
Renata Tebaldi



'Let us go back to the golden age of Italian opera'

The following excerpts have been translated from the Italian transcript of Miss Tebaldi's speech to the Milan Schiller Institute conference on April 9. Renata Tebaldi, a "spinto" soprano, particularly celebrated for her Verdi roles such as Desdemona, Aida, and Violetta, performed regularly at La Scala of Milan, and the Metropolitan Opera of New York.

I am happy to be invited to speak on this subject because I think it is very important. The constant increase in the tuning pitch brings on enormous difficulties for singers. Both in the conservatory and afterward, during the entire arc of one's operatic career, we study constantly to keep the "passage" of the voice in order, because this is what allows us to sing high notes without difficulty.

So, we study years and years to place our voice correctly, and then, all of a sudden, we are hit by an orchestral pitch which, instead of being at $A = 440$, (official standard pitch), goes higher and higher all the time. There is no orchestra, either in the big opera houses or in the provincial ones, which begins the performance at 440; they always start at 442, 443, 444, and keep going up every year. It is already hard for the instrumentalists; imagine for the human voice, which must make an effort to adapt immediately to the pitch which the orchestra is playing at.

During my own career, I had it put into the contracts that the $A = 440$ pitch had to be respected: not to ask for a special treatment, but because that was the pitch established by international agreement, i.e., by law. And let us keep in mind that this 440 pitch, which was fixed at a conference in London . . . was already higher than the 432 which was used in Verdi's day. The famous tuning which we consider the most precise, the most natural, has disappeared from the horizon; on the contrary, the electronic tuner has become fashionable, in which you press a button and it emits an A from which the orchestra is supposed to tune up.

So there was already from that time an imbalance, but nobody noticed. Along came the record boom and the directors, listening to recordings, noticed that the brilliant sound

of the instruments came out better. So things went on, but their ears adapted to the change of tuning, and hence also in performing operas they kept the brilliant sound which they liked so much; without thinking about the problems which both instrumentalists and singers would have. I remember that in Naples, during rehearsals of the *Gioconda*, as I was talking to an oboist who had won the San Carlo competition, we realized that the pitch had risen.

Now *La Gioconda* is a hard opera, and a voice with body has trouble adapting to a rise in pitch. I was supposed to sing four acts, one tougher than the other; not only that: At the end, in the fourth act, there are ornamented passages which have some problems. Being curious, I asked if I could talk to the Maestro. He came to my dressing room and I asked him: "Tell me the truth: How high is the A?" he answered: "442-443." But that was the pitch at the start, and at the end? "That we do not know," he admitted, "because you know that with the heat, and breathing into the instruments, the winds tend to rise in pitch." So I told him: "If you don't guarantee me 440, as written in my contract, I'm packing my bags and leaving." That was the dress rehearsal. The oboist told me: "I took six months, gradually cutting the reed of my oboe, to adapt to the pitch which I found when I arrived in this orchestra."

So the wind players can easily understand the singer's problem. The winds use air as we singers do: putting it little by little into the instruments—and thus we cause the voice to float on the breath, attacking with the voice one instant before the air. We both speak the same language. The wind instrument can lengthen or shorten the reed to lower or raise the pitch. The woodwinds are easier, because the brasses have to gradually shorten the tube through which the air passes. The stringed instruments are even easier, because by stretching the string you attain the desired tuning.

But if the oboe takes six months to get up to the right tuning, the singer, too, ought to get six months or a year to adjust his or her breathing. The problem is not so great in the center, so much as fact that the voice which is wrongly placed

in the center does not give the possibility, as I said before, to make the [registral] passage, the jump to the high notes.

What happened to mezzosopranos?

If that does not happen, it does not go up, above all if you have a voice with a certain body to it: I am thinking about a voice of an Ebe Stignani, a Fedora Barbieri, of a [Fiorenza] Cossotto who for me, and for everyone, is the last true mezzosoprano. All the other mezzosopranos who have come later are neither fish nor fowl, in fact many of them have done soprano repertoire: *Norma*, *Gioconda*.

