



## *Sylvia Olden Lee: A Fierce, Happy Partisan of Immortality*

*June 29, 1917 – April 10, 2004*

**T**he Schiller Institute, Lyndon and Helga LaRouche, and the LaRouche Youth Movement, this evening commemorate, with a pedagogical concert, the immortality that is the life of the Artist, Sylvia Olden Lee.

Sylvia always demanded that those that knew her be reminded, and those that had not met her, be acquainted with the fact, that she was the grand-daughter of a slave; that she was one of the last of Americans to have known directly an immediate ancestor, Sylvia's grandfather, who was born in slavery, who, also fought in the Union Army.

Her grandmother was one of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, that group formed at Fisk College, the Nashville Classical education-based college, founded in 1866. In the 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, in a series of concerts given in Germany, Czechoslovakia, England, and other European nations, introduced the world to the Negro Spiritual, in two tours intended to finance the school's work. Both Sylvia's parents were accomplished musicians, although her minister father was primarily a civil rights activist, who left Alabama because of death threats, and moved to Washington, where, like the LaRouche Youth Movement, he weekly lobbied Congress.

Sylvia, with several of her close associates, such as William Warfield, Roland Hayes, William Duncan Allen, Hall Johnson, Robert McFerrin, George Shirley, and Mattiwilda Dobbs, carried the strain of Classical culture. She, and they together, preserved that devotion to Classical music culture that was under constant

assault by Dark Age forces, both in the United States and abroad.

During 1993 and 1994, she began a close association with, first the Schiller Institute, and then directly with Lyndon LaRouche. This association was begun through the National Conservatory of Music Movement, and, later, went on to directly supporting LaRouche's Presidential campaign. In the last three years, her work was increasingly centered on assisting the development of the teaching of choruses, including those of the LaRouche Youth Movement, in order to preserve the singing of the Negro Spiritual, as well to encourage the formation of nationwide singing societies of non-professional singers, that would meet weekly.

### **Saving Young Lyrical Minds In Advance**

It is not accidental that Sylvia Lee would spend a significant portion of the final ten years of her life working with Lyndon and Helga LaRouche, and, during the last three years, the LaRouche Youth Movement, to culminate the sixty-five-year project she referred to as "Project SYLVIA: Saving Young Lyric Voices In Advance." Sylvia's combativeness, and uniquely polemical teaching style, made the association with LaRouche a natural one. It was, further, a more fruitful collaboration because of the work of her close friend William Warfield, a Board Member of the Schiller Institute, collaborator of LaRouche and the LaRouche Presidential campaign, and a consummate master of the Classical art song.

In a seminal conversation in 1993, involving Amelia Robinson, Sylvia, and Robert McFerrin, the idea was advanced to perform Mrs. Robinson's Spirituals-based play, *Through The Years*, a project that was implemented in Chicago in 1994, and Washington, D.C. in 1995, at the urging of Helga and Lyndon LaRouche, for the which Sylvia, as well as Warfield, acted as consultants.

For nearly seventy years, from 1925, when she first accompanied her father at the piano in Franz Schubert's lied, "Du Bist die Ruh," through her and Warfield's intensive work sessions with the LaRouche Youth Movement during 2000–2003, it was Sylvia who relentlessly conveyed to America the Classical intent behind the Fisk Jubilee Singers' first introduction, of all of 1860s Reconstruction America, to the Negro Spiritual. Her father had been a member of the Fisk Quartet with the aforementioned tenor Roland Hayes, and her mother was both an exceptional singer, as well as pianist, performing Beethoven's "Apassionata" piano sonata for her Senior recital. Sylvia practiced the time-honored tradition of Cotton Mather, Franklin, Paine, and LaRouche, in pamphleteering. She always carried and distributed her small pamphlet called "Project SYLVIA: Saving Young Lyric Voices In Advance." This was a project that she had carried out for sixty-five years, from 1939, the year of her mother's death, to her own. Thus, the project was not named after Sylvia, but her mother (also named Sylvia), and was dedicated, not, to her mother's *memory*, so much as to her *immortality*.

Her mother had tasted of immortality, by resisting what would have been, for a weaker person, a self-enslaved person, a life-destroying, but irresistible, temptation. When asked by financier Paul Cravath, then a board member of New York City's Metropolitan Opera, to deny her African-American ancestry in order that she be permitted to sing at that then-segregated opera house, Sylvia's mother happily forfeited that career. Almost fifty years later, her daughter would become the first American of African descent to serve as vocal coach at the Metropolitan, and would play an instrumental role in securing Marion Anderson's debut, as the first African-American singer on the Met stage, in 1955.

It was the successful assertion, by Lee, Anderson, and a short while later, Robert McFerrin, of the inalienable right of all people to a Classical expression of the Beauty of the human soul, which was the real achievement of that victory that Sylvia, and, posthumously, Sylvia's mother, won. So, Sylvia's mother *did* in fact get to sing at the Met, in the persons of Anderson and McFerrin. That vindication of her immortality, practiced by Sylvia from the time of her mother's death in 1939, became, through Sylvia, *the efficient intention* that was sung by Anderson, McFerrin, and by every singer and every member of the audience that was moved by those performances.

