Yvonne Wong gave up her legal studies, and the prospects of a lucrative career, to pursue her passion for performing Cantonese Opera.

Yvonne Wong Mong-shu might have been expected to embark on a law career when she enrolled in City University's law school in the late 1990s. But she instead chose Cantonese Opera, which she has been performing for 10 years. "People get a job either for the money or for interest. Performing Cantonese Opera gives me great satisfaction," Wong said. "Not being a lawyer is not a sacrifice for me, but giving up Cantonese Opera would be a sacrifice," she said.

She almost completed her law degree but eventually gave up as the final examination clashed with a performance in Singapore. The young woman chose to pursue a life on stage instead.

"A Singapore troupe invited me to play a leading role. It was an invaluable chance," she said. "I had already decided I would be taking this road at the time. I'm happy with the knowledge I gained."

Yvonne Wong and Ng Kei-yan joined the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts' first Cantonese Opera troupe, established last week. Made up by the pair and students and graduates, the group has the youngest full-time performers among Hong Kong's opera troupes.

Wong and Ng first encountered Cantonese Opera when they were in senior secondary school. They met by learning from the same Beijing Opera master. "I saw a banner promoting Cantonese Opera courses outside my school and I thought I might try it. I didn't know what Cantonese Opera was about at the time," Wong said. Ng, a woman who plays male roles, said she was attracted to the art by watching fund-raising galas on television. "I hadn't thought I would be a performer when I was first learning it, but then Wong brought me onto the stage," Ng said.

While most of their opera classmates treated the art as a hobby, the pair decided to make a career out of it. After taking part in various troupes, they established their own venture. They are involved in about 200 performances a year, some of them overseas. Their show at Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre last week filled 80 per cent of the seats. "Sometimes after the show audience members tell me how great I was, and I know my efforts have paid off," Wong said.

But both said they had been disheartened in the past over a lack of performance opportunities, but were feeling more positive now.

Ng once considered giving up but decided to stay on when new roles came up.

"It's great that we have been able to work as a pair from the start. We encouraged each other when things didn't look up," she said.

Wong said she has encountered pressure from many sides. "We face many attacks and criticisms as performers. Competition is fierce in the industry. But I usually forget about them when I wake up the next morning," she said.

Her family doubted her choice of career in the beginning, but later supported her when she proved results. Wong's salary is not as high as a lawyer's, earning HK$10,000 to HK$40,000 a month depending on the number of performances she gets, but for her that is enough.

When they started out 10 years ago, prospects were dim. Now Cantonese Opera is being promoted more strongly in secondary schools and elsewhere. The Academy for Performing Arts established the Young Academy Cantonese Opera Troupe with support from the Home Affairs Bureau, which is putting forward HK$4.5 million over three years. The troupe is receiving instruction from such veterans as Lam Ka-sing.

The pair are happy with their choice. "This will be our career for life," Ng said.