

# Bergonzi campaigns for 'Verdi A'

*In a master class at Carnegie Hall, the legendary operatic tenor embraced the Schiller Institute's fight to save voices. Nora Hamerman reports.*

World-renowned operatic tenor Carlo Bergonzi, who made his debut in Lecce, Italy in 1948 and will retire from the opera stage shortly before his 70th birthday next year, stunned the New York music world on Thursday, April 8 by conducting a master class to demonstrate why it is imperative to return to Verdi's classical tuning of A-432. Speaking to an overflow audience of 280 persons at Weill Recital Hall of Carnegie Hall, Bergonzi praised the Schiller Institute for its initiative to save the voices of the next generation of opera singers and the precious cultural heritage which depends on preserving beautiful and powerful voices.

"Within a few years, opera itself might even vanish," warned the well-loved tenor, as he called upon the teachers, singing students, and conductors in the audience—in some cases by name—to do everything they could to promote the return to the "natural" tuning fork for which Mozart and the great Italian opera composers of the last century wrote their works.

The demonstration was sponsored by the Schiller Institute and co-sponsored by the Italian Cultural Institute of the Italian Consulate. An audio feed had to be piped in to the hall's lobby for dozens who could not get tickets for the sold-out event, while lines formed outside and frantic calls were received from the Juilliard School of Music and other "establishment" conservatories in vain attempts to procure tickets.

## Tuning 'Manual' presented

Bergonzi was preceded on the stage by Kathy Wolfe of the Schiller Institute, who announced that the evening was to celebrate publication of the Schiller Institute's *A Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration, Book I*, which she held up and noted was on sale outside and would soon be at major New York bookstores.

The initiative was begun, she pointed out, by the statesman and physical economist Lyndon H. LaRouche, who insisted back in 1986 that music should be played at the physicists' tuning fork of C-256, since it was irrational for music and the physical sciences to exist in two apparently different universes.

Since 1939, International Standard Pitch has supposedly set the concert A (the A above middle C) by which the oboe "tunes" the orchestra at 440 Hertz, but even that arbitrarily

high tuning fork is hardly observed any more.

Wolfe reported that Liliana Celani, an Italian collaborator of Lyndon LaRouche and his wife Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the founder of the Schiller Institutes, had discovered that Giuseppe Verdi himself had demanded the fixing of concert pitch at a *ceiling* A-432—the highest possible level for the physicist's middle C of 256 Hertz. Mrs. Wolfe went on to say that exactly five years ago, on April 9, 1988, the Schiller Institute's conference "Music and Classical Aesthetics" at the Casa Verdi in Milan, had launched the campaign for the lower Verdi tuning.

There Piero Cappuccilli, whom Maestro Bergonzi has called the "last great Verdi baritone," sang two Verdi arias at the lower pitch, and changed musical history, resulting in thousands of endorsements and a bill before the Italian Parliament, modeled on Giuseppe Verdi's own legislation of 1884.

Although Cappuccilli was recovering from a serious illness and could not be in New York, she read his greetings: "My best wishes for your conference in New York, 'Return to the Verdi Tuning!' Giuseppe Verdi certainly knew voices very well, and he was right to demand in 1884 that the orchestra tuning be lowered in order to preserve opera voices. I hope that with your conference, and the recently published *Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*, that this aim may be finally realized."

Mrs. Wolfe continued by presenting a concise but clear overview of the vocal registers as applied to arias by Mozart, Rossini, Handel, Donizetti, and Verdi, passages of which were later sung by the nine young singers who participated in the program. She used overhead transparencies of the musical scores, which were projected again while the singers were singing. All but one of the examples came from the Schiller Institute's *Manual*, published last year. She joked that it was already out of date in citing a standard modern pitch of A-440, since Steinway Piano Co. had recently sent out an official announcement that New York concert pianos will henceforth be tuned at A-442.

## You can't change human vocal cords

After this introduction, nine singers, pianist Glenn Morton, Carlo Bergonzi, and a translator joined Mrs. Wolfe on



Above, Carlo Bergonzi (left) beams after congratulating tenor Steve Tillman for his demonstration of the opening bars of Verdi's "Celeste Aida" (the score projected in the background is one of the illustration in the Schiller Institute's new "Manual on Tuning"). Tillman had just finished singing the passage at the Classical, A-432 tuning.



Right, Soprano Darlene Bennett Johnson rehearses the high notes of Mozart's "Queen of the Night," accompanied at the piano by Glenn Morton. Here, she is singing with the grand piano tuned to the unnatural A-442—now standard pitch in New York concert halls. Later she sang at both tunings.

stage. The audience burst into applause when Bergonzi came out, and the mood of affection toward him persisted throughout the evening, as he conducted the informal "master class" with an energy and enthusiasm that astounded many. Bergonzi had just completed his farewell operatic appearance in the United States, with four performances in Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* at the Baltimore Lyric Opera, which he pronounced a huge success.

