

---

Interview: Luciano Pavarotti

---

# At high pitch, 'there will soon be operas that can't be sung'

by Liliana Celani and Claudio Celani



*The following interview was granted by Luciano Pavarotti at his "Villa Giulia" in Pesaro, Italy, on Aug. 18, 1988. The Italian review Il Machiavellico, which published the interview in full, has kindly granted EIR permission to reprint this condensed translation.*

Before interviewing him, we show Luciano Pavarotti one of the many articles in the international press on the Schiller Institute-promoted legislation to go back to Giuseppe Verdi's tuning fork (A = 432, based on a middle C of 256 Hz). It is an article in the biggest Danish tabloid paper, *Ekstra Bladet*, showing a picture of the tenor with a gigantic mouth, and a smaller photo near the pictures of Tebaldi, Domingo, Verdi himself, and two Danish singers who endorsed the Schiller Institute petition. "What does the article say?" asks the tenor. "It says that Verdi, Mozart, and Beethoven shall bless us from Heaven for starting this initiative," we answer him, translating one sentence in order to show that it is a positive article. Pavarotti smiles, but looks a bit skeptical. "It is going to be a difficult fight," he comments.

"For sure, but it is precisely difficult fights which are worth fighting for," we tell him. We ask Pavarotti what does he think of Verdi's 1884 decree to establish A = 432 and of the corresponding bill to be debated in the Italian Senate, and he replies: "We should actually stick to A = 440, but in order to have A = 440 at the end of an opera, such as Bellini's *I Puritani*, you have to start off lower than that. These operas are to be sung by lyric tenors, not by light *tenorini*. The lyric tenor has trouble getting to the high D-flat. If, with a higher pitch, the D-flat becomes a D-natural, they become impossible operas. What should be done? For operas such as *Traviata*, A = 440 would be sufficient. For operas such as *Puritani*, *La Favorita*, *La Fille du Régiment*, or *William Tell*, the orchestra should try, if it's technically feasible, to start at A = 438, instead of 440, so that A = 440 is reached when the instruments warm up during performance."

**Q:** But that would again mean changing the original key chosen by the composer, since Bellini's or Donizetti's A was never higher than A = 432.

**Pavarotti:** We cannot speak in these terms, otherwise we

would change the A ten times. We should choose one. Verdi's tuning fork, which the bill is based on, is no longer possible. Let's make another bill, this time for A = 440, which, however, has to be a true A = 440, during the whole performance. Let's start with A = 438 to arrive at A = 440 at the end. We have to bring the voice back to human levels. Outside Italy, after the war, for example at Covent Garden, or at the Met, the pitch was often lower than A = 440, and one would go back to Europe after singing at the Met with a certain sound, and a certain body of voice in mind. I remember very well that when I came back to Europe from New York, where I had filmed *Rigoletto*, I stopped in Vienna to record it. I thought it was a different opera! It was almost half a tone higher, at least a quarter of a tone higher. . . .

**Q:** And what did this imply?

**Pavarotti:** It implies that anyone who keeps singing in such a higher key, will rupture his vocal cords. There would soon be operas that could not be performed any more. For example, in *Il Trovatore*, one of the best-known Verdi operas, which has a very low tessitura [average pitch] for the tenor, you suddenly have a "chest high C" in "Di quella pira." If it were tuned lower, it would be a better opera. Not because a tenor cannot sing a high C, but because he was singing in the center of the voice most of the time. Nowadays tenors do not limit themselves to singing "Di quella pira" and not caring about the rest of the opera. . . . And if you sing the whole opera correctly, you make a certain physical and vocal effort. It is hard to find a tenor who has the technical freshness to hit the high C of "La pira" if he has sung the rest of the opera well. If a tenor sings "La pira" strongly, it means that he half-sang before. There are other operas with very high notes, which, however, are prepared, and in these, the problem for the tenor arises only with the D-flat. If these D-flats are D-natural, it becomes not a vocal, but a physical problem, of the vocal cords.

