

Tuning as the key to interpretation

by Helga Zepp-LaRouche

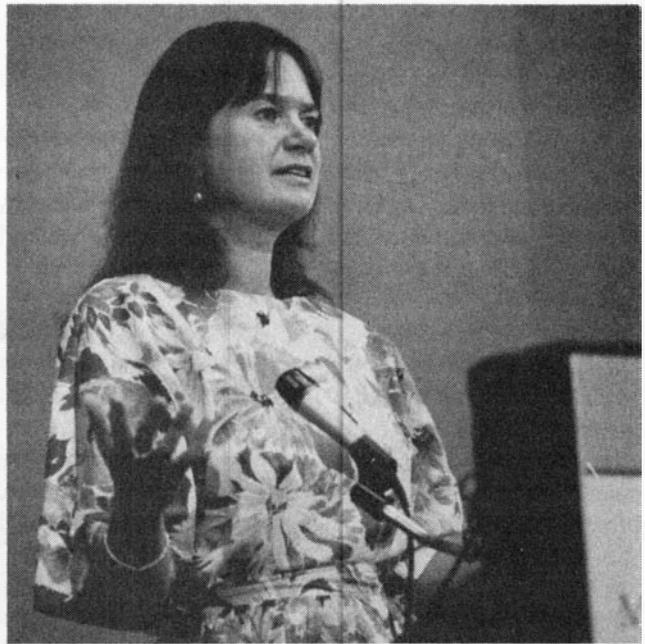
Mrs. LaRouche, founder of the international Schiller Institutes, delivered the following speech to the conference on "Giuseppe Verdi and the Scientific Tuning Fork," on June 20 at the Cini Foundation in Venice, Italy.

The battle to establish the tuning of middle C at 256 Hz is far more than an academic debate. What is at issue here, is the defense of the integrity of classical composition in general. Whether we are conscious of this or not, our culture—and with it, classical music—is our lives' most important feature; for it is culture—whether it be true culture or mere perversity—which determines the way in which we think. Culture is the substrate upon which we form our opinions and views regarding all matters of daily concern.

Culture is also not some social contract made by a person or a nation, simply because that is what he or it happened to possess at a particular point in time; rather, it must become so intertwined with one's own identity, that determines the practice of human beings or of an entire nation. And if we apply this measure, we find to our horror, that the world is on the verge of losing European culture altogether. True, there still exists a small and dwindling elite for whom this is not the case; true, Verdi's operas still enjoy a modicum of popularity with a large audience, especially Italy, and elsewhere.

But when on a world scale we compare classical European culture's share in relation to the spread of irrational counter-culture, of which we cite satanic rock music as only one example—and that's what most of the youth in the industrialized nations listen to nowadays—then it becomes clear, that we must wage a battle on behalf of classical culture, if we do not want to see it disappear entirely someday soon. We must recall that there are many examples in man's past universal history, when entire civilizations and cultures collapsed because they had ceased to be faithful to the principles and ideals upon which they had once been based. And should we not experience the same fears today, when we see how there are already entire generations of students and former students, who cannot associate anything with the names Schiller, Heine, Beethoven, and Petrarch?

It is all the more urgent that we act in defense of *classical* art, since we should really only describe those works as "classical," which were created during phases of high culture such as the Greek classical era, the Italian Renaissance, and



Helga Zepp-LaRouche, founder of the Schiller Institute.

the German classical era, or which reflect the spirit of those times. Poets, musical composers, and other artists are only entitled to be described as "classical," when their works contain universal truths which, because they are universal, will remain true for all time and therefore become a possession of all humanity. Herein lies the essential reason why screenplays are not legitimate, because with these, the director bars the way between the audience and the musical or poetical ideas of the composer or poet, and instead, in plagiarized form, presents the audience with an amalgam of the director's own ideas along with some from the original.

