



*Suna Gunther, an assistant professor of voice at The College of Saint Rose, in Albany, New York, specializes in the ornamentation and improvisation of different singing genres. She teaches students how to give an authentic performance of the music they sing, be it opera or Motown. Gunther, who earned her D.M. at Indiana University, is also a soprano and a touring musician. Several times a year she and the five-member ensemble Trio Chicago and Friends perform a cross section of American music in non-Western countries, as representatives of the U.S. Department of State.*

## PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Jane Gottlieb

### The Music of the College of St. Rose



#### A Country with No Formal Music Education

Most recently, she visited Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a country, Gunther notes, that offers no formal music education, and where the cinema only recently became legal. During her visit, news broke of the murder of American journalist and Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, apparently at the hand of the Saudi crown prince.

Nonetheless, at an elementary school in the city of Dhahran, girls in Halloween costumes and teachers largely covered by their abayas and niqabs saw Gunther's group perform selections from "Porgy and Bess," the overture to "Candide," some blues classics, and songs by Duke Ellington.

"You'd think it was a Justin Bieber concert. After the first piece, they erupted in screaming," explains Gunther, a soprano. "It was the first live music performed at the school."

#### Creating Lasting Ties to Other Countries

Over the past eight years, she has traveled with the ensemble to 15 largely non-Western countries, some

multiple times. The visits are part of a suite of cultural programs the State Department uses to create lasting ties to other countries.

The gig has found her performing the works of Copeland, Ellington, Bernstein, Porter, Gershwin, and Joplin before children, college students, and diplomats in Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, Turkey, Micronesia, Kuwait, Chile, and Saudi Arabia. The ensemble has commemorated Fulbright anniversaries, the 60th anniversary of U.S.-Korea relations, the 40th anniversary of President Nixon's visit to China, and the 750th anniversary of the founding of the Thai city of Chiang Rai.

#### Making a Difference in a Small Way

Following performances, Trio Chicago and Friends holds discussions and assists music students with their work. The musicians are sure to discuss the influence of other cultures on American music and mention that many of the greats are first-generation immigrants, who owe a lot to their countries of origin.





Often, their hosts reciprocate by performing their music and offering pointers on the instruments they play. Sometimes, the two cultures meld their work. “We’re not there to change the politics,” Gunther says, “but to make a difference in a small way.”

She became a cultural ambassador as an Indiana University graduate student, when she was standing in line for coffee and a classmate let her know that the State Department program needed a soprano.

Gunther has not only become a world traveler as a result, but she now organizes the trips with the embassies and consulates.

### An Emerging Openness

Among the many countries where she has performed, she says Saudi Arabia stands out for a few reasons. First, there was the turmoil building between that country and the U.S. Additionally, she says the experience was notable for precisely the opposite trend—an emerging openness.

Among the many countries where she has performed, she says Saudi Arabia stands out for a few reasons. First, there was the turmoil building between that country and the U.S. Additionally, she says the experience was notable for precisely the opposite trend—an emerging openness.

The two performances in parks, for example, mark the first time the U.S. government has put its name on a public musical event in Saudi Arabia.

Another first: Saudi dancers performing a traditional sword dance—which they invited a Trio Chicago member to join.





The two performances in parks, for example, mark the first time the U.S. government has put its name on a public musical event in Saudi Arabia. Another first: Saudi dancers performing a traditional sword dance—which they invited a Trio Chicago member to join.

There also was a glimpse into the future at that elementary school in Dhahran.

“After (the performance), during the Q&A, a small girl asked whether they could learn music,” Gunther says. “A faculty member said ‘That could be something we could do in an afterschool program. I think we’ll pursue it.’” Gunther concludes, “This makes me a much better teacher with a world view. I can come back and tell my students about music and cultures from all different parts of the world.”

---

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Jane Gottlieb is a freelance journalist based in Albany, New York, and a member of the marketing staff at The College of Saint Rose.

I see the special in **SPECIAL-LITE**

On my campus, many building systems require constant attention or maintenance. But there's never an issue with our entrance systems and doors because we chose the resilient and attractive products of Special-Lite.



See what they can do for your campus:  
[special-lite.com/solutions-higher\\_ed](http://special-lite.com/solutions-higher_ed)



[info@special-lite.com](mailto:info@special-lite.com) • 800.821.6531





[www.suitmate.com](http://www.suitmate.com)

# What's your facility missing?

## The SUITMATE® Swimsuit Water Extractor

An innovative system that efficiently removes 95% of water from a wet swimsuit in just eight seconds.

**SUITMATE®**   
Swimsuit Water Extractor

1-800-553-3353  
[info@suitmate.com](mailto:info@suitmate.com)  
Manufactured in the USA