Bergonzi put the crowd at ease by making fun of his own English, and then recounted, through the interpreter, a string of anecdotes about the pitiful state of affairs caused by the rising pitch. He said that a few years ago the Metropolitan Opera was still holding at A-440, although he pointedly added that today, even the Met has officially put the pitch up at A-442. ("No, 443! 444!" members of the audience who were just as irate at the Met were heard to shout.) After a performance of *L'Elisir* in New York a few years ago, he said, he flew to Florence to perform in the same opera, only to discover that the pitch had been hiked to A-446. Bergonzi had to stop the rehearsal and confer in his dressing room with the oboist, who agreed to change his reed and bring the pitch down to A-440, even telling the tenor conspiratorially that he thought he could get it to A-438!

When he recounted the same story two days earlier during a taping of a master class with the Schiller Institute, which will air on June 9 on the *New York Times* radio station

WQXR, Bergonzi said that he had told the conductor in Florence that either the pitch came down—or "Bergonzi will not sing Nemorino."

Bergonzi also said that he tours with a cheap pitch pipe and tests every orchestra to make sure they do not go above A-440.

In another anecdote, he said that the orchestras in Vienna are playing at A-448 and that they have actually had to cut pieces off the flutes to allow them to play so high. "If they go any higher," Bergonzi quipped, "there will not be anything left of the flutes!" He also talked about the late, great opera conductor Tullio Serafin, his own mentor, who had been adamant about keeping the tuning low. Serafin used to fume, Bergonzi said, that he wanted to hear tenors—"not castrati."

The sad thing is, he went on, that you can tune a violin, a viola, or a cello higher by simply turning the peg, but you can't do that with the human vocal cords. That is why he sees his mission today as fighting for the future of young singers by restoring the natural pitch. In tonight's demonstrations, he underlined, there will not be the usual master class on vocal technique (Bergonzi's master classes are very celebrated) but only the demonstration of the difference which is made by singing at the correct pitch. The passages to be sung, as he explained, were selected because they demonstrate the composer's intention to use the "passage" from one vocal



Bergonzi makes a point as Darlene Bennett Johnson, Suzanne Loerch, Héctor Martínez, Thia Carla Moore and Kathy Wolfe watch on the stage at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall.

register to another for expressive purposes—an intention which is sabotaged when the tuning is too high.

## Demonstrations

On the stage were two identical Steinway concert grand pianos. The one on the audience's left was tuned to A-442; the one on the right, after four tunings, had been brought down to A-432 by a technician from the Steinway factory. Each singer demonstrated his aria first with the higher tuning, and then with the lower.

Darlene Bennett Johnson, a light soprano, sang part of the Queen of the Night's aria, "Der Hölle Rache," from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (the only German selection of the evening). She had no difficulty with the notoriously high fourth-register notes of this piece even at A-442; yet when she repeated it at A-432 the entire passage acquired a new roundness and beauty which was audible to everyone. Thia Carla Moore sang Handel's "Deh, pietà" from *Giulio Cesare* at both pitches; and Andrea Cawelti sang part of the Verdi aria from *Don Carlo*, "Tu che le vanità," which unfurls all three registers within the first few notes, when sung at the proper tuning.

For the mezzosoprano voice, the singers were Suzanne Loerch, singing Rossini's "Una voce poco fa" (*Barber of Seville*); and Ann Plagianos, with the fiendishly difficult "O don fatale," also from Verdi's *Don Carlo*. When Miss Loerch

began to repeat her excerpt at the C-256 piano, the voice was so audibly richer and "mezzo-like" that Bergonzi turned to the audience and threw up his hands as if to say, "Voilà!" to general laughter.

## A challenge to conductors, teachers

After an intermission, Bergonzi again directly addressed the audience, imploring singing teachers especially to use their influence to change the tuning and to work to influence conductors for this change. The problem is not the lack of good singing teachers, he said, although of course there are bad ones as well as good ones, among whom he mentioned Rita Patané, one of the teachers (along with Betty Allen, Elaine Bonazzi, Virginia Lindle, and Mignon Dunn) who assisted in organizing the program and had provided students for the demonstrations. He praised Daniel Lipton, an operatic conductor present in the audience, for having told him of his agreement with the project, and urged everyone to remind conductors of "what is happening to the poor fellow on the stage," so often forgotten by the maestro in the orchestra pit who is concerned only with symphonic brilliance.

Then two tenors demonstrated passages from their respective repertoire. The light tenor repertoire was represented by John Sigerson singing Nemorino's celebrated "Una furtiva lagrima" (*L'Elisir d'Amore*). Sigerson, who directs the Schiller Institute's choral and orchestral activities in the

United States and was co-project editor for the *Manual* with Mrs. Wolfe, has been singing at the Verdi pitch for several years. The more dramatic type of “lirico spinto” tenor was represented by Steven Tillman with “Celeste Aïda” from Verdi’s *Aïda*. Bergonzi, who later confided that he had debuted as Radames in *Aïda* at the Metropolitan Opera on Nov. 13, 1956, seemed to particularly enjoy drawing out this example, where the contrast between the harsh quality of the high tuning and the sweetness of the lower tuning was impossible to miss.