Now I wonder: Why should the color of the mezzosoprano voice suddenly have vanished off the face of the earth? Why do we no longer have baritones who sing by unfurling and broadening out their voices, with the color of the true baritone? They are all white baritones, who don't have to work as hard to sing, because having less voice than the others, they have less trouble going up and overcoming this obstacle of the tuning of the orchestra. The *basso profondo* has disappeared; to find a Sparafucile today for *Rigoletto* is impossible: Voices are used which perhaps can also sing low, but which have no body, they don't say anything. Not to mention the contralto, which has disappeared.

I wonder: Is it possible that the voices of this kind have all been lost, for who knows what reason? If the voices we hear today were to sing at A = 440 or even lower, at 438, we would already hear the difference. The singer could open the throat, instead of squeezing it, and let all the voice he has come out. I am sure that all the great voices we used to have and which we took all over the world, would come back out again. Today the foreigners are surpassing us, I don't say this out of chauvinism: I am very happy to hear good foreign singers, but I can't understand why Italy, which was the cradle of the most beautiful voices in the world, which took *bel canto* everywhere, today has lost those voices.

I believe that this is not just, and even though there are at this time great musicians, and they speak our own language, they do not want to understand it, because they find it convenient to have this brilliant sound. Instead, when an opera is performed, everyone, from the orchestra musician to the conductor, is at the service of the singing voice, and there is no motive for saying, "I do what I want to do, I don't pay attention to the others." They have to pay attention to many others, because even the chorus members, who are many and whose voices are not indifferent, have the same problems. And so let's reflect a little, because next year the pitch will rise to 446, 448, and it will turn out that the effort can only be sustained by little voices, the lightest ones, which have an easier time going up because they don't have the weight of a voice with body.

But ladies and gentlemen, the "great Italian repertoire" will disappear. Let us take the fact that the public has heard *Norma* sung by light, coloratura sopranos like Joan Sutherland: a tremendous talent and a great singer who, nonethe-

less, in *Norma*, has told us nothing. A soprano of her vocal weight cannot sustain the recitatives of *Norma*. But the public accepted her and applauded her. Another who ventured to sing *Norma* was Beverly Sills: all voices who, at one time, when there were real voices to sing *Norma*, the orchestra conductor himself would not have had them on his conscience. he would have said: "You are a coloratura soprano. You are a fantastic thing, but stay in your repertoire."

A future for young singers

I have not been singing now for 11 years, but I am fighting because it is unjust: The young people have already had so many difficulties in starting their career: The big houses do not want them because they want names; the little opera houses don't exist because they don't do seasons and they too, to guarantee audiences, want the presence of the big names.

So, with the difficulties of the work, taken from a school after so many years of study and tossed onto a stage such as, for example, the one at La Scala, or Vienna, they find themselves in front of an orchestra pitched so high that they are doomed. In fact I, in my career, witnessed a number of voices that were destroyed. I heard, when I sang with them, that they did not know where to place their voice and they were clambering up a slippery roof.

We feel, without anyone telling us, if we are singing a B-flat or a C: from how the vocal chords vibrate, from how the voice is in the head.

Imagine a singer who opens his mouth, seeks that note, seeks that position, that particular way of singing, and can't find it. It would be like throwing a marble into a hole and it doesn't go in. So what does he do: He sings false, he sings off-key, his voice cracks, and then, after all that effort and that result, back in his dressing room he says: "I can't make it any more as a singer, I quit."

We don't have to let things go on that way, absolutely: If the gentlemen conducting the orchestras want a brilliant sound, let them use it for symphonies, provided the instrumentalists agree with them, because you have heard that the stringed instruments also have their problems: When the strings are stretched too much, they break too. So you would need two sets of instruments, one for symphonies and one for operas. . .

Every score has its problems, and the singer prepares himself well to overcome the point where these problems arise. When they happen in the first act, you get them out of the way at once, but if, unfortunately, the point we fear arrives in the third act, our first and second acts are hell: Not only are we concentrated on what we are executing at the moment, but mentally, in our subconscious, we are expecting that the moment is going to arrive that we somehow have to get over, both with our technique and with our calm and security. If, then, there's an additional disturbing factor, there is no possibility of getting past it.

