

sentation on how the performer must approach a musical score, to achieve a true interpretation. She discussed the need to make distinctions among three types of musical lines in a polyphonic composition: those which are melodic, those which are rhythmic in character, and those which are static, and played many examples from J.S. Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart to underline her point.

The second day included a presentation by Muriel Mirak, executive member of the International Caucus of Labor Committees, on classical theater. She counterposed Stanislavski's existentialist "method acting" with the true classical tradition of performance based not on the "feelings" of the performer, but on the thoughts and word of the poet, as exemplified in this century by the work in Germany of the circle around Gustav Grügens.

In the last panel, dedicated to the C=256 campaign, the Schiller Institute's Liliana Celani insisted, along with the initiative's originator Lyndon LaRouche, on the need for an identical approach to musical composition and to physical science. She then introduced Spanish tenor Miguel Berraldes, who sang passages from Verdi's *Requiem, Il trovatore*, and the "Celeste Aida" from *Aida* at both the high and the low tuning. Comments from the audience indicated that this demonstration was just as convincing as the demonstration given by Italian baritone Piero Cappuccilli at the Schiller Institute's very first conference on tuning, held on April 9, 1988 in Milan, Italy.

The event was topped off with two concerts. The first featured three fine Italian singers—soprano Loredana Romanato, tenor Mario Zecchini, and baritone Santi Amati—with arias from Verdi operas, all done at the tuning demanded by Verdi himself. At the second concert, Norbert Brainin and pianist Günter Ludwig performed sonatas by Beethoven and Johannes Brahms.

## Verdi in Houston

The tuning revolution arrived in Houston on Oct. 7 when classical singers representing a cross-section of the Houston musical scene performed arias and ensembles from Mozart to Verdi. Lyric baritone Douglas Yates opened the concert program by singing the aria "Ah! Per sempre io to perdei" from Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani*, first at the high tuning of A=440, and then at A=432. Yates, a member of the National Opera Company, explained how the words are more clear at the lower tuning, the vowels "more open," and the sound more round and beautiful. The singer is also able to voice the E-flat in the middle register, as intended by the composer, instead of displacing the sound by "passing" the note into the higher register.

Also appearing on the program were sopranos Lois Alba, Shana Hogan, and Louise Mendius; mezzo-sopranos Paula Blackman and Jane Riley; tenors Carlton Hines and John Jennings; and baritone Rodney Stenborg, who performs with the Houston Grand Opera.

## Of pitch and transposition

### Opera in Crisis: Tradition, Present, Future

by Henry Pleasants

Thames and Hudson, New York, 1989

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*The following article, kindly made available to us by the author, is an expanded version of one written for About the House, the magazine for the Friends of Covent Garden, in July 1981, for inclusion in the book Opera in Crisis. Dr. Pleasants, now resides in London, was music critic for the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin and the New York Times, and then, from 1967 onward, the London music critic of the International Herald Tribune. He has written, translated, and edited numerous books in the field.*

*In 1988, Henry Pleasants endorsed the campaign of the Schiller Institute to back a law then pending before the Italian Parliament, to reinstate Giuseppe Verdi's pitch of A=432 Hertz—as opposed to the modern A=440 and even higher concert pitches—as the standard tuning pitch for state-subsidized schools, orchestras, and public concerts. A=432 defines the upper limit of a tuning based on the scientific middle C of 256 Hertz.*

*The book consists of a series of lively essays, of which the following sample is typical. Although we differ in our estimate of the authority of Ellis (see article, above), we could not agree more on the thrust of his defense of singers from modern pitch extremes, and we find the book delightful and informative—a good holiday gift idea for your music loving friends.—Nora Hamerman*

What is *authentic*? What is *original*? And what of the singer? Well, *authentic* and *original* are adjectives much used nowadays by those commendably bent on bringing us operas of the standard repertoire as conceived and written by their authors—at least as far as the music is concerned!—cleansed of the cuts, transpositions, embellishments, cadenzas, interpolations, instrumental touching up, etc., that have come down to us in performance over the years, and are now generally accepted as "traditional," often having found their way into printed vocal and orchestral scores.

