

## Interview: Richard Bonyngé



# 'All music comes from the human voice'

*Mr. Richard Bonyngé, leading international opera conductor, is also a historian of the bel canto school and artistic guide for his wife, soprano Dame Joan Sutherland. During a brief stop in the U.S. in October, Dame Joan and Mr. Bonyngé enthusiastically signed the Schiller Institute's petition to the Italian Parliament in support of a pending bill to establish standard pitch for all government-subsidized musical performances at A=432, instead of today's International Standard Pitch of A=440, or the often higher tunings which prevail in many symphony halls and opera houses today.*

*Mr. Bonyngé gave EIR correspondent Kathy Wolfe both their thoughts on the subject Oct. 25, as Dame Joan was indisposed.*

*By way of background, A=432 was the standard proposed by Giuseppe Verdi in 1884 as the equivalent of setting middle C at 256 vibrations per second, which had long been known as the "scientific pitch" and which was the tuning fork of the classical composers from Bach onward. A bill has now been introduced into the Italian Senate by Senators Boggio and Mezzapesa, to return to the "Verdi A." The historical research and scientific investigations to support the "Verdi A" based on C=256, have been carried out by Schiller Institute members at the encouragement of Lyndon H. La-Rouche, Jr.*

*The campaign for the current legislation was started in April 1988 at a Schiller Institute conference in Milan addressed by soprano Renata Tebaldi and baritone Piero Cappuccilli, who are among the world's leading opera singers of the postwar era. The "Verdi A" is pitted against the "Goebbels A," the A=440 tuning, imposed in 1939 at the instigation of Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels's Radio Berlin, which cannot claim either a scientific or a historical foundation.*

**EIR:** Mr. Bonyngé, the Schiller Institute particularly sought out Dame Joan and yourself for signatures, because you two led the movement to revive the great bel canto operas.

**Bonyngé:** I'm glad you did that. . . . I must say I feel quite strongly about it, because the pitch in some places has gone

wild. In Milan and Vienna we've had it up to 448, it's ridiculous. It not only puts a great strain on singers; to me it's absurd because it makes them sound so bad. The sound comes out over-bright, and the high notes are hard—and both for singers and for orchestras. And I think you are hearing a different sound than that of which the composers conceived.

**EIR:** What motivated you to revive bel canto opera?

**Bonyngé:** Probably about 1949-50, we heard the first Callas record of [Bellini's] *I Puritani*, and that made us realize that not only light sopranos can sing the bel canto repertoire. It had been limited to light sopranos in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. We began as early as 1951, working on things like *Puritani*, and the very florid Mozart roles, and then moving later into all sorts of bel canto repertoire.

Because when Joan first went to Covent Garden in 1952, they gave her heavy roles—*Aida* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

**EIR:** Really!

**Bonyngé:** Oh yes, she sang them in the theater many times. Her first understudy role was the Marschallin [in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*] and they wanted her to understudy Flosshilde and Sieglinde [from Wagner's Ring cycle].

**EIR:** You're kidding!

**Bonyngé:** Yes, and we rebelled against it, because we thought it was the wrong direction for her, and we had many fights. And for a long time she was singing both the heavy and the light repertoire, until they gave way after three years and gave her the doll [Olympia, a high coloratura role] in Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*.

However, they gave her Olympia and *Aida*, in the same week. They'd give her *Aida* on Monday, the title role, and Olympia on Wednesday. She had big success in both, but the success as Olympia was overwhelming—and I think that changed the tide. After that they gave her [lighter roles such as] Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* and eventually Donizetti's Lucia in 1959.

They thought she was a Wagnerian, a dramatic soprano. They were grooming her to be the Wagnerian singer for the

house. Well, she *is* a dramatic soprano, insofar as she is capable of singing Turandot, Norma, and Donna Anna. She certainly could sing the big Wagner roles, if she had gone into them.

But she preferred to go the direction of the *bel canto*; because there is so much more to it, she could go so much further, it opened up the repertoire for her so much.

**EIR:** I always thought it was a rather large voice for Lucia. . . . You agreed with their diagnosis, you just didn't like the repertoire?

