

# Tribute to Sylvia Olden Lee, Master Musician and Teacher

June 27—Executive Intelligence Review received the following press announcement, regarding the remembrance of Sylvia Lee (1917-2004), the great voice coach and accompanist, and member of the cultural advisory board of the Schiller Institute, whose 100th Birthday would have been this June 29.

“The Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture is pleased to announce that the Mayor’s Office of the City of New York will issue a proclamation that will declare June 29th to be ‘Sylvia Olden Lee Day.’ Sylvia Olden Lee was a great artist and a pioneer of the Metropolitan Opera. A self-proclaimed ‘granddaughter of a slave,’ Sylvia was instrumental in giving African-Americans access to the Metropolitan stage for the first time. She lived in New York City for many years. Her achievements live on in the work of the Harlem Opera Theatre and many musical institutions and persons. She is a truly great ‘hidden figure’ who deserves this recognition.”

*EIR* notes that the proclamation is to be presented at the Foundation’s commemorative program at Carnegie Hall on June 29. Tribute statements were received from many, including artists Jessye Norman, George Shirley, Bobby McFerrin, and many others. Sylvia Lee spent many hours, together with her friend, the great bass-baritone Bill Warfield, working with members of Schiller Institute choruses in the 1990s, touring Europe and the United States on behalf of her Project SYLVIA (Saving Young Lyric Voices In Advance), and in the creation of a new audience for Classical music.

Two of those tribute statements appear below, including that issued by Helga Zepp-LaRouche, President and Founder of the German Schiller Institute. Sylvia Lee spent many hours in the company of Helga and Lyndon LaRouche, including at their home. She was particularly intrigued by the LaRouches’ project to return Classical musical performance, especially vocal



Sylvia Olden Lee  
1917-2004

performance, to the “Verdi tuning” of C=256 Hz, requiring an “A” with a range between 427-432 Hz, far lower than the modern “A” which ranges from 440 to 450 Hz on the modern opera stage.

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## Greeting from Schiller Institute Founder and President Helga Zepp- LaRouche

Sylvia Olden Lee was one of those absolutely outstanding artists who are capable of crystalizing the essence of a piece of music, the true idea, only accessible to those individuals who can

read the intention of the poet and the composer. She implanted throughout her life, in the many pupils and people she inspired, the knowledge of how the artist, the singer, or the instrumentalist steps modestly behind the composition, but at the same time adds his or her ennobled individuality to the performance, to make it both unique and absolutely truthful.

In doing that, she was always playful, polemical, full of humor, profound, loving, and with a disarming openness, and by representing all of these characteristics, she would liberate her students, as well as the audience, out of their normal unelevated condition to the higher plane of true art. She was able, like only a few, to let those around her participate directly in the creative process, in the diligent work of the kind of perfection it takes to actually produce art, as opposed to only making nice sounds.

The afternoons and evenings when she would participate in a *Musikabende* or coaching sessions in our place in Virginia, together with William Warfield, Robert McFerrin, and numerous other classical artists, belong to the fondest memories for my husband, Lyndon LaRouche, and myself. Sylvia and Bill were for many years on the board of the Schiller Institute and added an invaluable treasure to its work.

In thinking about Sylvia, one suddenly wishes she

were still here, since what she taught is so very needed for humanity.

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## A Centennial Celebration of the Life of Sylvia Olden Lee

Eugene Thamon Simpson, Ed.D.

Any centennial celebration of the life of Sylvia Olden Lee must be a retrospective of her origin, her education, her work, her influence, and the lives she touched. Although she loved the phrase, “born as the granddaughter of slaves,” Sylvia Olden was born into a privileged family in Meridian, Mississippi on June 29, 1917. Her father, James Olden, a Minister, and her mother, Sylvia Ward, were both graduates of Fisk University where her father had been a tenor in the Fisk Quartet with Roland Hayes, and her mother, a singer of such excellence that she was offered a contract at the Metropolitan Opera in 1913 if she would pass as white. Little Sylvia proved to be a prodigy, accompanying her parents by the age of eight, and playing in concerts from the age of ten. Her precocity attracted the attention of many in high places, and she was invited to play at the White House for President Roosevelt’s first Inauguration, and later by Mrs. Roosevelt in 1942. After two years at Howard University, Ms. Olden was offered, and accepted, a full scholarship to Oberlin Conservatory from which she graduated with honors in 1938, with a major in piano performance. Her musical and linguistic abilities were further developed by a Fulbright Scholarship for study at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, seven years in Germany during which she studied German *Lieder* and opera, and seven years in Sweden, where she coached and performed with her husband, violinist and conductor, Everett Lee.

Before moving to Europe in 1956, Sylvia taught at Talladega College, Dillard University, and Howard University; she toured the southern states with singer Paul Robeson; and she accompanied singers in the voice studios of Elizabeth Schumann, Eva Gautier, Konrad Bos, Rosalie Miller, Fritz Lehmann, and many others. She coached singers for New York City Opera, the Tanglewood Festival, and in 1954, became the first African American on the coaching staff of the Metropolitan Opera as a Kathryn Tourney Long Scholar. It is to her activist intervention with Max Rudolph and Rudolph Bing that we attribute the debut of Marian Anderson as the first of her race to sing from the Metropolitan Opera stage. This opened the door for Robert McFerrin, Leon-

tyne Price, and all who followed. In 1970, Mrs. Lee returned to Philadelphia to join the faculty of the Curtis Institute as a Vocal Coach, a position she would hold until 1990. She coached the singers for the Metropolitan Opera premiere of *Porgy and Bess*, for the Russian production of the same opera, and for the Carnegie Hall “Spirituals in Concert” with James Levine.

Sylvia Lee’s influence can best be measured by the principal singers she has worked with. A greatly abbreviated list would include scores of emerging artists at the institutions of higher education, at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, and at Curtis, as well as a bevy of stars including Kathleen Battle, Jessye Norman, Marian Anderson, Robert McFerrin, Grace Bumbry, and Simon Estes. While much of her work involved coaching and playing the standard classical operatic and art song repertoire, her long association with the Schiller Institute took her to many colleges and universities to conduct master classes on the African American Spiritual, alone, and with William Warfield. One year before her death on April 10, 2004, Oberlin Conservatory conferred upon her an Honorary Doctor of Music Degree.

I shall never forget her fearlessness and musical competence which she demonstrated at the Hall Johnson Centennial Festival, which I produced at Rowan University (then Glassboro State College) in 1988. It was a three-day retrospective of the life and works of Hall Johnson that featured headliners Jester Hairston, William Warfield, Leonard De Paur, D. Antoinette Handy, three choral concerts, and five solo recitals of Hall Johnson’s music. One day before the festival was to begin, John Motley, former accompanist for Marian Anderson, who was scheduled to play for John Morrison (then tenor soloist at Riverside Church), and Dr. Blanche Foreman (a former pupil of mine who was then on the faculty at Vassar), cancelled for personal reasons. Morrison’s recital was of Hall Johnson’s original art songs, and Foreman’s of familiar Spirituals. Without batting an eye, Sylvia, who had been hired to play recitals for Gregory Hopkins and Barbara Dever, stepped in, and with only a single rehearsal, played John Morrison’s recital admirably and to the enthusiastic acclaim of the audience. I played Dr. Foreman’s recital which also delighted the audience. Both performances are preserved on the 4-CD album, *The Best of the Hall Johnson Centennial Festival*. I shall forever be grateful to her for her help in rescuing the festival and for her contribution to the performances of those rarely heard, and not previously recorded, works. “Thank you, Sylvia.” You live on in our memory and in these performances.