

April 9: Music at the Service of Truth Alone

by Dennis Speed

April 16—“Slavery of the body, and slavery of the soul, are two very different things. Sometime slaves are kings, and kings are really slaves. Sometimes slaves can change not only their names, but their destiny, and even all of history. If one man, born a slave, is sovereign over the power of his own mind, he can free a whole people.”

Thus did actor Ed Asner’s first words, delivered in his narration of *From the Mountaintop: A Concert Commemorating the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King*, announce not only the theme, but the purpose of the evening’s musical-pedagogical exercise. Classical Music as a weapon for the aesthetic education of mankind; the use of the Classical chorus in tragedy; and the particular role of the Schiller Institute’s New York City Chorus in changing the tragic axioms of popular opinion, to avert the presently unfolding world-tragedy—these were the pressing, persisting questions deemed urgent and essential to discuss with a Manhattan audience on the April 9, 50th anniversary of King’s 1968 funeral.

The concert, in which the Schiller Institute chorus played a prominent role, was performed two days after the Schiller Institute conference, “Bending the Arc of the Moral Universe Toward Economic Justice,” addressed by Helga Zepp-LaRouche. That conference also featured a presentation by Jason Ross, co-author of the Schiller Institute report, “Extending the New Silk Road to Southwest Asia and Africa.” In response to a questioner, Zepp-LaRouche said:

And since we have this event today, because of the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, I think it’s a very good moment in history, to say, we will not allow the murderers of King to be successful in eliminating the hope which he represented. Martin Luther King was murdered at a moment when he had started to pick up many of the same issues which are now being, in reality, changed by China. Because he had started not only to take up the question of economic justice *inside* the



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New York Schiller Institute Chorus at April 9 concert commemorating Martin Luther King.

United States, but also he had started to take on the question of jobs and overcoming poverty in developing countries. And that is what China is doing, exactly today. In the same way, what the Schiller Institute has been campaigning for, and LaRouche and his movement have been working for, for almost half a century, is now becoming a reality.

So there is reason for optimism. And I think that the best thing we can do in a moment like this, thinking about the memory of Martin Luther King, is to say, we will pick up the torch, we will not allow the American people to be passive and desperate and ignorant and all of these things, but we will all turn into active members of the Schiller Institute, help to spread the message; make the Schiller Institute a Renaissance movement, a moment fighting not only for the economic buildup of the United States, but also for a cultural Renaissance. I think the two things absolutely have to go together.

These remarks, and the Zepp-LaRouche speech, anticipated the unexpected events that would confront those in attendance at the concert, and all Americans and world-citizens, only hours later. Most in that Monday audience could not have earlier known that the world would be on the verge of a potential thermonuclear war as that evening's performance would begin.

A statement on behalf of Zepp-LaRouche to the 700-person audience read: "As you are assembled tonight, in the last hours, the danger of war, even thermonuclear war, has increased. The United Nations has been meeting to discuss Syria. The very existence of world civilization hangs on whether the world's leaders, in China, Russia and the United States, in particular, now, together, find a way out of the old paradigm of war and geopolitics."

Rev. Bernard Lafayette, chairman of the National Board of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a long-time associate of Dr. King, also



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March 1965 Montgomery to Selma march. Dr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King, center; and Dr. Ralph Abernathy, far left with hat, and Abernathy's three children in the front.

presented a message to the assembled audience: "Whether it is North Korea or North Vietnam, America has no intrinsic enemies that cannot be addressed through dialogue. We need a bridge to China, a bridge to Russia, and we need to remember what John Kennedy said: 'Mankind will put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.' Mankind has to wage peace, rather than wage war." His remarks were delivered by Andrea King, a graduate of Lafayette's nonviolence training and a member of the St. Batholomew's Church where the concert was held. (Dr. Lafayette was unable to attend because of a last-minute scheduling conflict.)

Singing Awake America's Conscience

On April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King had stunned the world, including his life-long supporters, with his Riverside Church speech, "Time to Break the Silence," declaring on that occasion his staunch, fully considered, and thorough-composed opposition to the war in South-east Asia. He had famously declared, "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence; it's non-violence or nonexistence," referring to thermonuclear weapons and the continuation of hostile relations with Russia, then the Soviet Union. One year later to the day, he was dead. The night before his death, however, he had given one of the most powerful, and perhaps the most prescient of orations in American history.

