When they aren't in front of a classroom, a talented handful of faculty members can sometimes be found on stage somewhere, singing their hearts out.

Beverley Pooley, Donald Regan and Deborah Malamud sing in public just for the joy of it. They lend their voices to various musical theater groups and vocal ensembles in Ann Arbor. Carl Schneider, who has been heard singing on the sidewalk on his way to work, recently started taking singing lessons.

Pooley, professor of law and associate dean for the Law Library, reportedly has stolen the show in U-M Gilbert and Sullivan Society productions. He considers himself an actor, not a musician, and is modest about his vocal skills. "I'm really a pretty bad singer. I came into singing through the theater. I was acting with the Ann Arbor Civic Theater and I got involved with some musicals like Finian's Rainbow and Anything Goes," he says. More recently, as the dastardly Captain Hook in AACT's Peter Pan, he caused a sensation when his hat caught fire on stage.

Regan, the William Bishop Professor of Law and Philosophy, just started singing again with Ann Arbor's Comic Opera Guild after 17 years away from the stage. This summer, he also performed in the U-M Gilbert & Sullivan Society's production of Cox and Box. He takes singing lessons and recently persuaded Schneider to begin lessons as well.

Regan's first local performances were with the Gilbert & Sullivan group in 1968 when he joined the faculty. After performing in two shows that year, he didn’t sing onstage again until 1974. He sang lead roles in shows for two seasons, then semi-retired again.

He blames a sort of inertia for his long breaks away from the limelight. "When you are involved and doing it, you enjoy it so much that you’re inclined to keep doing it. Then when you quit for a while, you think, ‘golly, it really takes a lot of time.’ It’s hard to remember how much fun it is. I suspect that I’ll continue now that I’m back into it."

Unlike Regan, Malamud has been singing almost nonstop since kindergarten. "I was singing long before I even knew what a lawyer was," says the mezzosoprano assistant professor of law. Music is such a central part of her life that she has found a group to sing with at every stage of her career. While studying law, she sang with the University of Chicago Collegium and also with His Majesty's Clerkes. When she moved to
Philadelphia to clerk for the Hon. Louis H. Pollak, one of the first things she did was check into the local choruses.

"When I clerked for Justice Blackmun, I was too busy to even dream of singing, but later, when I was practicing with a firm in Washington, I sang with the Washington Bach Consort. I even found a group to sing with when I was at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for a year. I was already making inquiries about the singing scene in Ann Arbor as I was considering joining the faculty here in 1992," she laughs. A fan of Renaissance and Baroque music, she has since performed with the U-M Music School’s Early Music Ensemble, the Michigan Bach Society and Our Lady’s Madrigal Singers.

In ways both artistic and social, singing greatly enriches her life. "Part of what attracts me is just the music itself. It’s powerfully transporting. I love what singing feels like," she notes. "I’m a very verbal person and I find I value singing as a non-verbal form of expression."

Equally valuable are the friendships she forms in choral ensembles. "Because I sing, I have a potential circle of friends that includes not only law faculty but people from other parts of the university and the community. It makes the place I’m in larger than the job I’m in," she says.

Pooley agrees. "It’s very important for people who are busily engaged in an intellectual endeavor to have a hobby that gets them out of that circle. Theater does that. It gives them a window on what the world outside is doing."

They aren’t the first faculty to sing on the side. Many recall former Dean Allan Smith’s wonderful voice. He sang for years in Methodist Church choirs and in comic reviews at the Association of American Law Schools’ annual meetings. Professor John Reed, now emeritus, also lent his tenor to the AALS parodies and occasional musical shows faculty put on for students’ entertainment. He also has sung in or directed the First Baptist Church choir since 1950.

The Law School played a big part in launching Pooley’s singing career. About 20 years ago, a student organized an in-house production of Gilbert & Sullivan’s Trial by Jury. Regan and Reed took part, and Pooley was persuaded to take his first G&S role. "I was of the view that if you can’t sing and dance, you shouldn’t be doing Gilbert and Sullivan, but I agreed to play the judge. We won uncritical applause," he says with a chuckle. After that, he started trying out for roles with the U-M Gilbert and Sullivan Society. Through that group, he’s worked with skillful musicians who helped him learn the tricks of theatrical singing. He’s become quite attached to both the group and the material and has played in 15 UMGASS productions over the last 20 years.

The singing professors say they tend to keep their musical avocation and their work separate. However, they all make some use of their vocal skills in teaching. If you pass by Regan’s Hutchins Hall office just before his classes, you’ll hear him inside singing to warm up his mellifluous voice before he lectures.

Says Pooley, "One of the things I learned as an actor is that you have to keep people’s attention. It’s very difficult for people to pay attention for an hour, let alone two. Knowing that helps me maintain something for students to focus on. I hope performing assists in teaching just as teaching assists in performing."

Malamud recently found herself getting hoarse while lecturing, so she’s going to start warming up first like Regan – but not in her office, she says.

