

namely, His role as the Creator—is something entirely different than a mere cry for help in time of need. The mere repetition of the seventh line already makes it clear that the subject here is this other quality of emotion, since the only sense in repeating it, would be to express something other than what has come before. And that is precisely what is made explicit by the shift in register.

Within this final word of the song, “beten,” lies all the devotion of which man is capable, his humility before God—a humility, however, in which he experiences at the same time his greatest sense of elevation, because in his perfect concentration upon God, he comes to most resemble Him. When in this way, a person is immersed in perfect devotion to God, that person is consummating his *capax Dei*, his participation in God. If instead, this final word “beten” were sung without any clear register shift, as is often the case when the singer does not use the belcanto method, then this deep meaning is, at the very least, only superficially rendered.

It is no accident, that modern composers have such a difficult time creating works which can even approximate the powerful effect of the works of Beethoven or Verdi, for example, or of the specific form of the Italian and the German art-song. One can not just throw aside the classical rules of polyphonic composition, and assert that it were better done by setting up new, arbitrary rules. On the contrary, we must study the rules of the great masters, practice them, and then create new things from these.

For some time now, the *Zeitgeist* has been going in the opposite direction, with increasing emphasis being put on the accidental aspects of composition and interpretation. As a result, truly beautiful performances are heard less and less often, and whenever a performance does succeed, it often has to do with the fact that well trained musicians speak the language of music with some fluency, and that they perhaps speak beautifully, but without any knowledge of the principles whereby they speak.

Verdi's music embodies the spirit of the national movement which was an echo of the Italian Renaissance. Verdi's ability even today, to move Italians to tears of joy, is a powerful weapon which can be used to raise the spirit of the Italian people out of the cultural pessimism into which this country has been sliding in recent years. And likewise, for the German nation, the *Lied* represents perhaps its most precious pearl, because it is able to unite poetic ease together with the great intensity which is associated with the cultural high-point of German classicism.

Without a revival of this spirit, we will never succeed—neither in Italy, nor in the Federal Republic of Germany, nor in any other country in Western civilization—in carrying out any political or economic program which could improve our situation. Today we need a cultural renaissance more urgently than ever before; and for this great undertaking, we can obtain our inspiration, first and foremost, from great classical music.

## Where have all the great voices gone?

by Gino Bechi

*Mr. Bechi, one of the great Italian baritones of the interwar era, offered the following comments to the conference “Giuseppe Verdi and the Scientific Tuning Fork,” held on June 20, 1989 at the Cini Foundation in Venice, Italy.*

. . . The Italian tuning law established a solution which is contrary to what had been asked for, as far as I know. What was asked for was an A of 432 vibrations, but I have received a sheet from the Culture Commissioner which states that a tuning fork of 440 has been decided upon. This is not what we want—I mean, the Schiller Institute and the rest of us. We need a tuning fork of 432 vibrations . . . and we hope that the tuning fork will be adopted which Verdi seems to have promoted. (I say “seems” because I'm close to 80, but unfortunately I never had the chance to sing under Verdi, nor to attend his performances.) It is historically presumable that this is true, as it is historically verified that in the old days there was a certain arbitrary confusion: 432-435, 440-444, 480, were the tuning pitches in various places, with very clear signs of voices put out of phase in the different registers, although this was overcome in a masterly way by a great and extraordinarily valid vocal technique which was being taught in the various schools of that time.

I am happy to state that the emission of sounds coming out of the so-called “yawn position”—the true yawn, i.e., the sensation of the yawn—is the ideal position that permitted at that time—as it would today if they did it—the total elimination of the much-feared torment of those famous registral passages. This is the nub of the question, because if one can mechanically modify the sound of an instrument by pulling out the mouthpiece, changing the reed, with this or that instrument, the Eternal Father has not yet stuck a faucet on the vocal cords. Physiologically there is an obligatory passage which, in the low voices, starts with the F below middle C and then goes to the E (I am speaking about baritones); and then there is the most important one, which is on the E-natural.

I'd like to reveal the fact that today, with real teachers—

teachers of the level of certain educators of singers—when a singer had gifts, he was certain to go study with Rosati, and you got a singer out of it; or with Cotogni, and you got a Beniamino Gigli; and so forth. Today I don't say there are no good teachers; there are, but frankly I don't know any of that level.

And so the discussion of the tuning fork becomes imperative, so as to allow a solid technical construction on bases which can go back to being favorable for the rebirth of vocal art—the true color of the contralto, a mezzo-soprano, a true baritone. . . .