**Bonyng:** I like Wagner, I just didn't think it was right for her. It wasn't that I thought she couldn't sing it, it was just that I wanted her to sing so much else. But I think that if she had sung Wagner, *under present conditions*, the pitches of course as they are, and the orchestras as absolutely open as they are today—Wagner did not intend for his operas to be sung with this huge amount of orchestra. He wrote all of the big ones for [the covered orchestra pit at] Bayreuth; in the earlier ones, the orchestras were under the stage, anyway. And the voices were not supposed to have to yell all the time. You listen to Wagnerian singers today: Most of them don't sing, they yell! And I didn't want her to get into that way of singing, and she has been able to avoid it all of these years.

**EIR:** Just for Dame Joan, or is the *bel canto* route better for all singers?

**Bonyng:** It would probably be better for all voices. I believe very strongly that all voices should study the *bel canto*, it doesn't matter whether they are male or female, or dramatic, or *what* they are—what size has nothing to do with it. They should all study the *bel canto*, because *if* you can sing and master the *bel canto* repertoire, I think you can sing anything. The modern repertoire becomes easy if you are proficient in *bel canto*, because you know how to place your voice and where to put all the notes. If you are started in the heavy repertoire, and the modern repertoire, you *never* learn to sing—all you do is get into some terrible faults.

**EIR:** Was it the conductor Tullio Serafin who started the *bel canto* movement?

**Bonyng:** Serafin cared a great deal for *bel canto*, yes, he started back in the 1930s with Rosa Ponselle—and he introduced her to *Norma*. . . . Covent Garden sent us to Venice in 1959 to study with him. And that was quite wonderful, because he was supposed to work on *Lucia* with us, but after a couple of days of *Lucia*, he said, "Why don't you just bring *Norma* and *Sonnambula* and *Puritani*?" [all operas by the *bel canto* composer Vincenzo Bellini] and then he worked on all of them. . . . He was a wonderful man. He was the greatest opera conductor of the century, or the greatest one that I had the privilege of hearing.

**EIR:** Your manager Mr. Boon said Maestro Serafin fought

the rise of the pitch, too.

**Bonyng:** I don't know, but once we had done a lot of performances in Milan and Vienna, we realized that this A = 448 is just ghastly!

**EIR:** When did you start doing it that high?

**Bonyng:** Oh, I suppose already in the 1960s, they were using that very, very high pitch. In Vienna, they loved to have a high pitch there; and Milan was very bad. Milan recently has dropped again, because so many of the singers have made such a fuss about it.

**EIR:** You have stressed that the importance of *bel canto* is that music is based upon the human voice. . . .

**Bonyng:** I think all music comes from the human voice, because that's how music began; and then men invented instruments to go *with* the human voice, and things became more and more sophisticated as time went on. For example, I am not crazy about going *back* to old instruments, because we have developed the instruments so much. But I do think this raising of the pitch is a horrendous thing; because what one is hearing constitutes things which are not the way the composer wants them.

To be very specific, in *Puritani*, for example, the tenor's music is written exceptionally high.

**EIR:** Including an F above high C. . . .

**Bonyng:** It's general to drop that a semitone today. If it is dropped a semitone it sounds much more beautiful—very, very much more beautiful—because the sound becomes more dulcet and more round. There are a couple of tenors who are *able* to sing it up, and then of course because they are able to, they want to show that they can. But I don't think it sounds better, I think it sounds better down.

The same goes for the high piece in *Lucia*: It sounds too brittle to me. The composer, Donizetti, wrote *Lucia di Lammermoor* for Fanny Persiani (1812-67), who had a very, very high voice, so he wrote it up there; but when the other singers started singing it, they all sang it in a lower key. Actually it was almost never published in the higher key.

**EIR:** Henry Pleasants, the opera scholar, in a recent article being published by *EIR*, reports on a new finding of the Donizetti autograph of *Lucia*, which shows Lucia's famous mad scene was actually composed in F, not in E-flat, but had to be taken down because of the subsequent rise in the pitch. . . .

**Bonyng:** This is quite true—it was composed that way for Persiani. It wouldn't have been as high as our modern-day F—it would have been no more than an E at most.

**EIR:** And it's normally done today only in E-flat, isn't it?

**Bonyng:** Yes, but you see, it was done already in the early 19th century in the E-flat. Persiani may have sung it in F, but

it was very soon dropped, and nearly all of the published scores are in E-flat.

**EIR:** But mightn't that be because, by 1840 or 1850 in many places—and it *was* Wagner who did this—they had already pushed the pitch almost up to 450?

**Bonyng:** As high as that? I think it varied enormously from city to city. . . . In Naples [where Donizetti composed *Lucia*] the pitch was not so high. . . .