Recent examples of this quest of authenticity have been

Jesús López-Cobos's edition of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Alberto Zedda's "authentic" *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Some seasons ago we had at Covent Garden a *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* laying no claims to authenticity (with this opera there is no such thing), but with the conductor, Georges Prêtre, insisting that everything be sung in the original key as given in the Choudens edition.

Original key—ay, for the singer, there's the rub! Not just *what* was it? More to the point for the singer, *where* was it in terms of the pitch prevailing at the time and place of composition? Our editors, Zedda and López-Cobos, for example, go back to the autographs and find that, let us say, Lucia's final aria, "Spargi d'amaro pianto," is in F rather than the "traditional" E-flat, or that Don Basilio's "La calunnia" is in D, rather than in the C in which it is usually sung.

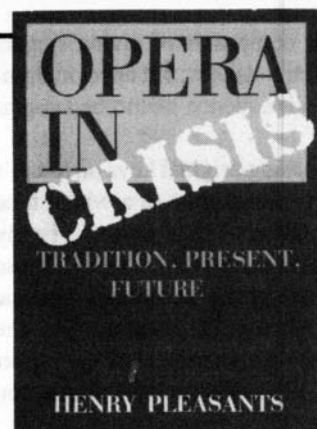
Well, there those keys are, those tonalities, in black on white in the composer's autograph. Why are not these and other arias now sung in the keys the composers chose for them? López-Cobos has ascribed the downward transposition as far as Lucias are concerned—and the Mad Scene is not the only one—to prima donna vainglory and convenience.

"In order to cope with the top notes asked for by Donizetti," he wrote for a recording of his edition, "they have transposed everything down, making those extra notes and all the extra flourishes easier. . . . I consider it a musical crime to change or even destroy the tonal plan of a great masterpiece for the sake of being able to sing with greater ease a handful of notes (which are not even in the original)."

Plausible enough, if we are thinking only of Lucia. But what of Edgardo and Enrico, who are not prima donnas, and who do not, as a rule, favor or exasperate us with "traditional" altitudinous interpolations, embellishments and cadenzas? As to the keys assigned to *their* music in the autograph, our editor is less persuasive. Of the Lucia-Enrico duet, a whole tone lower in the "traditional" version than in the autograph, he wrote: "Incidentally, the high *tessitura* of the baritone in the duet when sung in the original key, like his opening cavatina ('Cruda funesta smania'), reveals a more lyrical character than is customary, one that is in keeping with the youth and impetuosity of Enrico Ashton."

All well and good as interpretive elucidation, but it overlooks, or ignores, the fact that in Donizetti's time there was no such thing as today's high Italian baritone, for whom Enrico's music in the original keys poses no problems. The first Enrico was Domenico Cosselli, described in contemporary accounts as "basso cantante" or "the most celebrated bass in Italy," and who numbered among his roles that of Assur in Rossini's *Semiramide*, now always assigned to those we think of as basses rather than baritones.

Tenors, in the century and a half separating us from Donizetti's Naples of 1835, have edged higher, but not that much higher. And so the original key of D for Edgardo's taxing final scene caused plenty of trouble for José Carreras at the Royal Opera premier of the López-Cobos edition in 1981.



"For truly 'authentic' performance of just about everything from Handel through Gluck to Cherubini to Beethoven . . . orchestras would have to be tuned down a semitone."

I do not know what passed between tenor and conductor thereafter, but I do know that in a subsequent performance broadcast on Radio 3 he sang it—and to conspicuously better effect—in D flat, as many other tenors have done.

