

Interview: Gilda Cruz-Romo



'The human voice is an irreplaceable instrument'

Gilda Cruz-Romo is a Mexican-born soprano who has made her home in the United States, having starred at the Metropolitan Opera of New York for many seasons. She was the first major artist in the United States to endorse the Schiller Institute's campaign to lower the tuning pitch to A = 432, the pitch of Giuseppe Verdi, and backs the legislation in Italy to set a uniform pitch at that level. Miss Cruz-Romo is known the world over, especially for her interpretations of the Verdi heroines, including the title role in Aïda, Leonora in La Forza del Destino, Desdemona in Otello, and Elisabetta in Don Carlo.

The following interview is abridged from a longer discussion held at Miss Cruz-Romo's home, conducted by the Schiller Institute's Jeanne Percesepe Bell, with the help of soprano Jodi Laski-Mihova, founder of the Lubo Opera Company.

Q: What do you think will happen if, and when, the legislation to lower tuning to A = 432 passes in Italy? There, the campaign to lower the tuning pitch, is actually reviving the pride that Italians have always had in their music, in their singing, in the heritage of great art that they have brought to the rest of the world. Do you see such a revival as being possible, for instance in Mexico, or in the United States?

Cruz-Romo: Well, I really wouldn't know exactly the whole situation in my country, because I have been away. . . .

In this country [the United States] . . . we have to sing in so many ways. It [the human voice] is not only an instrument, a woodwind or brass, it is *within us*. We have to go and sing in a place at sea level. Then we have to go and sing at a place at 5,000 feet high. Then we have to go to one that is 400 feet, another at 2,000. . . .

Now, the strain that it puts on the body is already bad enough. All of a sudden—you're singing in America, for example, the pitch is high already. Then you go to Europe, and all of a sudden you have to sing a half-tone higher. It's bad on everybody. Mentally, you adjust very fast. Your body *cannot* adjust very fast. Even when we travel to different places, your body does not adjust. It will adjust in six months. Your mind adjusts in five seconds. Your body starts waking

up at 1:00 in the morning, things like that. . . .

We have to go against so many things, and we are the least powerful of the artists. Everybody thinks about the conductors, the stage directors, the instruments, but they never think about the human voice, which is one of the most precious instruments. They cannot be replaced. They can get another violin, another piano, another of everything, never another voice.

Q: What could you tell our readers about what this does to the music itself—to the message of the composer—when the singer is so bent on just hitting the notes?

Cruz-Romo: I don't have to go too far to tell you what it is. I have just seen what all the artists have been doing, whenever they colorize the old movies. The artists are so upset, and I don't blame them. It is exactly the same. We are—I hate to say the word, but—bastardizing the situation. . . .

Q: Earlier you were talking about the role of the artist. We've named our Institute after Friedrich Schiller, the great poet and dramatist. In one of his poems, *Die Künstler*, "The Artists," he speaks to the role of the great artist in uplifting mankind, that we are the conscience of humanity. What do you see, in the broadest terms, as the role of especially an opera artist, who is not only singing, but is interpreting some of the greatest dramatic works ever written?

Cruz-Romo: We are in a very materialist world. Like it, or not like it, that's the way it goes. It is run by how many dollars, or yen, or whatever you call it, someone has. The thing is this: If a great executive at the moment of great stress, and big problems in the company, can either shed a tear, or loses his temper . . . it is looked at as a gesture of weakness. When we go to the theater, and in the darkness the artist moves you, and you shed a tear, the pressure of the day goes out, through that. You are *not* ashamed, you are not characterized as a weak person, because probably everybody is in the same boat. If we have moved a person, to laughter, to tears, and he comes out and says "Gosh, I feel good about it," he's ready for the fight the next day. Well, that's what entertainment is all about.

We are going into a world of make-believe. How can you tell me that anyone who is 15 years old, can play Juliet, in the opera? They cannot. And still, we are getting directors who say, "No, I want so-and-so." She may look the part, but . . . they have gotten away from the fact that [when we enter the theater] we are in a make-believe world.

With the pitch, we have done the same. We are putting more strain into something that is already very difficult. The thing is, the people who have the brains, are the people who have to go back to where we have to go. . . .