### **Sylvia Olden Lee And Immortality**

To be immortal is to be uniquely sovereign in the service of the Highest Good. To be so sovereign, the *rule* of the self, must be the same, as the *nature* of the self. The method of changing, improving, the state of Being of man and nature, celebrates Man's fulfilled nature, not as a goal, but as a completed act in the simultaneity of eternity. The mission of Classical art, is to happily divest us of the delusion, that we, each of us, do not always have wings with which to soar our souls to that immortal Place in which we, each through our sovereign acts, may choose to abide forever.

So, Tragedy is often the happiest of experiences of Classical art. Not because "tragedy is happy," but because Classical Art provokes us to admit, that Tragedy is not inevitable.

For those who are its students, Classical tragedy will liberate and uplift; those who refuse its gift, are self-doomed, but, now, knowingly so. This insight, that tragedy is not "fated," but that man's destiny is changeable, is the efficient domain of action of the Negro Spiritual, Classically rendered. These were not "slave songs." These were freedom songs, that destroyed the slave mentality. Sylvia Lee, and the tradition from which she originated, knew this to be so. LaRouche, and the philosophical tradition that he represents, have, not merely the same outlook, but provide the pedagogical context for the realization of Sylvia's, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers', universal mission.

We know this, because, this Classical approach to art, and to politics, often infuriates, because it takes away the excuse for persisting in the fear of immortality that is the refuge of the underling. Sylvia's teaching method was to surgically remove artifice, "phoneyess" from performance, no matter what the protest a singer might give in its defense. Tragedy, the tragic, slave/underling identity, so overcome, either in Classical dramatic performance in music, or in politics, inspires all who accept its gift, with the courage to act for the Highest Good. That is, "The greatest work of art is the construction of true political freedom," as Schiller tells us.

Consider, that whenever the African-American masters of the Classical art form, such as Sylvia Olden Lee, and her precursors and descendants, masterfully perform the immortality of Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, the Negro Spiritual as sung particularly by Harry Burleigh or Hall Johnson, or Mozart and Verdi's operas, that the tragedy that is the legacy of the obscene crime of American slavery, were instantly, efficiently overcome, by that very act of celebrating Classical art, through inspired performance. They have claimed the universal province of Beauty as their own, and they walk in the company of, and converse with, the greatest masters of the soul of Mankind. How absurd, then, is the sophist's idea that

such a man or woman, could be inferior to anyone else, based on the color of their skin!

So, when a German audience in 1927, responded to Sylvia Lee's friend, Roland Hayes, as he quieted the theater to an eerie silence with his ethereal performance of Schubert's "Du Bist die Ruh," by later exclaiming, "Finally, an American who can sing our music!" every "Jim Crow" racist that had denied Hayes access to a stage in America, was defeated.

When Sylvia Lee's Marian Anderson, who in 1955 sang at the Metropolitan Opera largely because of Sylvia's direct intervention, was denied an audience at Washington's Constitution Hall, causing Eleanor (and President Franklin) Roosevelt to intercede for her to sing, instead, to 75,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, 1939, all Americans, who *were* Americans, were uplifted, their dormant sense of the possible, resurrected that Sunday morning. (Twenty-four years later, at that same spot, Anderson would introduce the youthful Martin Luther King, who would make that now-matured audience dream again of the possible, in a poetic re-statement of Lincoln's Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses.)

Sylvia, like Anderson, Hayes, Amelia Robinson, knew racism to be absurd, and never let the experience of racism define who she was. She outflanked it by instead living in history, not in reaction. She ran a war in favor of immortality. Hers was a living history that would pick

her pupils up by the scruff of the neck and shout, "Don't you know who you really are? Then, *sing of that, and sing that way!*" Her teaching was so startling, and so effective, because it was so true.

In Boston, during the Democratic Convention, the LaRouche Youth Movement admonished several admiring individuals who remarked on the beauty of their Classical performances of *bel canto* settings of Bach and Negro Spirituals, that they should consider what the nature of the mind that would generate, and replicate such beautiful conceptions, would have to be. The mind of Sylvia Lee was like that of her beloved composers: *happy*. It was remarked, that Sylvia's death the Saturday before Easter, meant that she had arrived in Heaven just in time to rehearse the choir for the next day's celebration. "Can you imagine Sylvia saying to the angels, 'Bless your hearts, it's just not *happy* enough!'"

Perfection in the pursuit of happiness that was the mission of the mind of Sylvia Lee. May she rehearse the heavenly choirs, and us, who loved her, in the heart of our imagination, in a never-ending chorale, that will sing of the Highest Good, and of humanity's potential to the attainment of that state of perfection, forever. Sylvia Lee is immortal, in constant communion with the immortality of the human soul as sung by Bach, Schubert, Mozart, etc. Therefore, as James Weldon Johnson's "Go Down, Death!" states: "Weep not. She's not dead. She's resting in the bosom of Jesus."

