

EIR Feature

Science, morality, and singing debated in Venice

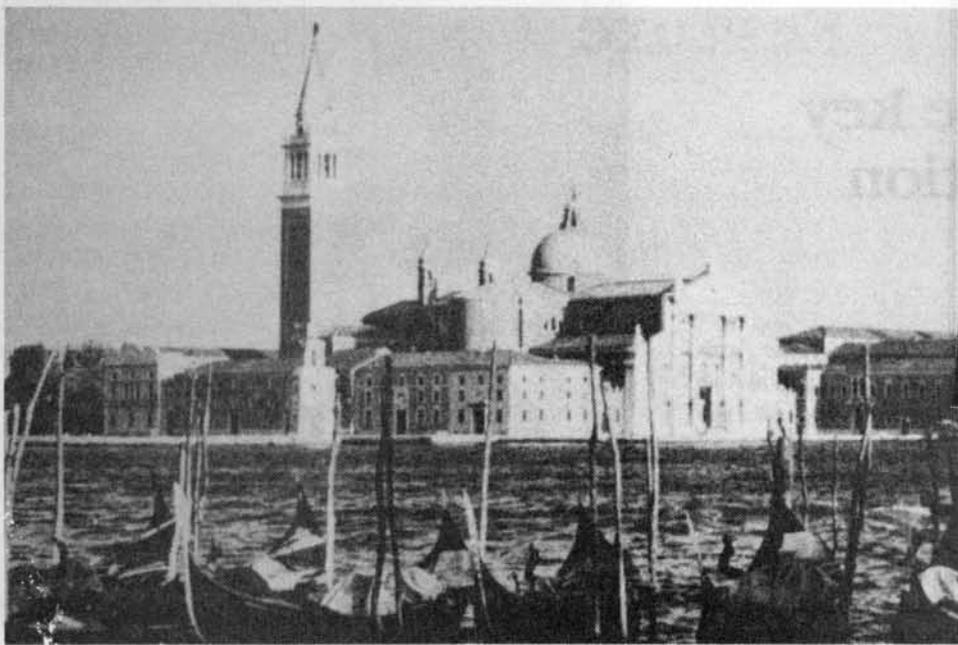
by Nora Hamerman

We present below four of the speeches that were delivered in Venice, Italy on June 20 in a history-making conference on “Giuseppe Verdi and the Scientific Tuning-Fork,” organized by the Schiller Institute and the Italian Harpsichordists Association, and sponsored by the Cini Foundation and the Levi Foundation. This conference occurred at a turning-point in the battle to lower the standard pitch at which music is performed, to that employed by the classical composers from Bach to Verdi, where middle C is set at 256 vibrations per second.

Before an audience that included a representative of the Italian Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment, Liliana Celani of the Schiller Institute retraced the history of the initiative. She reported that the American scientist Lyndon LaRouche in 1986 proposed an experimental performance of Mozart’s “Coronation Mass” at $C = 256$, which was carried out in Virginia. Historical research then led to the discovery of Verdi’s concern for this issue, the 1881 scientific conference in Milan which arrived at $A = 432$ based on $C = 256$, and the 1884 decree of the Italian War Ministry, which, at Verdi’s behest, set $A = 432$ as the standard pitch for all military bands.

In 1950, Celani said, the French National Academy of Sciences unanimously proposed a return to the “Verdi A,” but they were defeated, apparently by wind instrument makers more interested in exporting jazz instruments to the U.S., than in the classical or opera repertoire.

In July 1988, a Schiller Institute-backed bill to establish the Verdi A for all publicly subsidized concerts in Italy was introduced by two senators in Rome. The Institute organized three vocal concerts—in Paris, New York, and Washington—to demonstrate the “Verdi A,” as well as the memorable recital of violinist Norbert Brainin and pianist Günther Ludwig in Munich last December, where the classical tuning was demonstrated in works by Bach, Brahms, Schumann and Beethoven. But early in 1989, the Schiller-supported bill was subverted into legislation imposing $A = 440$, the old “international standard pitch” which the majority of the



The Venetian Island of San Giorgio, home of the Cini Foundation, which hosted the conference on "Giuseppe Verdi and the Scientific Tuning-Fork." The Cini Foundation houses one of the world's finest libraries of early music. Inset: a poster advertising the conference.

world's greatest opera and classical singers have rejected as too high.

No sooner had this diabolical law been announced, than four leading figures of the Italian musical world, opera diva Renata Tebaldi, the renowned Verdi baritone Piero Cappuccilli, the artistic director of Vatican Radio Arturo Sacchetti, and Prof. Bruno Barosi, who directs the acoustical physics laboratory at the Cremona Violin-Building Institute, sent an open letter to the major Italian newspapers. Their letter denounced the perversion of the bill and vowed to continue to fight for the tuning Giuseppe Verdi had demanded in 1884. Meanwhile, it was also announced that Maestro Cappuccilli and other famous opera stars will perform a televised concert version of Verdi's most celebrated opera, *Rigoletto*, during the coming opera season in London, with the London Philharmonia orchestra under the baton of La Scala conductor Michel Sasson—at the "Verdi tuning."

Future issues of *EIR* will contain further speeches from the Venice conference, including Prof. Bruno Barosi's unique contribution to the knowledge of how the Cremona violins, especially those of Stradivarius, were built.

Elio Manzoni of the Mezzanzana Foundation in Busseto, brought the greetings of Carlo Bergonzi, the great bel canto tenor. He reported that he has created the Bergonzi Verdi Academy in Busseto (Verdi's birthplace) for contestants in the "Verdi Voices" Competition. Manzoni disclosed that two of the greatest figures in postwar opera history who are no longer living, conductor Tullio Serafin and soprano Maria Callas, to his personal knowledge were supporters of the lower tuning: "Now if artists like Callas and Tebaldi who, by their character, status, and all the vicissitudes we know were at opposite poles from each other, were fully agreed on these

things, that must mean they are true!"

Dr. Mario Bardi, emeritus chief of anesthesiology at St. Paul's Hospital in Milan, and formerly a professional singer for seven years, spoke as both a physician and singer, as he forcefully endorsed the Verdi A = 432 pitch. He reported that his own singing teacher had a piano tuned to A = 435, even though "standard pitch" had already risen to a minimum of A = 440, because he said, "it was the highest pitch at which a singer could correctly place his or her voice." He then noted that even the minimal variations in pitch damage both the throat and the hearing of the performers, and that the rising pitch of the orchestra, as it warms up during an evening, is a primary cause for many singers' declining vocal production from the first to the last act of an opera—and in the long run, of many pathologies that afflict professional singers.

A basic disaccord

While agreeing on the practical need to adopt the Verdi tuning to save voices and the bel canto school of singing, the scientific interventions were not in accord on the fact that this really is the scientific tuning fork. Two basic theses were presented: Dr. Tennenbaum's in support of C = 256, from which the Verdi A derives, and Professor Ernetti's in favor of a lower standard, A = 415.

Whereas the first view is supported by the opinions of the greatest classical composers, the second rests on premises which would lead to repudiating the entire well-tempered system, and hence is unacceptable. Nonetheless, Professor Ernetti's speech has the merit of affirming the existence of an absolute tuning and proposing one solution. We publish both speeches, inaugurating a debate which will continue with other qualified contributions.