded when he stepped in as artistic director of The New School for the Arts/New Jersey Opera Institute, which Cioffi founded. Shirley was on the Harlem School of the Arts' board at the time. He "lived here and said, 'I want to support your interest in programming in the inner city and provide programs for aspiring performing artists in any way I can.'" The collaboration lasted more than 18 years.

"He always said I did all the work and he got all the credit," she recalled with a laugh.

When in 1992 the school was forced to move, but couldn't find the new right space, it was time to close the doors. Cioffi seized the opportunity to return to school, choosing Mount Holyoke from among it, Smith and Wellesley, each of which offered a full scholarship. She was a Frances Perkins Scholar and earned her bachelor of arts, cum laude, in music and Italian studies, while also teaching at the college, in Manhattan and Montclair.

"Don't ask me how I did it or raised my kids and worked three jobs," she said. "I was lucky to have two wonderful daughters who loved their home and did well in school. They weren't hard for me to raise."

Along the way, she attended Florence's Instituto Lorenzo di Medici, the Juilliard School, Westminster Choir College and the Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute. She's a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing and National Music Teachers Association.

### Insight and influence

Students are effusive about Cioffi's influence.

"Her greatest gift to students is her ability to draw out the best in each individual," Prcic said. "She understands that you are more than just a voice. You are a person with feelings, thoughts and emotions. As a teacher, you are many things to a student. You are a listener, a friend, a colleague. She has the keen ability to sense when something is wrong. She can hear it in the voice."

"What impresses me most about her is her passion—for singing, for encouraging singers, for teaching us to be the best we can be," Kamihara said. "I think of her as the embodiment of Puccini's Tosca's aria line, 'Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore'— 'I lived for art, I lived for love.' Pat is the true artist!"

Kamihara has been taking semi-private lessons with a handful of women for the past four years, meeting in Cioffi's living room every Saturday morning.

"It is such a wonderful experience to be part of this group, the fellowship of singers who are committed to the art," Kamihara said. "Listening to the singing is attending a mini-concert each week—marvelous and uplifting!"

#### Wearer of many hats

Besides teaching, Cioffi has for decades been a special employee, evaluator, reporter and panel member for the National Endowment for the Arts, and performing artist here and in Europe. She has studied with luminaries and sung under the baton of the late Cesare Alfieri of La Scala Di Milano, under members of Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera. Still, "the most thrilling of all experiences was my first paid performance, during which I performed with two other soloists, singing 'Waltz of the Snowflakes' choral music in 'The Nutcracker' with the New Jersey Symphony and New Jersey Ballet," she recalled, adding, "Earning \$1,000 for four performances in the 1980s was a big deal."

She knows most of her students aren't aiming for illustrious gigs like these, but singing for the fun of it. This doesn't change her approach.

"No matter if you're singing in a non-professional setting or elsewhere, you must be trained as a professional and learn the fundamentals of music before approaching the stage," she cautioned. "One cannot drive blind-folded, and a singer cannot render a piece of music accurately by ear."

Le voci internazionali,  
a group of citizen singers Cioffi founded  
and artistically directs,  
presents its annual holiday concert  
at 4 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 10,  
at St. John's Episcopal Church, 55 Montclair Ave.  
Suggested goodwill offering is \$15,  
\$12 for seniors and \$25 for families.

#### 'Dogged optimism'

No matter the task, Cioffi relies upon a quick wit and scientific mind to overcome obstacles. Her tenacity harkens to both that tall oak tree and a comment made in childhood.

"My father called me a mountain climber, a goat," she recalled. "I have a dogged optimism that just won't quit."

As much as anything else, that resolve pervades Cioffi's lessons, where she reminds students that practice, even when performing casually among friends, is key to success.

"People will never forget if you sing unprepared," she cautioned. "Never be in a hurry to prove to the world something you have yet to master."

Cioffi helps vocalists see in themselves gifts they might otherwise miss, and assures them singing can be a lifelong joy. "I'm mining for gold," she said.

"She never gives up on you," Prcic agreed. "To this day, she keeps cheering me on to go out there and audition. She gives you hope that it is never too late."

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By Chelsea Dodd



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*Chelsea Dodd is Information Services Supervisor at Montclair Public Library.*