Tillman, together with Héctor Martínez and Andrea Cawelti, had joined Bergonzi two days before in taping the radio master class and interview, during which the tenor had also demonstrated the opening passage of “Celeste Aïda.” Asked by the show’s host, June LeBell, how he felt about the change in tuning, Tillman strongly endorsed the lower key. He said that only at Verdi’s original tuning could he express the “tenderness” which the character, Radames, feels about Aïda in the opera.

Bergonzi stressed that “Celeste Aïda,” the tenor’s first aria in the opera, is already “scary” without the further strain of modern pitch. He said that it is not just the high notes which suffer at A-442 and upwards, but that all the ranges of the voice, low, middle, and high, are thrown out of balance and that the very development of the voice of every student at modern pitch is being stunted. He promised that if conservatories were to return to the Verdi A-432, that within a “very few years” we would again see a blossoming of baritones, tenors, mezzosopranos, and other voices of which today there scarcely exist a few.

The final selections were “Il balen del suo sorriso” (Verdi, *Il Trovatore*), by baritone Héctor Martínez; and “Aprite un po’ quegl’occhi” (Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*), interpreted by bass Arizeder Urreiztieta, both young voices which have not yet developed the depth for true “Verdian” singing—and indeed, Urreiztieta chose a light Mozart bass part, rather than Verdi, for the demonstration. (Both kindly filled in at the last minute.) Bergonzi told the audience that the baritone’s voice would only develop if he studied at the lower tuning, and stressed throughout that the richer “Verdian” vocal color cannot be created in voices that study at the modern high tuning pitch.

Just before the forum ended, Bergonzi thanked the audience and challenged them again to carry forward the tuning campaign. He talked about his own career and the importance to it of his beloved wife Adele’s life-long support. He hinted that he would like to give a farewell recital of operatic arias in New York City, like those he has planned for Paris and Milan later this year—a proposal greeted with vibrant applause.

Bergonzi reemphasized the need to safeguard the vocal heritage. When my career as a tenor began in 1950, he said—he had sung in operas for three years before that as a “half-baritone”—there were 100 great first-rank tenors and about

80 second-rank. He added, I am not criticizing anyone but frankly the second-rank tenors of that time were better than today’s first rank. So, there were 180 great tenors; but today how many great tenors are there—not counting himself and Alfredo Kraus, the two seventy-year-olds—still singing? “Two and a half!”

He referred to the problem of any tenor today (“myself, and all the others included”) who faces the aria “Di quella pira” of Manrico in Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, which ends with a famous, long high C. In a hilarious rendition, Bergonzi mimicked the behavior of the panicky tenor in his dressing room, who tries to sing that passage “a hundred times” before he goes on stage, to verify that he has the high C—which of course, at A-442, has become a high C-sharp. The tenor does not even think about any of the other beautiful arias and duets he is supposed to sing in the opera, but is obsessed with “Di quella pira.” Then he goes out to perform and when he comes to the high C of “Di quella pira,” he chokes, because he has exhausted his voice back stage—Bergonzi imitated this, much to the amusement of especially the tenors in the hall.

He praised Kathy Wolfe and John Sigerson as the leaders of the Schiller Institute’s efforts to reverse the rising tuning fork and promote C-256 in the United States, adding that he thought from knowing Kathy’s determined efforts to save voices and opera that she well deserves “to wear pants,” a compliment which brought a roar of appreciation from the audience.

Although several questions had been handed up in writing, Carlo Bergonzi closed the forum after the last demonstration—well after ten o’clock at night—because as he said, following the intense performance schedule in Baltimore, he felt tired. Numerous participants were heard remarking as they left, “I think he’s onto something. I really think he’s onto something.” At the reception that followed, the popular tenor was mobbed by old acquaintances, admirers, singers, and others, seeking autographs, advice, or auditions, and expressing support. One teacher at a Manhattan college approached a Schiller Institute representative, grasping his *Manual*, and said, “I’ve been teaching voice for 15 years and now I finally understand what is going wrong. I’m going to fight to introduce this book into our curriculum.” Another said he was taking the book to another country to have it used for training there.

Two well-known singers were overheard holding court at the back of the room during intermission. They told people that they fully support the initiative and have been part of it for some time. “We are absolutely shocked about what is going on in Vienna. No one can sing there. The work of the Schiller Institute is very important.” A conductor told of a singing teacher who said to him, “My students already have problems getting jobs. If I train them to sing properly at a lower tuning, I don’t think they would make it.”