What is most important, is that all great classical works are grounded upon an image of man which sees him as potentially infinitely perfectible, and which celebrates his creativity as the divine spark within him, such that, in a classical work, this creative lawfulness is unfolded in such a way, that it corresponds with the creative potential of the listener. Herein lies the reason why a successfully performed work elicits within the audience a feeling of elevation—the emotional quality associated with *agapē* in the New Testament sense of the word. It is this elevation of the emotions, which is the source of all creativity, and which we experience whenever we are confronted with something of great artistic beauty, which brings tears to our eyes.

The performance of classical works is therefore of infinite importance, because in such moments as those, man perfects his emotional capacities. It is what Schiller describes in his play *The Bride of Messina* as the power which continues to affect the listener long after the performance has ended. And hasn't each among us already had the experience, that our witnessing of a great performance has, as it were, expanded our soul; or, conversely, that our being cut off from classical

music for one reason or another, has made our life more barren because that crucial dimension is no longer there?

The ennobling role of classical art

In his *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller posed the question of how it were possible to ennoble human beings, if their government is decadent and the masses brutalized, such that any impulse toward improvement along either of these routes is cut off. Schiller, as you know, allots this role of ennobling human beings, to art. And because he does so, he also places the greatest demands upon the artist, who, precisely because he is able to influence the innermost stirrings of the human soul, must idealize himself into his species-being during those moments when he is creating and performing the work of art. Thus, the moment he devotes himself to art, both the artist and the listener exalt their own humanity in its most elevated form; and the more often and more intensively the artist does so, the shorter become those other intervals during which he sinks to a less exalted level of humanity. This is why performing and listening to great classical music provides nourishment to the soul, and at least for the duration of its performance, the soul is dominated by the beauty expressed in the work; and the impression of the world's ugliness is driven from heart and mind.

The continual expansion of our capacity for the emotion of *agapē* is the decisive element in whether a society will continue to develop, or whether it will degenerate. This is what determines whether relations among men are predominantly characterized by what is usually described as Christian brotherly love, or by that malicious meanness of spirit, which we can observe in American soap-operas. *Agapē* is therefore not merely an emotional state, in the sense in which emotions are usually counterposed to reason or the understanding; rather, the emotion of *agapē* is the precondition for all truly human intelligence, and thus it is an indispensable component of human reason. To put it in simplistic terms: Whenever man does not love passionately, he will also never comprehend fully. It is with love as our object, that we can develop the line of questioning from which we can find creative solutions to contiguous problems, and leading us to further development in all fields of knowledge.

And so, since the performance of great classical music is such an important matter, whose significance goes far beyond the immediate scope of music *per se*, there is all the more reason for us not to permit the question of musical interpretation of these works to be influenced by any sort of *Zeitgeist*.

Giuseppe Verdi has the great merit that with his operas, he created a body of music that moves the hearts of the Italian nation. Indeed, we can say that along with Italy's great tradition in the natural sciences, it was especially Verdi's emotional power, and the special beauty of the music which the *bel canto* method has bestowed upon the world, which can aid us today in standing up against the attacks which have been thrown against Italy as a cultured nation. But as we have indicated at previous conferences of the Schiller Institute, we

currently do not have a new generation which could step into the shoes of the old guard; the repertoire is in danger of shrinking drastically, because singers simply can not be found to play certain roles; and for this, we can place substantial blame on today's overly high musical tuning.

The *bel canto* manner of singing proceeds from the idea that not only the quality, but also the longevity of the singing voice depends upon whether the voice's natural characteristics are taken into consideration. Among these characteristics are the various vocal registers. The register-shift of the soprano voice lies between F and F-sharp in the well-tempered scale; if the scale is tuned anywhere above middle C = 256 (or approximately A = 432), the human voice suffers damage, which has been proven to lead to the fact that many young singers have lost their voices after only a few years of singing. If the tuning is too high, the soprano, for example, is forced to choose between changing registers on F, or straining to keep the F in the lower register—which of course is possible to do with good training, but which has the long-term effect of damaging the voice, because the shift is being executed by doing a certain amount of violence to the voice.