The problem, I venture to suggest, is not one of key, but of pitch. The pitch prevailing in southern Italy was considerably lower than elsewhere. Alexander John Ellis, in his *The History of Musical Pitch* (1880) quotes Carlo Gervasoni's *La scuola della musica* (1800): "The pitch is not the same in all Italian cities. The pitch in Rome is, in fact, much lower than that of Lombardy." The Lombardian pitch at that time, according to Ellis, was A=422 (oscillations per second, or ops). This was the so-called "classical" pitch common (with variations) in orchestral music throughout Europe until raised later in the 19th century to accommodate the requirements and predilections of wind players. It is about a semi-tone lower than the A=440 (or a shade higher) that is standard today.

According to Ellis's estimates, the Roman pitch ranged from A=403.9 down to A=395.2, which would place it another semi-tone below the "classical" Lombardian pitch, and a full note below our own. Thus, Figaro's high Gs in "Largo al factotum" were F sharps by contemporary standards elsewhere, and Fs when measured against our own A=440. Don Basilio's F sharps in "La calunnia" were, in fact, the Es that are sung by basses in the transposition from the key of D to the key of C still common today.

It is easy, in retrospect, to see what Rossini must have had in mind. For *Il barbiere di Siviglia* he needed brilliance and sparkle. Had he written for his basses with the conventional *notational* range, their singing would have been low and dull. Here, therefore, he chose higher keys, knowing that what *looked* high to his singers would not, in fact, be as high as it looked.

It seems pertinent to add here that those Gs in "Largo al factotum" should be followed by As on "presto!" They complete the obvious sequential pattern fulfilled in the orchestra. In the autograph, the singer is given a cadence on two identical As an octave lower, Rossini here following the

convention adopted by earlier composers of giving singers an option in their shaping of such cadences, but never imagining that the (actually unmusical) cadence would be sung as written.

Thus López-Cobos, in imposing original keys on today's singers, is asking them to sing a semitone to a whole tone higher than was required of Gilbert-Louis Duprez, Fanny Persiani and Domenico Cosselli in Naples in 1835. Those downward transpositions of which he complains became "traditional" simply because when *Lucia* went north of the Appennines and the Alps, and was performed at the higher pitches prevailing there, the singers found the music too damned high.

The same had happened with *Il barbiere di Siviglia* twenty years earlier when it journeyed north from Rome. Rosina's contralto music was found congenial by sopranos. Almaviva's music caused fewer problems because Manuel Garcia, Sr., who created the role was so low-voiced a tenor that he could and did sing Don Giovanni. The trouble lay with the basses (and in Rossini's autograph Figaro, Dr. Bartolo and Don Basilio are all listed simply as *bassi*).

Dr. Bartolo's "Un dottor della mia sorte" in E flat was too high, and Pietro Romani's "Manca un folia" was substituted. Don Basilio's "La calunnia" was omitted or transposed down to C. "Largo al factotum" was transposed down a whole tone to B flat. Antonio Tamburini even made news of a kind by singing it in B. There it stayed, in performance at least, until the new category of Verdian high baritone emerged to restore it to its original key and make of Figaro a baritone rather than a bass.

From the foregoing it may be seen that transposition for the convenience and vocal health of singers was accepted with far fewer reservations in the previous century than is the case today—or even with none. But singers then had a greater say in the making of artistic and technical decisions than is accorded them now. Consider, for example, this letter, dated 15 March, 1859, from Pauline Viardot to Luigi Arditi, who was to be her conductor in performances of Verdi's *Macbeth* in Dublin:

"Caro Maestro: Here are the transpositions which I am making in the part of Lady Macbeth. The most difficult of all, which will necessitate certain changes in the instrumentation, will be that of the cavatina. The recitative in D flat, the andante, 'Vieni t'affretta,' in B flat and the allegro, 'Or tutti sorgete,' in D flat, consequently, the whole scene must be a minor third lower. Not bad! All the rest of the act may be given as written. The cabaletta, 'Trionfai,' is not sung." etc.—along with composed insertions or alterations to achieve suitable modulations from one key to another.

