



# Opera Man

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photos by Master Sgt. Keith Reed

**Singer hones 'hobby with a goal' in Naples**

**Manny Martinez (opposite) strikes a pose in the Galleria Umberto in downtown Naples, Italy.** The master sergeant attends weekly voice lessons nearby in pursuit of an opera career he hopes will begin when his Air Force service ends. Martinez (below) reviews correspondence with Senior Master Sgt. Rory Calhoun, first sergeant for Detachment 2, U.S. Air Forces in Europe, where Martinez also pursues a college degree in addition to his job as noncommissioned officer in charge of personnel programs.



As a 2-year-old, Manny Martinez would climb onto the family recliner and perform for his mom such crooner classics as “Moon River” by Andy Williams and other mellow melodies by artists such as Perry Como and Julio Iglesias.

During one such performance, he fell and smacked his head on the tile floor of their living room in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. But despite such a bumpy start that left him with a scar above his right eye, Martinez continued to pursue his love of music.

The journey brought him to Naples, Italy, where the 32-year-old master sergeant is assigned as the noncommissioned officer in charge of personnel programs at Detachment 2, U.S. Air Forces in Europe Mission Support Squadron.

For many, an upcoming assignment to Naples is a source of dread after listening to co-workers quick to color it with stereotypes of petty crime and trash. But Martinez met the news with unbridled excitement. Naples was the perfect place to continue a “singing and travel habit” after beginning his Air Force résumé with tours at Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D.; Bitburg Air Base, Germany; Hill Air Force Base, Utah; Izmir Air Base, Turkey; and Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany.

“I would not be able to do all this without the Air Force,” Martinez said of the opportunity he’s had to further his singing development. “It was the Air Force that brought me here, and I’m thankful for that.”

## The Naples connection

In Naples, he discovered a love for this historically blessed city whose pulse and energy match the same enthusiasm Martinez brings to the office each day. But perhaps more importantly, he also came upon the person who has both focused and furthered his love of singing.

Through friends, he heard about Jeanette Taylor-Sciorba, a retired British opera singer who teaches from her home on the grounds of Christ Church, a tranquil oasis located smack in the middle of chaotic Naples. She invited Martinez to stop by and sing for her.

So the newcomer to Naples “plowed” his way downtown for the rendezvous. Taylor-Sciorba, a friendly, straightforward woman, assessed Martinez to have a “good natural voice,” but told him a “natural voice does not have the discipline to use it in an operatic style for the long term. You’ve got what it takes; you’ve just got to work on it.”

# Martinez

Martinez was only too happy to renew his commitment to a musical pursuit that had steadily progressed both before and after he joined the Air Force.

## The early years

From the family recliner, a young Martinez advanced to the church choir where he was promoted from choir boy to cantor when, as a 17-year-old, he jokingly made fun of the church's incumbent cantor. His friend and church organ player, Frank DeProspero, dared him to step up and offer his services instead.

A cantor coup didn't ensue. Instead Martinez was chosen as cantor for noon mass until he joined the Air Force in 1988. He joined for reasons commonly heard: looking for an opportunity for something different, not ready for college and wanting an independent lifestyle away from his family.

Despite his intention to serve four years and get out, he re-enlisted and relocated to Germany, Utah and Turkey where he sang in church choirs. It was during his next assignment at Spangdahlem where his singing moved into a higher gear by responding to an ad from a local woman offering voice lessons.

It was there that Martinez tuned into a world of singing in French, German and Italian while learning to appreciate the historical period of musical masterpieces. He was selected to sing in the chorus when Handel's "Messiah" was performed in the Bitburg Chapel by professional American and German opera singers.



**Foot power and trains propel Martinez to voice lessons** in downtown Naples where he studies with former professional opera singer Jeanette Taylor-Sciorba at her home in the reclusive confines of Christ Church. The weekly trip takes about 30 minutes from office door to church gate.

Although his love of music had reached new heights, his expectations were, and still remain, planted firmly on the ground.

## A modest proposal

"I'm a rookie," he said, in a self-assessment of his operatic abilities. "If I tried to sing at the San Carlo Theater opera house, I would be booed and have tomatoes thrown at me."

His teacher, Taylor-Sciorba, who performed in that grand Neapolitan edifice during her career, offers a kinder, gentler viewpoint.

