

Sylvia Olden Lee's Mission—and Ours

by Dennis Speed

June 13—When the Sylvia Olden Lee Centennial Chorus performs at Carnegie Hall this June 29, as part of the “Tribute to Sylvia Olden Lee, Master Musician and Teacher,” sponsored by the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture, a promise to the Schiller Institute’s late Cultural Advisory Board member (1917-2004) will be not merely kept, but renewed. Specifically, the Schiller Institute New York City Chorus—which has joined with the Convent Avenue Baptist Church Sanctuary Choir and other choruses and singers for this occasion—intends to establish a citywide choir of 1000-1500 people by the end of this year. This is a cultural “Apollo Project,” launched in the spirit of that initiated by President John F. Kennedy, who was also born in 1917. It was proposed by Lyndon LaRouche during one, and later several of his Saturday Manhattan dialogues, and was finally adopted. Since that time the Schiller Institute New York City Chorus has grown from a handful of persons to 125-plus people. Two hundred twenty singers will take the stage at Carnegie, in addition to the seasoned professionals, colleagues, and collaborators of Sylvia who will pay their respects in the way that only great artists can do—bringing the works of genius to audible life, giving many people, particularly youth, access to them for the first time.

Sylvia Olden Lee taught and believed that the great prospective singers of the Classical stage were in the gas stations, waiting on tables in restaurants, parking cars, and flipping burgers throughout the post-industrial wasteland of America. They were not necessarily anywhere near the conservatories. Sylvia, who was not only meticulously trained, but who could recall and play from memory well over a thousand musical vocal pieces from opera, lieder, chanson, and oratorio, deeply believed in thorough musical preparation—so she was not opposing conservatory training. She



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Sylvia Olden Lee, speaking at a Schiller Institute music seminar at Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. on Feb. 7, 1998, at the time of the visit from Germany of the Thomanerchor boys' choir to Washington.

simply noted, largely as a result of the work of her father, he of the famous Fisk Quartet, and of her own observations, that the proliferation of musical instruction, and the weekly practice of singing, if energetically spread throughout a community, resulted in the production of many more “voices of distinction” than might be assumed.

Members of the Schiller Institute, working with Sylvia’s colleagues, including those who were and are great professional singers in their own right, have set out to demonstrate—using New York City as the laboratory—that Sylvia was right. The additional interesting feature of this, is that more languages are spoken in New York City than any other city in the world—perhaps as many as 800. Of these, 176 are spoken in the city’s school system. New York City is therefore the natural “proving ground” for Sylvia’s project, named after her mother, to “Save Young Lyric Voices In Advance.”



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Sylvia Olden Lee working with friends at the Sept. 1, 2001 ICLC/Schiller Institute Conference in Reston, Virginia. From left to right: William Warfield, Dorceal Duckens, and Dennis Speed.

Revolutionizing the Potential of Youth

How can you create a chorus out of people that all speak different languages, as in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, to sing as a single voice? That is no different from the idea of Alexander Hamilton’s American Presidency. A singular voice of multiple states, a union that is “*e pluribus, unum.*” Music, itself a language, hovers above these specific spoken (and sung) languages. In choral singing, in multiple parts, Bach’s method of composition allows for every human voice-type to be placed, to be heard, and even to be featured, as all the other voices are simultaneously singing, as well. Rather than cacophony, an ever-richer harmony and counterposition of ideas was developed through the method of what is properly termed Classical polyphony. The basis, however, for the response in the human mind to that polyphony as a single idea, is that each mind is sovereign, and can therefore contain that polyphony, using it for its own form of individual expression through properly placing his or her voice within that polyphony.

For this, great teachers, and great music, are needed. But this is also the basis for revolutions in thought and changes in ideas that can be very quickly assimilated and transmitted from one individual and group to another. If such is successfully done, no population so educated can ever become petty and enslaved again. No such population so educated would ever tolerate what has happened to the United States since the two events

of September 11, 2001, and more profoundly, November 22, 1963.

Our educational institutions are the greatest expression of the failure of the political discourse and culture of the United States in the aftermath of Kennedy’s assassination. Our physical economy could not have been so far degenerated had not the popular culture of the past 125 years degraded the mind of the citizen to such depths. Those who are six and seven years of age, as well as younger and older, are clearly not to blame. Liberating them from their imposed condition cannot be done by calling for the hanging of their teachers—who are themselves the product of the same system.

Classical music’s method allows a powerful, if apparently indirect access to this deeper quality of thought in nearly all students; when Classical music doesn’t work, there are always extra-musical reasons for that failure. Reversing the path of suicide in the United States requires that people be educated—“led out of”—their present self-imposed dark age. That requires getting past the policemen of consciousness, including the specific ideologies that plague particular national groups. This requires an epistemology which is generally unavailable at this time in trans-Atlantic school systems generally, and in the United States in particular. Only musical studies are generally capable of bringing this therapeutic corrective to the attention and the minds of the elementary school- and junior high school-aged child. Before they become the source of a descent into yet another, lower level of Hell, we have to “save these young lyric voices in advance,” else, they will have no voice in any field.

It is this task to which the efforts of the Schiller Institute, including its participation in the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture’s event, are directed.

About Sylvia Olden Lee

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