One can imagine the reaction of almost any conductor today upon the receipt of such a communication. But Arditi cherished it, and was delighted to reproduce it in his memoirs as a letter "illustrative of her clear knowledge of notation and composition as well as her lucidity in dealing in a practical

way with the parts which she required to be transposed."

Nor do we have to go back so far to find an example of a great conductor's comprehension and indulgence of a great singer's vocal limitations. In Erich Leinsdorf's profoundly thoughtful book, *The Composer's Advocate* (1981), we find the following about no less puritanical and dictatorial a conductor than Arturo Toscanini:

"Toscanini was also more liberal and pragmatic with transpositions in opera than anyone else in my experience. It has not been recorded that in *Fidelio* performances at the Salzburg Festival he invented a new modulation. The great Lotte Lehmann was incomparably moving and well cast as Leonora/*Fidelio*, but she had difficulties with the high notes of the aria. When the second run in 1936 came along, Toscanini wanted to relieve Lehmann's anxieties, and transposed the entire piece one semitone lower. Everybody felt that although this was a most generous act to bring out the best in a great artist, the recitative preceding the adagio portion of the aria had suffered in the transposition. . . . In the third year, Toscanini tried to combine the original key of the recitative with a transposed aria, and 'invented' a new transition . . . arriving at the semitone lower key of E flat."

Nor was Toscanini alone in not wishing to sacrifice a great performance on the altar of a semitone. The late Rosa Ponselle told Harold C. Schonberg, then senior music critic of the *New York Times*:

"I had a complex about the high C in 'O patria mia' [in *Aida*] and then [Tullio] Serafin said: 'Why worry? We can transpose the ending a semitone down. Everybody does it. Caruso used to transpose his high Cs down.'" Ponselle added: "I felt pounds lighter!"

In an obituary notice on Mary Garden the same Harold C. Schonberg noted of her recordings of "Depuis le jour" from Charpentier's *Louise*: "Her most famous recording of the aria was made in 1926, toward the end of her career. She had the aria transposed down from G to F, and thus the climax is a high A instead of B. But how easily and beautifully she takes that note, and how elegant is the musical conception, and how purely the voice is projected."

That transposition should have been so common throughout most of the 19th century was essentially the result of wide fluctuations and variations of pitch. As noted earlier, during the 17th and 18th centuries, as far as orchestras were concerned, and thus including opera, pitch had been reasonably stable at A=420, give or take and oscillation or two, in other words, about a semitone below today's A=440. Thus, for truly "authentic" performance of just about everything from Handel through Gluck and Cherubini to Beethoven, Schubert, Weber and Rossini, orchestras would have to be tuned down a semitone (as is being ever more frequently done now in solo instrumental and chamber music, but is out of the question—because of the construction of the instruments, not to mention the predilections of their players—for modern symphony orchestras), and that Beethoven, exposed to his

“Eroica” as played today, would be hearing it in E instead of E flat.

But dating from the time when Tsar Alexander, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, made a present of higher pitched instruments to an Austrian regiment, of which he was honorary colonel, and whose members were also subject to service in the court theaters, the pitch began to rise, largely because instrumentalists, the winds especially, preferred the greater brilliancy. Instruments had to be adapted to the higher pitches. They could be, and were—including the string instruments. But voices could not be assisted by similar physical and mechanical alteration and adjustment.

The singers’ only recourse was to adapt their vocal production to the higher pitch (not an easy undertaking, and least of all with the pitch varying from place to place and from year to year) or transposition to lower keys. There were instances of successful rebellion, most notably by Adelina Patti, Christine Nilsson and the tenor, Sims Reeves, in England, where in some orchestras in the 1860s and 1870s the pitch had risen to a level sensibly higher than today’s A=440. Of more enduring effect for England was the insistence by Dr. George Cathcart, an ear and throat specialist, that the pitch of the orchestra be lowered to the so-called French diapason (A=435) as a condition for his financial support of Sir Henry Wood in the founding of the Proms in 1895.