"Manny's got a lovely, natural voice. He's a lucky boy," she said before their weekly Monday practice. "If only he would practice a little more, who knows if he could use it after his Air Force career," she chided with a friendly smile. Others also notice when Martinez skips his homework. His Italian landlords enjoy his evening studies and question him if they haven't heard his voice after a few days.

His German neighbor also would question Martinez about his absent voice, explaining that his wife enjoyed listening. She enjoyed it so much, in fact, that Martinez flew to Germany to sing at their wedding. He's done likewise at five others.

Nothing would please him more than steady doses of practice. Martinez said it would be "awesome" to increase his hour-and-a-half weekly lesson to three times a week, but honing his baritone voice competes with an Air Force career and the pursuit of a degree in human resources management. The average duration for operatic voice study in Italy is eight years.

"That's tough for me," said Martinez, who's into his third year with Taylor-Sciorba. "It holds me back from progressing as fast as I'd like."

But he's not willing to throw in the towel just yet. Martinez still holds hopes that after his military retirement in the next four to five years, his "hobby with a goal" might offer him the possibility of singing in the chorus of an opera company.

"I'm just barely scratching the surface here, and it's great," Martinez said of his progress thus far that he likened to the incremental process of learning a second language. But just as he's mastered three languages, he holds out hope for equal success with his singing. "Hopefully someday I'll be able to get up there and do it. I could get there. I just have to practice."

Martinez has had a glimpse of life on the stage, and he finds it both humbling and rewarding. Through local community theater, Martinez had the opportunity to perform

in a variety of musicals such as "Music Man," "School House Rock" and "Alladino," a spoof of the Disney movie "Aladdin." His résumé also includes performances from the opera "Edgar" by Giacomo Puccini during a military community recital.

"The opportunity to do something in the community is great and humbling," Martinez said. "To be able to hear people come up and tell you they became emotional or sad from my performance — when you can express those emotions with people and share them with others — that's great. You get a big high off it."

But there's also an internal reward. "You forget about what's going on in the world, in the office or with your broken-down car. For that span of time you're immersed in this."

## Voice at work

That immersion is clearly evident as Martinez and Taylor-Sciorba study together. On a hot July afternoon, Martinez shows up dressed casually in shorts and sandals. A music stand is positioned just inside the open doorway where sunlight shines through and onto the pages of Handel's "The Messiah." Nearby sits a baby grand piano.

After a few moments of friendly conversation, they settle down to work. Martinez is transformed as his friendly smile and soft-spoken voice are replaced by a focused expression and a deep baritone voice that fills the small room to the accompaniment of Taylor-Sciorba on the piano.

"Feel your way through the beat of the lower notes," she instructs after stopping play. Martinez listens, nods in understanding and continues singing "the people who walked in darkness." Another halt. "Bring a little more joy in it," advises the instructor. The need for joy is duly noted and added. Another stop. "You did a little scooping on that," Taylor-Sciorba remarked with constructive humor. "Well, we certainly don't want to scoop Handel!" Martinez quipped. Laughter.

Under such tutelage, Martinez said he has come a long way the past two years. He has worked diligently on basics such as breathing, posture, how to hold his dia-



**Martinez's baritone voice resounds** as he sings within the cozy confines of Taylor-Sciorba's studio house where he travels weekly to discover how far his love for singing will take him.

phragm, the tightening of the facial muscles and positioning of the tongue.

"Every sound in your body has a placement," Martinez explained. "You must learn where every sound vibrates, how you use your face and bones and how it rings through your body. It's very difficult to work on these things."

Musically speaking, one could say Martinez is operatically buff. Long operatic phrases formerly requiring three to four breaths now can be negotiated with only one.

Martinez said he also is better able to appreciate and understand what the author of a piece of music was trying to convey. As Taylor-Sciorba reminded him once, "There is reason why Mozart put those notes there."

"I think that's the hardest part, especially in opera which is repetitive," he said of the challenge to keep the song a "living thing" to the audience. Who best handled that challenge? Frank Sinatra. Martinez is a huge fan of Old Blue Eyes and how he could express a song.

"He had a good voice," Martinez said. "Not the greatest voice, but he took you there with his phrasing and delivery that breathed life into a song."

That's what Martinez wants to do. Be there and take people along with him. How far the journey will continue is unknown.

"I'm enjoying the experience. If it turns out to be a career at the Met, that's great. If it's only community theater, that will also be great. The important thing is I'm enjoying it." ☺