

# About Sylvia Olden Lee

*Excerpted from a 2004 article by Dennis Speed, which first appeared in the June 28, 2004 issue of the New Federalist newspaper.*

Sylvia Olden Lee's father was a minister. "Daddy was born in 1884 and was the youngest of four children. Like Mama, Daddy had to work his way through Fisk, where he arrived in 1906. Part of Daddy's scholarship was to serve as a waiter, as well as to lead the singing in Sunday morning chapel. Many times they had visiting ministers. . . . Nobody knew what [they were] going to say. When the minister sat down after speaking, it was Daddy's job to break out a *cappella* in the choir with the very first thing that came into his head from the sermon, like, 'I never been to Heaven, but I been told. . . .' Then the whole church would join in unaccompanied: 'I know the Lord's laid His hands on me. Oh the gates are of pearl and the streets are gold . . .' It was a kind of a *cappella* Negro Spiritual. There weren't more than ten musicians in the congregation, but everybody sang four-part harmony. 'He sees all you do,' Daddy'd sing,

and they'd respond, 'He hears all you say . . .' Every Sunday a different one!"

Divorced from its setting in the church, the Spiritual is as impossible to understand, as it is impossible to understand Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as a "concert performance piece." And "*Jauchzet Gott*" requires the same conviction, and spontaneous joy, as Sylvia's father had to glean, as an antiphonal counterpoint, from the Sunday sermon.

### Her Family History

Sylvia's paternal grandfather was a slave who ran away from the Oldham plantation in Kentucky to fight with the Union Army at the beginning of the war. Her great-grandfather, Nelson Merry, was the founder of what was called the First Colored Baptist Church in Nashville, in 1853. He was also a slave, born in 1824,

### '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

and freed in 1845, after being taught to read, against the law, by the pastor of the First Baptist Church. (The First Colored Baptist Church was the segregated spin-off of the original church to which he was passed on, as property, by the wife of his former master, upon her death in 1840.)

Nelson Merry got to Nashville as a result of the refusal of his Indian mother, Sylvia's paternal great-great-grandmother—refusing to continue to walk to Oklahoma in Andrew Jackson's and Martin van Buren's genocidal "Trail of Tears," the attempted extermination, through deportation, of the Cherokee Nation of North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Because she refused to walk any further, the children, including Sylvia's great-grandfather, were sold to various masters. Sylvia's grandfather, father, and mother were also students at Fisk College, founded

by members of the American Missionary Association to provide the basis for a Classical education to former slaves, in 1866.

The Fisk University education was emphatically not to "educate the newly freed slaves to their expected station." It was not "post-slavery skills 101." In the music curriculum at Fisk, for example, it was noted by this author, in 1994, that the section of the curriculum which discussed prerequisites for competence in piano, emphasized the students' study of Bach's "two-voiced and three-voiced inventions," not today's musically illiterate "two and three-part inventions." Students were offered, and encouraged to study, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, often in relation to religious study, but also for basic literacy.

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.

## The Fisk Jubilee Singers

Sylvia's Civil War-veteran grandfather had a sister, Elizabeth Merry, who also attended Fisk, and was part of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the group that was responsible, more than any other, for making the African-American Spirituals known throughout the world. In two remarkable and exhaustive tours, they acquainted particularly Germany, Bohemia (the present-day Czech Republic, as well as Slovakia), and England, with these songs, not as a specialty, but as embedded in Classical repertoire programs, of which all the members of the ensemble were accomplished performers. The Spirituals would be, less than twenty years later, the basis for the attempt by Johannes Brahms and his associate, Antonin Dvorak, to create an American practice of Classi-

cal musical composition in the United States through Jeanette Thurber's National Conservatory of Music. Dvorak's devoted study of the Negro Spiritual, as conveyed to him by the singer, musician, and composer Harry Burleigh, won Dvorak the undying enmity of those in both Europe and America committed to the lie of "black cultural inferiority." Although aborted, echoes of Dvorak's and Brahms's efforts would persist up through their destruction by the Frankfurt School and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Sylvia's mother, a formidable pianist and vocalist, was offered the opportunity to sing at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1912, but refused, when she was informed that she, who had blonde hair and blue eyes,