You end up being unable to perform operas such as *William Tell*, the one inaugurating the Scala season. There are voices, like mine and [soprano Mirella] Freni's, which could perform such operas if the pitch were more human. I can tell you that *William Tell* finished off a tenor named [Nicolai]

Gedda, because he sang it in a higher key. If the pitch had been less high maybe Gedda would have sung 10 years longer. He still sings, but he is no longer the great tenor he once was. Fifteen years ago he sang the whole opera, in French, which is a language well suited to his voice, but the high pitch ruined his vocal cords. It's not worth the strain, I think. Even an orchestra conductor does not like it, because when the conductor has 10 performances planned, and the tenor does two well and eight badly, it's not a gain for the conductor either.

**Q:** How come orchestra conductors do not understand this? Do they not understand voices, or do they only care for the brilliance of the orchestra?

**Pavarotti:** Unless you make a law, the conductor has the orchestra play at A = 440, and at the end of the performance it is 442-444. But if there is a law, the conductor will have to see whether the winds can do it.

**Q:** Do you think that a conductor could adapt to that?

**Pavarotti:** I think the sound of the orchestra would be much mellower and more human with a low tuning fork. It would be more majestic, more powerful. There's no doubt about that. Less brilliant, but who said that music should be brilliant?

**Q:** Coming to the question of vocal technique. I read with interest the chapter of your book (*Io, Luciano Pavarotti*) dedicated to vocal technique and interpretation, in which you speak of breathing and the registral passage (which many are unacquainted with) as fundamental points in the teaching of singing. How do you produce and teach the registral passage yourself?

**Pavarotti:** Everybody knows the register passage, many avoid it; many believe they are doing it, and are not doing it. Many think they are doing it fully and are only doing it halfway. And it is not the case that the person who does it fully is always on the right track.

**Q:** . . . One of the defects provoked by the high tuning is what you describe in your book when you speak of "tenors who seem like baritones that someone is strangling." . . . This premature closing, this premature registral passage, have you noted it in young voices which are singing without the appropriate guidance?

**Pavarotti:** I have noticed one thing in young voices: that when you have a "short" baritone [refers to a limited range—ed.] he tries to be a bass, and a "short" tenor tries to be a baritone. Voices like [famed baritones] Bastianini, or like Cappuccilli, I don't seem to see. . . .

**Q:** Our magazine gives much importance to teaching about the classical period, the idea of uplifting the human spirit which comes from great theater, for example Schiller, ex-

pressed in Verdi, or great classical poetry, by Dante for example. . . .

**Pavarotti:** . . . When I started singing 2% of the public was interested in opera singers and now it's 20%. This due to the fact that in these years television has processed the material for the viewer, and the viewer . . . has realized that it is not entertainment for the elite. . . . It's something very serious. . . . If you had come out when I got started singing and talked about the tuning fork, you would have had everybody splitting their sides with laughter.

**Q:** "And who is the Tuning Fork?" they would have asked.

**Pavarotti:** Not even, they would have said: "Go talk to that guy who lacks high notes. You will see that he will say 'yes, it is a good idea,' but I, who have a high C, for me things are fine as they are, good night." . . . This [campaign for lower tuning] is becoming a cultural event, put in these terms, because so many operas that could not be performed, will be recovered.

**Q:** In criticizing our initiative on the tuning pitch, a Swedish newspaper stated that singers supported it because they don't know anything about politics. What do you think about that?

**Pavarotti:** The . . . musician, and the singer is one of these, has the task, and he realizes this, of keeping together the souls of all the world. We realized this in China when we went to make our concert tour and really made a political conquest. That was a political conquest, with music. If you speak of politics to speak of movements, then certainly singers don't understand and they don't want to understand.

**Q:** I replied to the Swedish daily that singers generally see politics through Verdi's eyes, that is, as a way to improve people's minds, and in this sense they understand it better than many politicians.

**Pavarotti:** Certainly.

**Q:** Another question. I don't know if you heard the interview conducted by Laura Padellaro over "Ora della Musica" with me and others, quoting at the beginning a statement by the American economist and politician Lyndon LaRouche on Italy, in which LaRouche says he weeps for the political and economic conditions of Italy, but he sees two major hopes. One is the tradition of bel canto, that is, Italy's cultural heritage, and the other is the scientific tradition around Leonardo da Vinci, Betti, and Beltrami. Do you agree with this evaluation?

**Pavarotti:** I am fully in agreement.

**Q:** Do you think that these two things can give hope to this beleaguered country?

**Pavarotti:** But they are giving it. When people are kept from badmouthing us, it is because of these two subjects. There is no doubt.