

‘SCHILLER’S MUSIC TEACHER’

## Sylvia Olden Lee and the German *Lied*

by Dennis Speed

June 13—The German *Lied* is the *Rosetta Stone* of Classical music. The project—initiated by Ludwig van Beethoven, and advanced and perfected by Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Johannes Brahms, to spread, through these songs, the highest expression of Classical artistic principles of composition to the widest possible audience—was not limited to the German language, as Beethoven’s settings of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh songs, as well as the Robert Burns settings done by several German and other composers, attest. It is, however, in the German *Lied*, that the Song achieved its highest expression.

Sylvia Lee was a master of the art of *Lieder* performance. It was her extraordinary integrity as a musician, that led her to achieve this level of perfection. Her studies with Gerhard Hüsch in Germany were essential for this. Hüsch recognized that Sylvia could understand what many miss—the Classical composers’ appreciation of what America’s Edgar Allan Poe once termed “The Power of Words.” “When teaching

German *Lieder*, Gerhard Hüsch insisted that his students speak the lyrics as dramatic monologues before singing them, Sylvia told author Elizabeth Nash.

These *Lieder*, properly performed, embody the principle of Classical Theater. Tragedy is often their subject, but Tragedy viewed from the standpoint of the Sublime. Brahms’ “*Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*,” a song that Sylvia and singer Elvira Green often performed for Schiller Institute programs in Europe and America in 1994, perfectly illustrates the Idea of the Sublime, without flinching from a wrenching portrayal of the Tragic. Many often quote John Keats’ famous “Ode On a Grecian Urn” that “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” but how do we reconcile that with the Tragic? That demands artistry. That was the successful mission of the life of the Artist, Sylvia Olden Lee.

Since the 1873 and 1877 visits of the Fisk Jubilee Singers to Europe, there has been a trans-Atlantic discussion process among Classical artists, including Brahms and Dvorak, with American musicians, and particularly many musicians of African heritage, on the identity of the Idea of the Sublime, embodied in the German *Lied* and the Negro Spiritual. Contrary to the unfortunate commentaries written by those who have failed to comprehend the Classical composers’ devotion to the Poetic Principle, this is not a “multi-cultural issue.” If one listens, for example, to contralto Marian

Anderson and pianist Franz Rupp perform Schumann's "Stille Tränen" followed by the Spiritual, "Crucifixion," the identity of intention that imbues the spirit of the two performances is audible. It cannot be so, not if the performances are truthful, unless the substance of the message behind the words, is also identical. It was George Shirley, William Warfield, Sylvia Lee, and Robert McFerrin, who insisted, on the behalf of Musical Truth, that this identity in Intention, of both the *Lied*, and the Spiritual, be the standard of performance, in their 1990s performances and teaching with the Schiller Institute.

Dvorak spoke of the same identity of Classical intention to his friend, musician Harry Burleigh, who introduced Dvorak to the Spirituals, by singing them to him for hours at a time. Dvorak exclaimed to Burleigh, that he heard the same Idea behind the Spirituals, as he heard behind Beethoven's great symphonic themes. Roland Hayes proved this to initially hostile, and then adoring, German audiences in 1927, much to the chagrin of certain of his American counterparts, who were a bit surprised when the now-converted German audience members exclaimed, "At last! An American who can actually sing our songs!" Hayes recognized what Sylvia Lee practiced all the time, and what Gerhard Hüsch must have appreciated about her from their first meeting. They were not only "the songs of the Germans," although they were also the songs of the Ger-

mans. These were, like the Spirituals, songs of, and for, all people everywhere.

Of course, therefore, Sylvia and the Schiller Institute would have to meet. Of course, she would find herself a closer and closer interlocutor with Lyndon LaRouche and Helga LaRouche, whose love of the German *Lied* mirrors their love of humanity, as Sylvia's love of humanity mirrors her love of music. The present tense is appropriate here, for the Artist never dies. All Nature sings the song of the Artist, always; for the Artist, as Schiller taught us, is he who stands at the shoulders of God in his Creation, for whom all things are new, and all things renewed, forever.

*Über mein Bett erhebt sich ein Baum,  
Drin singt die junge Nachtigall;  
Sie singt von lauter Liebe,  
Ich hör es sogar im Traum.*

Over my bed, there rises a tree;  
In it the young nightingale sings;  
It sings of nothing but love, of nothing but  
love;  
I hear it, I hear it even in my dreams, even in  
my dreams.

So may we all, hear Sylvia, even in our dreams, of a better world, that will be of her, and the Artist's, making.