The Schiller Institute's fight

Finally we have found the Schiller Institute, which is fighting, and I am happy for the young people, because I hate to see voices which are being destroyed this way. We need voices, we need incubators, because it is not possible that Italy can no longer export voices and hold high in the world the name of *bel canto*. *Bel canto* was invented by us, no one taught it to us; it is an unmistakable style, and everyone has come to Italy to learn it. We have to get busy so that our rights to a correct tuning, which are established by law, shall be respected. Everyone could take the responsibility to tell the director: "If you don't want to come down (on the pitch), then I won't sing."

If we continue to be silent, then the world will go on this way. We can continue to hear 18th century repertoire, which requires voices which are like gold filigree and very beautiful; but there are also such things as heavy golden bracelets. I absolutely cannot believe that all the voices have disappeared, and therefore I appeal to those who can change things so that I, as well as others, may no longer be forced, as in the past, to leave rehearsals.

In fact, many times I had to walk out on rehearsals for an opera and that was my right; of my colleagues, only Mario Del Monaco stood by me because he also had a voice with quite a lot of body, and more than the others, he understood the problem. Mario Del Monaco had one of those voices which we feel the lack of today; but I repeat, I cannot believe they don't exist any more: I am sure they exist and the public has to have the right to hear them.

Oversized orchestras

These voices must be able to come out of the mouths of singers in such a way as to fill houses like La Scala, reaching the audience by overpowering the 150 orchestra players and the voices of as many chorus members who stand behind us soloists. The voices are smothered by the orchestral sound, and this can be remedied by cutting back the number of orchestra players to a maximum of 40.

I think all of you listeners and the people who sponsored this conference have probably understood, that the subjects we are dealing with have stirred me up mainly because I feel bad about the voices which will never be able to be heard if the current situation goes on; to hear these voices fills those who hear them in the opera houses with joy. That goes even for the small voices, utilized in their proper repertoire, but it has to be established once and for all that there is a difference between a mezzosoprano and a normal soprano, then there is the lyric soprano, the spinto, and then the dramatic soprano, and they can't be inverted, absolutely not; the roles can't be switched around. Everyone has to stick to his or her own repertoire.

Putting together everything which has been said, we can return, finally, to the great joy of everyone, to the golden age of Italian opera.

Piero Cappuccilli

'We must bring pitch back to normal'

"I must say that if in the beginning, in the era of Verdi," Cappuccilli began, "the standard pitch was at 432 vibrations, and he was writing his works for that pitch, Verdi was an intelligent person, who understood voices and wrote for voices. Taking the tuning pitch up to the present level puts too much physical force on the vocal cords. This is why many singers, after two, three, or four years of their career, run into major problems. Because they are forcing their vocal cords in an unnatural way. In a period when voices are rare, we must return the tuning to normal, to not create problems for those voices that exist.

"Returning the tuning pitch to normal changes the very color of the voice." Piero Cappuccilli then gave concrete examples of the problems created for voices by unnatural changes in tuning, especially in the notes in which the voice passes from its center register into the high register.

Responding to questions about the concept of registral passage, Maestro Cappuccilli continued:

"First I must say that in the *mezza voce* first one covers and then one creates a certain color and a certain style, but the closing on an E-flat or even on a D-flat, is still too soon and that is dangerous, it crumbles because there is not enough breath support to sustain these notes. But with the tuning set at A = 432 this does not happen; the voice passes in a natural way—it is not necessary to sustain the voice beyond the physical capacities of the singer, and it is not useful to pass on E-flat; the passage will take place on F but in fortissimo also the E-natural can be broadened, with the low tuning. Whereas, with the present tuning to broaden or even to open up the E-natural means for the singer to jeopardize his career. Many of my colleagues have serious problems, and even a certain fear in facing these passages. Why did the great singers of the past sing on a normal tuning, and why were they still able to sing at the age of 50-60 years? The answer is simple: With natural tuning, they did not strain their vocal cords, which remained unchanged over time. Orchestras are not tuned to this natural tuning, and this is particularly noticeable in the woodwinds and brasses, which drown out the singers. Not even three Carusos could make their voices heard by the entire audience of the theater.