It was to musically frame those final words of that

speech, “I’ve been to the mountaintop.... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!” that the ordering and placement of the musical and narrative selections of the concert itself were devoted. All of the musical action moved toward, and then away from, King’s “Gethsemane moment,” the evening of April 3, 1968, when he proudly and defiantly announced, over the course of a twenty-five minute speech, to an audience of 2,000 sanitation workers and their supporters serving as witnesses, his intention to “stay on the mountaintop” despite the threats to his life. The following is an excerpt from the concert program about Martin Luther King’s nearly completely extemporaneous speech:

The poem would never have been made, would never have been composed and declaimed, except for the determined intervention of the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King’s closest friend. Abernathy, who, in his introduction to King that night, would humorously refer to himself as “[King’s] dearest friend and other brother,” had brought King there, despite his fatigue and reluctance to appear.

The author Taylor Branch reports what came next: “Abernathy told King this was a core crowd of sanitation workers who had braved a night of hell-fire to hear him, and they would feel cut off from a life-line if he let them down. His entrance caused an eerie bedlam.... Cheers from the floor echoed around the thousands of empty seats above, and the whole structure rattled from the pounding elements of wind, thunder, and rain.... King came smiling to the microphones about 9:30 p.m., just as the storms crested.”

Outside, “the wind howled like a hammer.” There were multiple tornadoes; at least five people died. Rain fell in slanted sheets, and only about two thousand people were there that night in Bishop Charles Mason Temple, unlike the 15,000 that had heard King there two weeks before. King was at the lowest ebb of his popularity in his entire career; 75 percent of the nation’s population thought he had lost touch with the American people, particularly because of his

announced opposition to the Vietnam War. The sanitation workers, prevented from forming a union, were on strike because of the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker. They had both been crushed to death on the previous Feb. 1 by a malfunctioning compactor in their truck, forced by rain to sit in the truck’s garbage bay because, under segregation, they were legally prohibited from seeking shelter from the rain anywhere else. These sanitation workers, Memphis’ “despised and rejected,” had sought sanctuary in Bishop Charles Mason church that night, from the rain, and from the denial of their humanity which was their daily ordeal. What should King choose to say to them?

King said nothing to them; he sang to them. And the first thing he did, was to transport them above the garbage of the streets of Memphis, to the very roof of the universe itself. “Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, ‘Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?’ I would take my mental flight by Egypt, and I would watch God’s children in

their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn’t stop there. I would move on by Greece and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon. And I would watch them around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn’t stop there....

“Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, ‘if you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’ Now that’s a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion



Library of Congress/Warren Leffler
Dr. Ralph David Abernathy

all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."

Poet Percy Shelley, in his essay *A Defense of Poetry*, contends that prophets are poets. "Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present. . . ." Martin Luther King, in that prophetic tradition, brought the sanitation workers that night to the stage of world history, to discuss their cause on that stage, because he recognized that they deserved to be there. When he concluded with the now-world famous "I've Been To The Mountaintop" ending, the reason for its electrifying effect, was that everyone there, for that moment, could see the Promised Land. It was the future in the present, summarized in the final words of King's song: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!"

That night, and in the last 24 hours of his life, Martin Luther King was the freest man in the United States, perhaps on earth. In our recall of that moment, and that speech, tonight, and in our recall of all the poets and prophets that have done as Martin King, let us remember: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

The Historical Martin Luther King

Ed Asner's opening lines were spoken just after the audience had been involuntarily placed in the position of being the uneasy witnesses to a slave-auction, chanted by baritone Frank Mathis. Mezzo Elvira Green had then performed, solo and without accompaniment, the African-American Spiritual associated with Isabella Baumfree, the Dutch-speaking former slave from upstate New York known as Sojourner Truth, whose refrain, "I told Jesus/ It would be all right/ If he changed my name," was given its context by Asner's commentary.

Abraham Lincoln's 1861-65 War Against the Rebellion; Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman's iconic roles in that war; Lincoln's assassination and the onset of segregation after the suppression of the Grant Ad-

ministration's successful efforts to eliminate the Ku Klux Klan; and the resurgence of these efforts in the aftermath of the Second World War, were dramatized in the choral selections, "Battle Cry of Freedom," "Oh! Freedom," and several Spirituals, performed by the chorus and soloists Everett Suttle, Indira Mahajan, Scott Mooney, and the great Simon Estes, one of the most accomplished singers in the history of opera in the world. Asner's narrative's role was to give those unfamiliar with the hundred-year span of history preceding King's 1963-68 "rise and fall," the background to recognize that it was America, not King, that over that time had changed for the worse.

