



**INEZ
LUNSFORD
SILBERG**
1908-1995

**FLORENCE
GILLAM
BIRDWELL**
1924-2021



**MASTER
TEACHERS
OF OCU
VOCALISTS**

Oklahoma City University is the Taj Mahal of voice students in Oklahoma. If you need a trained ear listening to you, encouraging you when you make progress and alerting you to bad habits that inhibit your progress, look no further than master teachers Inez Lunsford Silberg and Florence Gillam Birdwell.

Inez Scott Lunsford was born in April 1098 in Paris, Texas. She graduated from the Kansas City Conservatory of Music, establishing her international career as an operatic soprano. She was a favored soloist with symphonies across the country and studied under many opera greats in New York City, Boston, San Francisco, Rome, and London.

She married insurance agent Max Silberg in March 1943 and came to Oklahoma City University as a voice teacher in 1945. Instrumental in building the Oklahoma City University Music Department, she headed the department for fifteen years, training some of the country's leading opera singers.

Her students included Met Opera soprano Leona Mitchell, Met and New York City Opera baritone Stephen Dickson, Met Opera tenor Chris Merritt, mezzo soprano Sheila Smith and New York City Opera mezzo-soprano Gwendolyn Jones. She also coached a number of Miss America contestants include 1967 winner Jane Jayroe. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1977. The master teacher died in April 1985 at age 77 in Oklahoma City.

One of her students – **Florence Gillam Hobin** – came to Oklahoma City University after a music professor heard her sing with her high school orchestra. Born in December 1924 in Douglas, Arizona, Florence grew up in Santa Fe, New Mexico and graduated from Lawton High School in 1941.

Shortly before receiving her bachelor's degree in voice in 1945, Florence married fellow Oklahoma City University student Robert Birdwell. She was invited to join the chorus of the Met Opera and to audition for the role of Laurey in the movie musical Oklahoma! Those plans were derailed by a throat infection that damaged her larynx.

Her teacher Inez Silberg told her devastated student that she could still talk, recommending Florence turn to teaching and sent her three students. Through her technical prowess and a warm but firm demeanor, Birdwell taught "how to sing from the heart". She believed it wasn't just the melody, but also the lyric.

Oklahoma City University hired her as an adjunct faculty in 1947, where she received her Masters of Music in 1949. She was promoted to Assistant Professor in 1976 – and stayed for 67 years. Her students included 1981 Miss America Susan Powell, Tony winners Kristin Chenoweth and Kelli O'Hara, Tony nominee Lara Teeter, operatic soprano Barbara Fox DeMaio, and Broadway performer Stacy Logan.

In 2015, Birdwell traveled to New York, when both Chenoweth and O'Hara were nominated for a Tony as Leading Actress in a Musical. During her acceptance speech, O'Hara dedicated her victory to Birdwell, thanking her for influencing every facet of O'Hara's life.

Birdwell received the Governor's Art Award in 1985 and was inducted in the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame in 2012. She died in February 2021 at age 96.