## 'Music is Hard Work!'

June 13—"I don't feel that my approach as a vocal coach of interpretation is unique. But I probably am unique in beating the devil out of singers to help them create an interpretation meant to be closest to the composer's intention for his opera, oratorio, *lied*, chanson, or song." Sylvia Olden Lee could demand and elicit a caliber of musical and intellectual excellence from singers that other teachers could not, because she demanded the same excellence from herself. Here is some of the advice she offered, as recorded by author Elizabeth Nash in her book, *The Memoirs of Sylvia Olden Lee, Premier African-American Classical Vocal Coach: Who is Sylvia*:

Try setting your alarm at 6:15. Don't get out of bed. Don't go to the bathroom. Reach for your score and open it. Don't make a sound. Read it as you would a novel and put yourself in the place of the character. Try to acquire most of your artistic knowledge in quietness. It is your duty as a singer to know everything on the page except the printer's mark at the bottom.

For an opera, singers should be familiar with the libretto and its source, whether it's Shakespeare or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It's not enough to know that Gounod wrote

*Faust*. Who wrote the original story? They don't have to be authorities on the composer's and dramatic or literary author's lives. But they should at least know the author's intention and what prompted the composer to set this text to music.

... For a song, singers should know who wrote the poem. It must be superb, since the composer decided it was worthy of being set to music. ... Initially, the singers should look up the poet's life and read one other of his works, so as to take on his mantle. Then they should sit and silently study their song's poem. Next, they should say it aloud to discover the rhythms and words to be accented. If you take the tune away, some singers can't do the song. That's why I insist: "learn the text first!" Mr. Rudolf stated: "Both Beethoven and Verdi, never having written literary texts in their lives, said on their death beds: Pay attention to the words." They really could have said: "Pay attention to the thoughts."

... Singers can hold their scores if they must, but there's got to be some interpretation there! When teaching German *lieder*, Gerhard Hüsck insisted that his students speak the lyrics as dramatic monologues before singing them. ...

... But no one can put the meaning in your head. You have to bring it out of yourself!



Schiller Institute.

*Sylvia Olden Lee speaking at a Feb. 18-21, 1994 Schiller Institute conference in Washington, D.C.*



Opera Buff/Baroque Duet 1992 Documentary

*Sylvia Olden Lee and Kathleen Battle in a working session in 1992.*

would be expected to “pass for white”—to deny that she was of African-American ethnic origin. Her father, a member of the legendary Fisk Quartet, which also included the extraordinary singer Roland Hayes (1887-1977), became a minister and civil rights organizer, who was run out of Alabama by the Ku Klux Klan when Sylvia was a young child, in the 1920s. He later successfully forced the first performance by an African-American conductor, heading a Classical orchestra, below the Mason-Dixon line, in 1953. The conductor was Everett Lee, Sylvia’s husband and a master violinist.

Sylvia was to force the Metropolitan Opera to allow accomplished musicians of African-American origin through its doors, by first becoming a vocal coach at the Met, and then suggesting to her colleague Max Rudolf that an American of African descent, Carol Brice, sing the role of Ulrica in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera*. It was Marian Anderson who actually performed that role that year, which opened the American Classical stage to all those who had been forced away from this field from the time that Dvorak had been driven out of the United States, in 1895. This was followed by the great Robert McFerrin singing at the Met that same year. Sylvia became, through the years, the premier consultant for literally hundreds of singers, and had, as of



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

*Sylvia Olden Lee, speaking at a May 28, 1994 National Music Conference in Washington, D.C., entitled “For a Marian Anderson National Conservatory of Music Movement.” It was held at Rankin Chapel at Howard University.*

1993, become more familiar as “Kathleen Battle’s teacher.”

### **With the Schiller Institute**

The Schiller Institute worked with Sylvia Lee for just over ten years. Her pedagogical method was instantly identified as identical with that of the best of humanist thinkers and teachers. It was witheringly honest, often hilarious, and always focused on the essentials. In the last years, she most loved working with the LaRouche Youth Movement, which she had the opportunity to do on the West Coast and in Philadelphia. She was not merely in agreement with LaRouche on “cultural matters”; she was a financial contributor to the LaRouche Presidential campaign, and actively supported it whenever she could.