Q: Can you talk a little bit about what goes on when you, as a singer, perform some of the heroic roles, in Verdi or Mozart?

Cruz-Romo: I don't think anymore about it [the pitch]. You cannot afford to, because you make yourself into a terrible bundle of nerves. After all, the performance has to go out, and be done well. So, you try your best, but it puts a strain on the singer. . . .

All of a sudden you have this costume which weighs a million tons, 24 different kinds of steps. Many of the steps are uneven, and you have to be gracious coming down and going up. So there are so many things to worry about, that really you forget about certain things. You just go and do your best job.

Q: Could you tell us a little about your background, how you became involved in music?

Cruz-Romo: Well, I was born into a beautiful family. My parents were beautiful, musically inclined people. . . .

They used to have a symphony subscription. We didn't have that much music in our city [Guadalajara]; the symphony was the only thing, and visiting companies. . . . All the kids—the teenagers—used to go to the theater, way up, to the top, top, top, because we didn't have that much money. We formed a club, and one parent used to take 10, 15 of us, way up there. And we used to go to all the concerts. I saw Rubenstein, I saw Weisenberg, I saw Arrau, every artist that came to town. But we had put all our pennies together to go sit way up there. And I remember, we would hunt from up there—"there's a seat, right there"—and we used to run through the steps of the beautiful theater in Guadalajara. It is really special, because the guard at the theater, he knew us already, and he was always with his back to the door whenever we sneaked in to get into the orchestra seats. . . .

After that, we always took piano and guitar lessons. My father never thought that I would go into this professionally. He almost had a heart attack when I told my parents I wanted to, because at one time it was not very dignified for a lady to go on stage. But . . . they never put any hurdles out for me. On the contrary, they helped me, and I went to Mexico City and started studying.

I was very lucky. I had a great baritone who was a great teacher. There are still many people who are still singing in my country who were his students.

Q: Maestro Esquivel?

Cruz-Romo: Yes, oh, yes. His name was Angel, and he was an angel. You see, that's another of the things that I think that we are lacking in this day and age, that our materialized world has cheated from us. *Teaching is an apostolic job.* Not everybody can be a teacher. . . . He was not only a teacher, a great teacher, he was a great artist himself, he was a gentleman, and for me he was the father, the adviser, the friend, even a companion. . . .

For example, one day, I had a lesson of 10 minutes, because that's all I needed at that time. The next session, I would have an hour-and-a-half. Now, they have to fill one hour! I'm sorry, that's wrong: One hour is a long time for somebody to be singing continuously. But they charge them so much, and they have to make that, so that they feel that they get their money's worth.

And what happens, they push too soon. And then, with the pitch the way it is, there we go! The problem doesn't start only with the pitch. It starts way before.

Q: One of the things we tried to demonstrate in the need to lower the pitch, was the fact that the natural registral shifts of the human voice are distorted, and you're forced to distort the music, if the pitch is too high. When a composer wrote an F#, he wrote an F#, he did it for a reason, because that's when you're going into your next register. I would love to hear any insight you have into how Maestro Esquivel taught about the registral shifts. The reason I ask is that many voice teachers today don't even talk about register.

Cruz-Romo: They don't know. I'm sorry to say it. I don't think they know. I've been judging some auditions, and all of a sudden I hear a tenor who goes up to an A; he screams it out. And I say, "What happened, why didn't you pass?" And he says, "Huh?" "What happened? Open up there." He looks at me as if to say, "What are you talking about?" And these are people who are already in their thirties. What are we ever going to do?

Q: What do you think that the advent of rock music and the drug culture has done? . . .

Cruz-Romo: It's destroying our world. They have to take this to get excitement, when there is so much excitement, when there is so much joy to see around.

Q: The Schiller Institute recently held another conference in Italy, on the subject of reviving classical culture. Much of what was discussed there were not only the beautiful aspects of our work, but also the need to combat the organized evil that is responsible for the drug trade, and now, the Satanic cults that engage in ritual murders. . . .

Cruz-Romo: We are a very powerful nation, and as that, our enemies are undermining us. . . . That undermining of our society, also in our children, is one of the most terrifying things. They are destroying the nucleus of the family. And once you do that, we will be very vulnerable.