**EIR:** Conductors aside, there is evidence that the great composers starting with J.S. Bach composed for the scientific pitch of C = 256, between A = 427-432. In many Bach choruses, the tenors and sopranos have high B's above the staff; and the altos and the basses have low, low F's and D's, such that about 430 is where it can be sung. Not much higher, certainly, but also not much lower. If you take Bach down to A = 392 you need to have men singing the alto line!

Mozart and Beethoven are also routinely recorded at A = 430 by original instruments groups today, too. So wouldn't it seem that that's where Donizetti wanted his pitch?

**Bonyng:** I would imagine so, because it sounds better at those pitches. Sometimes a composer heard something in a different key, but then when he sat down with the singers, then he found that it didn't work. For example, Bellini wrote [the major aria from *Norma*] "Casta Diva" in G major. We have actually recorded it in G major, but I still think it sounds better in the lower key, to my ears, in F. It's always pitched in F. In fact certain singers in history sang it in E or E-flat.

**EIR:** But the idea that Donizetti and Bellini wrote these at least as far down at A = 430, if not further, makes perfect sense to you?

**Bonyng:** Absolutely! Now, take for example all the Handel operas. Those are murderous to sing at the modern pitch—especially for sopranos, because he constantly makes the voice sit up between a G and an A-natural, the top of the voice.

**EIR:** Which operas, for example?

**Bonyng:** Well, any you would like to mention—*Julius Caesar*, *Rosalinda*, *Alcina*. . . constantly, the soprano voice is up in G-A—which is just in the break—and they become extremely awkward. If you drop them, by modern standards, even by 440—a semitone—then they become much more singable, much more manageable. It seems to make an enormous amount of difference, just this small amount.

**EIR:** Yes, enough to change all the registers of the voices. When you move the pitch, even as little as 10 Hertz, from say 430 to 440, you change the register shift. At A = 430, a tenor need not "cover"—[shift up into the high third register—his F-natural, he can leave it in the middle register. But at A = 440, even a Pavarotti, as he pointed out in a recent TV

feature you did with him, must cover the F-natural.

Where do you and Dame Joan believe that tenors and sopranos, say, should shift their registers?

**Bonyng:** I don't think you can categorize it. I don't think you can say it's exactly on this note or that note. To me, it alters very much for different voices. I hear sopranos who have the high shift come on F-sharp-G, and others G-A-flat, and others A-flat-A-natural. And for Joan, the shift from the chest to the middle register is E-flat to E-natural.

There are three registers; to me there is no doubt about that. . . . It's just that one has to disguise the registers so absolutely, that it sounds as if there aren't any!

**EIR:** Sure, but if you tried to drive your car in first gear all the way up to 90 mph, you'd get into trouble!

**Bonyng:** And if you try to sing, in chest register, arias all the way up to the C above middle C—which I have heard singers try to do—they get into trouble, too!

**EIR:** Some composers wrote for specific shifts. For example, Piero Cappuccilli demonstrated the proper shifts for a baritone at C = 256 at the Schiller Institute Milan conference. He sang "O, de verd'anni miei" from Verdi's *Ernani* which has a turn right in the first line going up to an E-flat. This is a quick turn, it should be a smooth passing note, staying down in the lower middle register. He was visibly delighted—he had never done it this low with no need to shift that E-flat into the third higher register. Then he sang it at A = 440, and had to jack the E-flat up, and didn't like it at all.

Furthermore, often the composer wants one phrase, poetically, in a lower register color voice, and a second, new phrase, in a new register voice. But in this aria at A = 440, you have to shift *both* the E-flat and the E-natural up, so you're *not* getting two poetic voices.

**Bonyng:** Right, right. . . . I could see immediately! It will make an enormous amount of difference. I've done Handel operas, for example, by modern pitch, a semitone low—so whatever that comes to, that comes to around 430 or 428 [about A = 420—ed.], it certainly makes the whole thing sound more beautiful, and certainly easier to sing. You have to then have very good altos, very good contraltos, because it does, as you say, put the lower roles down—take Marilyn Horne—they are very comfortable around the F and the E below middle C. Monica Sinclair, also—another singer who had a certain career many years ago. They were absolutely comfortable down in that register. And I have a feeling that the singers of Handel's time were much happier down there. Everybody is pushing up their voices today.