“Do you think this is exclusively because of the tuning fork?” you probably ask. Certainly that has a large share of the blame. Dramatic tenors are no longer dramatic, and they ruin their voices singing dramatic operas, when their voices are strictly lyric. This has been caused by the upward shift of the tuning fork—so much so that when Pavarotti opts to sing a B-natural instead of a high C in “Di quella pira” [a celebrated tenor aria in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*—ed.], you have to say he's right, because his vocal artistry would be reduced if he produced that note; his voice would be strained. So by singing a half step lower, he is never quite right, but close enough.

I have with me—I always carry it—a tuning fork which I bought at the outset of my career, and this is it [Bechi strikes the tuning fork into the microphone]. Some years later I bought this other fork [he sounds the other]. Half a step! And now we are beyond even this second tuning fork, which was higher than the first.

So where will we end up? How do you want to have baritones again like Cotogni, like Titta Ruffo? There are exceptions, like the man who preceded me, [Piero] Cappuccilli. . . . For him there was no problem, as frankly there was not for me; in fact, in certain cases I preferred a half step higher, because to reach low notes like the B-flat of the “Germe dell'avel” in *Otello* was possible; but when I had to sing the A-natural of “Avveleni per me,” things got more complicated, and so I used to sing the A one octave higher, following the example of Titta Ruffo who did the same thing.

But I was an exception, I had a naturally large range. What I am saying is not personal, I turn to those who are more normally within the limits of a baritone vocal range. By adopting Verdi's A = 432 we will be able to have the so-called Verdian voices again. But, you say, are we going to sing Rossini, Donizetti, and company just like we sing Verdi? No, because if the singer, favored by a physiologically more perfect, exact tuning, which is more consonant to human nature, can study and sing the *Barber of Seville*, whether they are dramatic or highly ornamented operas, doesn't matter. It becomes a little like the movie camera: When the lens is focused, it does not matter if it's color film, black and white, a drama, or Mickey Mouse; you will always get a perfect image on the screen, with the outlines not confused, not smeared by lack of focus.

## Down with monochromatic singing!

The voice has only one focal point, like the lens in the optical field, which after rotating around that point you can do all colors; and whoever cannot do the colors is a singer, but I am not sure you can call him an artist. The artist is not somebody who makes me a picture which is all yellow, or all blue, painting a blue face, blue eyes, blue nose, blue teeth, and what do I see? I see a big splotch which can also be considered a very modern painting—very bold, but I only see a splotch and no physiognomy.

Flexibility comes from good technique and the easiest production of the sound in the different registers, because the 432 tuning fork is physiologically more consonant with singing, and it has been scientifically proven, if I am not mistaken. I don't have deep knowledge of this, as does Mrs. Celani who will speak after me; but I can give a personal example. . . . I sang the opera *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas in Lisbon. The opera has a famous piece, the toast, in B-flat, which is then transposed even higher when the chorus comes in for the reprise. Mr. Thomas—since in his day the tuning fork allowed this—stuck in a fine B-flat with a fermata on it, deliberately. So you have to hold this high B-flat. I had no problem in Lisbon. Then I sang *Hamlet* in Italy, in Catania and Palermo, and at the crucial point, with the same voice, the same technique, and the same opera, I had a lot of trouble with this B-flat. Then I went back to Portugal, and rediscovered not only facility but vocal mellowness, baritone roundness. . . . I realized that the difference from Portugal was a half-tone difference in pitch, which despite my ease in sound production, kept me from doing it with the same facility and spontaneity and roundness [in Italy], which I could in Portugal. . . . In Portugal it happened that way because they were still—I don't want to be impolite to the Portuguese—but a little backward; they had been out of contact, something of a closed circle, and their orchestras had stayed the way they were years ago. . . .

For a baritone, or tenor, or soprano who has the voice, to sing a B-flat or B-natural is the same; there is no difference in effort, if the singer is in good technical shape.

The story changes when you are talking about the register passage. For certain phrases (and not for exhibitionism) I have to do a little example: In *Rigoletto* there is a phrase: “Tal figlia è per me.” You can broaden out in the E-flat [i.e., an expansive note at the very top of the second register—ed.]. But if the tuning is high, I am forced to sing “Tal figlia è per me” by closing the voice [i.e., moving the voice into the third register] on the E-flat of *figlia*. That makes a difference also in the color. If in “Pari siamo” I have to express great anger against the courtiers, I can still open the voice on the E-natural; but if I shift it further up a little, this anger is not anger any more; it is a passed note. . . .

Vocal technique is falsified by a tuning that does not correspond to the singer's nature. That's what my experience as a singer and teacher has taught me.