But while A=435 and today’s A=440 are an improvement on the extremes of the past, there has never been any question of a return to the “classical” pitch of the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus we still have Konstanzes, Fiordiligis, Leonoras, Queens of the Night, Florestans and Agathes singing their fearsome arias and concerted numbers a semitone higher than was required of the singers for whom they were written, and who brought less weight of voice to their singing against the less numerous and less clamorous orchestras of their time. As any singer will tell you, a semitone can spell the difference between vocal pleasure and vocal distress or disaster.

An example is afforded by the case of the American Minnie Hauk, whose London debut as Amina in *La sonnambula* at Covent Garden in 1868 was a disaster and her second performance a triumph, prompting Henry Chorley to write in the *Athenaeum*: “The chief cause of her greater success was unquestionably the judicious lowering of her principal airs. On the first night she fairly broke down in the final rondo; on the second, when it was transposed a half a note lower, this outpouring of recovered joy became the most thrilling feature of her performance.” Chorley went on to attack the abnormally high pitch, probably A=450, or even higher, at Covent Garden at that time.

The case against transposition in opera is that it violates the character and color associated with the key of the composer’s choice (there is, curiously and significantly, no similar objection to transposition in the literature of solo song, with most songs published in three keys for high, medium and

low voice), and that, unless applied uniformly to all voices, it violates the composer’s structural plan in the sequences of keys from number to number and from scene to scene.

All this is valid, especially for those endowed with absolute pitch (the ability, usually native, to identify any note sounded at random and, consequently, any key). I would suggest, however, that the argument carries less weight today than it would have done a century or a century and a half ago, if only because the adventurous harmonic procedures (and progressions) to which we have grown accustomed in the music of Wagner and his successors have rendered most of us less sensitive than our ancestors to modulations and key changes.

There is, in any case, a certain ambivalence in the opera world as to transposition, especially in respect of tenors, who are frequently allowed downward transposition of Rodolfo’s aria in *La Bohème* (to accommodate an alternative high C), the “Di quella pira” in *Il trovatore* (to accommodate unwritten high Cs), the “Salut demeure” in *Faust* (to ease a full-voiced high C for which head voice is more appropriate), and, as we have noted previously, the final scene of *Lucia*. Even the closing duet of Act I of *La Bohème* is sometimes lowered to assist the tenor to an unwritten (and unwanted) final high C, as reflected in the correct answer to the jocular question: What opera act begins in C and ends in B?

Baritones are less often moved to transposition, presumably because, now singing in a range of two octaves from A to A (roughly that of a tenor in the first decades of the 19th century and earlier before continuing upward in head voice and falsetto), they are a relatively new breed, more given to frailty at the lower than at the upper extremes of the range. One transposition generally accorded them, however, is that of Dappertutto’s “Diamond” aria in *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* down a whole tone from the E of the printed score to D. This is partly because the role is often assigned to a bass-baritone, rather than a baritone, and partly because two cruelly exposed G sharps in the key of E are no laughing matter even for a high baritone. Yet in the Prêtre production at Covent Garden, Siegmund Nimsgern was required to sing it as printed, which he did, making a near thing of those G sharps. And this despite the fact that the aria was drawn from an Offenbach operetta, and only inserted in the Giulietta act by Hans Gregor in Berlin in 1905!

In the end, it is a question of vocal performance and vocal health against a violation of a composer’s choice of keys, and I for one, have no hesitation in choosing in favour of the singer, especially in music dating from a time when the orchestral pitch was a semitone or more lower than it is today. There have been times when, hearing a Donna Anna struggling with “Non mi dir” or a Konstanze struggling with “Martern aller Arten” and “Ach, ich liebte,” or a Queen of the Night contending with “Der Hölle Rache” that I have thought of founding an SPCS (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Singers)!