Steve Curtis' career in vocal music has brought him both personal satisfaction and the respect and admiration of students and colleagues. He was the University of Oklahoma Student Association's 1989 Outstanding Teacher of the Year.

Ask Steve Curtis what he remembers most about Munich, and he will answer "Shenandoah."

During a recent European tour, Curtis directed members of the University of Oklahoma Choir in an impromptu rendition of Donald Erb's classic—performing on a Munich street corner to an audience of one.

"Our tour guide loves choral music," Curtis recalls. "Her husband teaches at the University of Munich, and she attends all their concerts. As we walked through the square and stood by a fountain, I asked if she would like us to sing for her. When she said, 'Yes,' the choir encircled her and sang 'Shenandoah.' From the moment we started to sing, she began to cry. When we finished, she kissed me on the cheek and said that was the most beautiful music she had ever heard."

The 39-member choir made beautiful music in nine cities during a 13-day tour through Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic.

Singing at masses, the choir performed religious music and American selections by composers such as Alice Parker, Oklahoman Ralph Manuel, Roy Ringwall, the late OU faculty member Michael Hennigan, René Clausen, James Mulholand, Kirby Shaw and selected spirituals.

The choir accumulated enough memories to last a lifetime.

"Like many of the members, this was my first trip to Europe," Curtis says. "I remember waking up one morning under a down-filled blanket and asking myself, 'Am I really in Germany?' Near Munich we went to a theater that had been converted from a barn. The audience filled all 150 seats. We felt honored, because they host 200 performances a year, bringing 'big name' performers from across the region. The acoustics weren't great, but they were adequate.

"In contrast, at Dinkelsbühl the next morning we entered a Catholic cathedral built around 1420. They had just installed a 1.8 million mark organ, and they let our accompanist, Andrew Dugan, play the prelude and postlude." Curtis says the students gained more from the trip than just performing. They experienced Europe: walking through 800-year-old buildings, seeing the homes of Mozart and Schubert and meeting people who shared a love for music. When the trip ended, they felt no regret because they had shared so much.

Sharing with his students is the hallmark of Curtis' career at the University, where he excels both as music director and teacher. The OU Student Association honored the 52-year-old professor with its Outstanding Teacher Award in 1989.

"I treat students as if they were my own children," Curtis says. "I spend much of my life with students, and I value that time. I respect them and get to know them. In 29 years of teaching, I've used as much psychology as musical knowledge. As different personalities meld to produce music, they sense my pride in them. In life, I like what they like; we talk about sports or other events in their lives. Since I love all music, they share their musical knowledge with me. When students leave a rehearsal, I want them to feel not only that they have learned but also have been treated with respect."

Previously, Curtis taught general and choral music in St. Louis. He served 10 years on the music faculty at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, where he earned his B.M.E. degree. He earned a M.M.E. degree from Southern Illinois University and a Ph.D. from OU.

Drawing on his experience in elementary schools, Curtis enjoys volunteering for clinic and ensemble work.

"I love the challenge," he says. "Sometimes, when I walk toward a middle school, a student will make an
unfavorable remark. They don’t know me. Then that same student may face me in class. By the end of the hour, I’ve changed his opinion. When that seventh grader shakes my hand and thanks me, I know I’ve made a difference.”

Curtis makes a difference in other ways, especially his research on the male changing voice. Having written articles on the subject, Curtis knows how such a change can impact a singer. Male sopranos often become baritones.

“When the male larynx changes, it grows to approximately twice its size,” he says. “If the vocal chords double in sung since their voices changed. When I work with boys experiencing this change, I point out that everyone has a different biological clock. I encourage teachers to have the boys sing the notes they have now. As they grow more comfortable with their new voices, they can expand the range of their singing.”

In the future Curtis hopes to develop a set of demonstration video tapes of adolescent boys singing so teachers can learn more about their changing voices. He believes the future of choral music as we know it rests with keeping males involved.

Curtis’ students and faculty colleagues admire him, both as a teacher and a person. Pauline Humphrey, Norman senior music major, says, “When Dr. Curtis walks into the room, he exudes a zest for life. He relishes the moment, and his love of music shows in the high caliber of choirs he directs and the number of successful vocal music teachers graduating from OU. He cares about his students and strives to help them reach their highest potential. By adapting his teaching skills to the individual, he allows them to learn and grow in their own way. As a person, his family comes first, and they receive his total devotion as husband, father and grandfather.”

Ed Gates, professor of piano, admires Curtis’ teaching ability. “In working with Steve, I’m impressed with the clarity and precision of his musicianship,” he says. “Although demanding of his students, his positive attitude brings out their best; they trust and love him. His rehearsals ring with the joy of singing and playing.”

Meryl Mantione, associate professor of music, agrees. “Steve’s knowledge of voice function allows him to teach correct technique. By using vocal exercises to promote and encourage proper posture, breathing, phonation and resonance, he brings students to their full potential. His choices of repertoire cover a broad range of languages, national styles and historical periods.”

Curtis feels blessed to be working in his chosen field. From the fourth grade, he knew he wanted to teach. He remembers listening to teachers and saying to himself, “I would have done that differently.” Or, “I like the way he or she handled that question.” Later, when he was in college, he struggled with a choice between entering speech therapy or music education. An older brother had entered music, and Curtis did not want to imitate him, so he started in speech therapy. However, during the first semester he found himself standing outside rehearsal rooms so often that he switched to music.

He never has regretted that decision.

“Music thrives through time because it develops the human spirit,” he says. “Music gives and nourishes hope. If you appreciate a piece of music, or a painting or a sculpture, then you rise above merely existing. You live.”

—Robert Ferrier