**EIR:** That raises another issue. Do you and Dame Joan have any concrete views on how we are going to continue bel canto as a scientific tradition? I noticed that you are always bringing up younger artists.

**Bonyng:** All one can do is to advise them, and try to lead

them in that direction. But you know, young people are very stubborn. And in these modern days, they all want to be stars yesterday. I'm afraid that these days they have to learn through experience—and experience often kills. And I think this is the reason that we have a dearth of singers these days, because everyone tries to do everything too fast. The pitches are grueling, and that hurts very much. And of course, they have all the jets, and they fly from here to there, they're performing too much, everybody does too much.

**EIR:** Do you think the opera houses are too big?

**Bonyng:** The houses are much too big; the television is a disaster, because as soon as the singer is beautiful, or young and handsome, they are on the television doing these roles they shouldn't do. And there are so many things to fight against, that didn't exist in the last century.

**EIR:** Do you talk to them about registration?

**Bonyng:** Oh, if they are smart enough, yes! The whole thing is, they're not smart; a lot of it goes in one ear and out the other. You have to find ones that can understand.

**EIR:** Do you know any schools teaching registration?

**Bonyng:** No, they don't seem to *understand* the registers anymore. People are so keen on saying "they don't exist," because we shouldn't *hear* them—but of course, they *must* exist, physically they *do* exist. If you try to sing without using registers, the tone becomes pallid, because you don't have the brilliance in the top and you don't have the depth beneath that you need.

**EIR:** One political question. Did you know that Lyndon LaRouche, the U.S. presidential candidate, organized this movement?

**Bonyng:** No, not at all.

**EIR:** This is why he is so controversial—he has attacked the whole rock and roll, drug culture. People don't like someone telling them: "You can't do your thing." He says that modern music is garbage, that the whole present-day culture, with the drugs and the rock music, is making people stupid.

**Bonyng:** Well, he has more than a point there. . . . I have no patience at all with that. That's just jungle music, it's primitive, it's just primitive instincts that are being catered to. I believe that real music has great powers; I think it has great powers of healing for the mind and the body. And I think a return to classical music would go a long way to fixing the world up. Whether it happens, is another story.

**EIR:** What do you think of a presidential candidate making that a major plank of his platform?

**Bonyng:** Wonderful! It's quite wonderful that anybody that's to do with the government, can think really deeply about something that really matters.

**EIR:** And what do you think of the idea of the fight for a lower pitch at the center of that?

**Bonyng:** It's very wonderful, but it's going to be very hard to do it. Because you see, apart from me, a lot of conductors won't fight it, because they think that the orchestra sounds more brilliant in a higher register. I personally don't agree with that; I love the more mellow sound you get from a lower pitch. No matter what the music is—all the 18th- and all the 19th-century music at a lower pitch, sounds very much more beautiful.

**EIR:** But, since art has to represent truth, and since the composers wrote at this pitch, and indeed had poetic ideas which were specific to the pitch—

**Bonyng:** —then we should try to reproduce the same, as much as we are able. I don't think one can *absolutely* reproduce what was done 100-150 years ago, but one can try.

**EIR:** The Schiller Institute has just recently worked with a New Jersey opera company called the Lubo Opera to return to the Verdi pitch. They began performing this month, at 435, which is an historic first in the U.S. They want to try to move down to 430-432 if they can figure out what to do about their woodwinds. What do you think of that idea?

**Bonyng:** I don't know; we've come so far with music, and people have become so used to this at the higher pitch. If people can get down to 435, even 438 in my mind, then I think that would be a good thing, and one might carry the day with that, to a great extent.

**EIR:** But if composers wrote for 430, they wrote for 430.

**Bonyng:** Yes, yes . . . but I think it's going to be very hard to get it down to 430.

**EIR:** Do you think it's desirable, though?

**Bonyng:** Yes, in many instances.

## 'Verdi A' advances

At a Schiller Institute conference in Rome on Nov. 24, more than 80 musicians and music lovers gathered to discuss the bill to lower tuning to the Verdi A = 432 (C = 256), now before the Italian Senate. Telegrams of support for the bill were read, including by Luciano Pavarotti and Carlo Bergonzi. Two demonstrations of the superiority of the lower tuning were given, one by Bruno Barosi of the Cremona violin-making institute (see page 58), the other by world famous baritone Piero Cappuccilli, who sang two examples from Verdi operas at the different pitches.