Otherwise, Malamud says her music seldom connects to her life in law. Recently, however, she linked the two when she gave a talk to the Jewish Law Students’ Association on what it means to her as a Jew to sing Christian texts. At the time, she was preparing to perform the St. John’s Passion with the Bach
Society. She found herself troubled about singing Bach's vivid Gospel-based account of the Jews' role in Christ's crucifixion. She then came across a scholarly article by a musical colleague exploring prejudice in early music. The article validated her concerns and inspired her to explore the issue and present it to both the JLSA group and the Bach Society. "I used my academic skills to do some research on anti-Semitism in the time of Bach. It's one of the few times I let myself get scholarly about music," she said.

The resulting discussion at the JLSA meeting was fascinating. "Some of the students thought that I was crazy to think I could sing these texts; others thought I was crazy to be concerned about the issue at all," she notes. She takes a more moderate view. She has concluded that it's possible to find a universal meaning in the music that transcends the limits of the problematic texts.

"The sacred music of the period is some of the most moving I've ever heard. To give up this music, the musician in me would grieve," she says. Nonetheless, she finds it worthwhile to think and talk about the texts, their historical context and their meaning when performed in a modern setting. "As I thought about this, I felt that it was almost my responsibility to use my analytical tools and training to present the issue and facilitate a discussion about it. That's been a new experience for me. It's exciting to use my intellectual skills to puzzle out a conflict I was feeling in my musical life.

She's grateful that Ann Arbor is a community where you can discuss such deeply sensitive issues without being branded a zealot. She also was pleased when one of her groups decided to try singing Hebrew sacred works by a Jewish composer. Malamud had great fun playing Hebrew coach to the chorus.

Malamud says music is actually an escape from the demands of her professional life. "I don't unwind by vegging out. Passivity doesn't relax me. Singing is an intense experience that really takes me away from my work," she says. In fact, this summer, singing was her vacation. She participated in a week-long a capella singing workshop at Smith College, working in small ensembles. Like Regan and Schneider, Malamud takes lessons with voice teachers, but Pooley never has. Regan studies with U-M music Professor Leslie Guinn. What does one do in voice lessons? "A large part of it is working on what singers call technique. Singing is a very complicated muscle process. It involves the interaction of many muscle groups, some of which are so far from ordinary voluntary control that non-singers don't even know they have them," he says. Improving technique — extending range and dynamic control, improving the resonance, developing legato and agility and so on — is a matter both of strengthening muscles and of altering and refining muscle coordination with appropriately chosen vocal exercises.

The teacher listens, since a singer cannot hear himself as the audience hears him, and guides the student through the exercises he needs at the moment.

Regan spends as much lesson and practice time concentrating on technique as on singing music or thinking about interpretation. "The technical stuff is fun in itself," he says. "Singing is physically enjoyable, like running, as well as aesthetically rewarding."

At a Christmas carol sing, Regan was so impressed with Schneider's voice that...
Carl Schneider just started taking singing lessons with School of Music Professor Leslie Guinn.

he convinced his colleague to take lessons. Schneider also studies with Guinn when the pair can make their schedules match; he’s working on fundamentals and “hasn’t yet sung a whole song,” he reports.

Malamud trains with Karen Lykes, also on the the School of Music faculty. She’s been developing the upper range of her voice and learning new repertoire. This summer, she treated herself to sessions with a Russian accompanist who is visiting the campus.

Despite long years in front of audiences and students, all the faculty singers still get nervous before performing. “I’m highly nervous. I have more stage fright now than ever,” Pooley says. “Nervousness is created by the sum total of your knowledge of the things that have gone wrong and as you grow older, that knowledge grows. So does the apprehension.”

Regan suffers from stage fright too. “I’m anxious before class and before performing. There’s nothing to do with that anxiety but be anxious; once you’re onstage, you can channel it into your performance,” he says.

Malamud makes use of her experience battling nerves when singing to calm herself in the court and classroom. “When I made my first oral argument, the experience I drew on was the terror of performing a Bach duet,” she recalls.

All four Law School singers downplay their own talent while speaking highly of their musical colleagues. They don’t hide their hobby, yet they don’t promote it at work. One reason is that they are reluctant to overstate their abilities when they are really in this for fun. “I think people believe if you are taking singing lessons and performing that you are claiming to have a professional voice,” Regan says.

Malamud says for that reason, she tends not to mention her concerts to colleagues and students. “You worry the first time you invite people to a concert that they will not find you good enough to justify the time you are spending on it,” she says. “We’re all such darned overachievers in every other aspect of our lives that it’s hard to convince ourselves that this is worth doing even if we’re not superstars.”

Still, she says, “It’s not strange to have a career and another avocation. It makes me more interested in knowing whether my students have a secret life.”

Secret or not, for these individuals singing is a vital element that enriches their lives. Regardless of the time involved or what people might think, they go right on taking lessons, taking the stage and making a joyful noise.