The Classical 'Complex Domain': A Composer's Dialogue on Tragedy

The entirety of the program, however, was actually "anchored, hinged and buttressed" in another musical compositional space entirely, the "sonic footprints" of which were made audible in five musical elements. Those elements were the *Prelude and Fugue in C Minor* by J.S. Bach, BWV 546, played by organist William Trafka; G.W.F. Handel's "And He Shall Feed His Flock," with soprano Indira Mahajan and alto Linda Childs, from Handel's *Messiah*; Beethoven's "Agnus Dei," from his *Mass In C Minor*, Opus 86, with soloists Michelle Fuchs, Nancy Guice, Dante Harrell, and Roger Ham (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass-baritone); the "Lacrymosa" from the Mozart *Requiem*, featuring Indira Mahajan, Linda Childs, Everett Suttle, and Jay Baylon (soprano, alto, tenor, bass-baritone); and "The Trumpet Shall Sound," also from Handel's *Messiah*.

These pieces were actually the expressions of a higher, unseen musical domain, only made "tangible" in the evening's concluding musical and choral selections. An excerpt from the April 3 Mountaintop speech was played to "introduce" the music. The words of Martin Luther King, at his "appointment in Gethsemane," and as spoken by him, rang throughout St. Bartholomew's Church as though he were actually present—because he was. King's voice, always implicit in all that was sung and instrumentally performed by the participating musicians, could be now newly and clearly heard by those that had never known "that side of Martin," and his passionate defense of the poor in his fight for economic justice.

Performances by tenor Everett Suttle of *Round About The Mountain*, and by soprano Osceola Davis of *Guide My Feet*, just prior to King's audio appearance,



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April 9 concert in New York commemorating Dr. King.

underscored and supported the message that was yet to be heard by the audience. Simon Estes' performance of Thomas Dorsey's *Precious Lord*, the song that King requested be played for him literally a few seconds before he was killed, and tenor Gregory Hopkins' surprise rendering of *If I Can Help Somebody*, the lyrics of which King had recited in his famous oration for his own funeral, played on April 9 at Ebenezer Church in Atlanta, were placed just after King's own voice.

As a result of their level of musicianship, and the placement of the successive bass-baritone and then tenor voices, and the subject-matter of the two compositions, the audience heard both of those pieces as though they were direct extensions of not only King's words, but his voice. We had left the domain of musical performance, and had arrived at the domain of music at the service of truth alone.

The Underground Railroad's Conductors

The historical Martin Luther King, rather than the presumptive, non-existent media creation so popularized today, was thus presented to the audience, not in King's own words, but in his intention. The musical arc of the two-hour presentation, while apparently shaped "in the foreground" by the Spirituals, and particularly those conducted by Dr. Roland Carter, was in fact

grounded and buttressed by a selection of familiar Classical compositions that were there to "bear witness" to the aesthetic truth of the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Many people, of widely differing backgrounds, have expressed their surprise, excitement and satisfaction with what was presented.

Most importantly, however, twenty-five people signed up to join the New York City Schiller Institute Chorus. The three branches of the chorus, in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, will soon each grow large and strong enough to sustain the growth required to reach the goal of 500 regular members of the chorus. (About 400-

500 persons have at one time or another attended a chorus rehearsal.)

It was the chorus that was the spine, the backbone of the entire evening. Diane Sare (*Battle Cry of Freedom* and *Oh! Freedom*) John Sigerson (*Agnus Dei*) and Dr. Roland Carter (all other choral selections) collaborated to weave a singular unity of effect in that respect. Dr. Carter also filled in as pianist for Gregory Hopkins, who had himself acted as an accompanist for other singers on the program.

Dr. Carter, called by one musician "the Ulysses Grant of choral conductors" for his ability to "win vocal victory" against seemingly unfavorable odds, used his arrangement of James Weldon Johnson's *Lift Every Voice And Sing* wisely and well. His arrangement consciously evokes Brahms and other Classical composers, not by plagiarism, or "quoting," but by brandishing the same intent, and therefore the same language. Carter not only involved the entire audience in the performance of the song's first verse, but, having done that, he then insisted that his unique setting of the piece be thoroughly heard by that same audience, which had remained on its feet to hear its conclusion, primarily out of excitement about the intellectual and emotional breakthrough they had just witnessed: No one took out a cell phone for the entire two-hour duration.