High tuning has equally grave effects on interpretation—or at least, on the interpretation of those compositions which envisage a shift of register at F-sharp. And on top of this, at the higher tuning the accentuation of the musical line is no longer in agreement with that of the sung text. If, for example, an opera which had been composed for a tuning of A = 432 Hz is instead sung at A = 440 or even A = 448, the entire coloration of certain words is thereby altered, since a darker coloration for those words had been originally planned, whereas now, the sad and uncanny expression which perhaps had been intended, is weakened or is made to disappear.

German art-song as a 'Rosetta Stone'

Many such examples can be found in the operatic aria repertoire. But I would like here to indicate the special significance of correct tuning for the German art-song. Lyndon LaRouche has correctly described the *Lied* as "the Rosetta Stone of classical music," particularly as it pertains to the compositions of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann. The *Lied* is the most "condensed" art form, because it unites the poetic idea of the poem with the musical idea of the composition, into a higher, unified whole.

Why write poetry? For the classicists, there was no question that the content of a poem was a poetic idea which had taken up residence on a higher level than what the text *per se* would lead one to otherwise assume. A poem that was self-evident—i.e., prosaic—could not possibly be a good poem. Instead, the poet had at his disposal various technical means, such as meter, rhyme, strophic and poetic form, and prosody, by which he could let the global impression be born on the very same higher level which contains the poetic idea itself.

A good classical poem is based throughout on the principles of Socratic dialogue—whether this emerges explicitly among various separate voices, as in Schubert's *Erkönig*, or

FIGURE 1

"Bitten" (Prayers), from Beethoven's "Six Songs by Gellert," Op. 48, No. 1

Feierlich und mit Andacht

Gott, dei - ne Gü - te reicht so weit,
so weit die Wol - ken ge - hen;
du krönst uns mit Barm - herz - ig - keit,
und eilst, uns bei - zu - steh - en.
Herr! mei - ne Burg, mein Fels, mein Hort,
ver - nimm mein Flehn, merk auf mein Wort;
denn ich will vor dir be - ten,
denn ich will vor dir be - ten!

Third Register

First Register

only becomes clear by having each of the various voices characterize various mental and moral levels, perhaps only by means of an ironical inflection, as we find in many locations in Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. In all cases, the various voices are always highlighted through shifts in register and alterations of tone-color—e.g., through the selection of *pianissimo*, *piano*, *mezzo-forte*, or *forte*.

In this composing of a poem called the *Lied*, the musical counterpoint consists in the deliberate use of dissonances to lead to a change in key in an otherwise rigorously sustained canonical development of a given theme. Each theme is a single voice in the socratic dialogue, and each key is a determinate geometry of tones and musical colorations, which are so arranged as to achieve a determinate mood—a determinate emotional state which is necessary by virtue of the effect it has on the listener, in order to convey the poetic idea in a lawful manner.

Whenever the key is changed, this is done in order to change the musical coloration and intensity which is associated with that key. The trained bel canto voice has three or more registers, each of which has a different intensity and coloration—comparable to the differences between the violoncello, the viola, and the violin. With each shift—whether it be from one key to another, or from one register to another—the listener experiences an emotional state corresponding to that key and that register.

The quality of the *Lied* is determined by how the composer juxtaposes one theme against another; and if both the singer and the accompanist are up to their task, they can maintain the span of creative tension throughout the course of the entire song, thereby pointing up the continuity underlying all the individual parts, so that the listener knows that these individual parts have no separate existence. And in this way, the snifiting ordering of various intensities of emotion, as they are expressed by changes in key and register, is conveyed as a higher, transfinite ordering; and that is precisely the level on which it is uniquely possible to comprehend the poetic idea.

An example

At this point I would like to present a simple example of how the composer unites the register shift with the poetic idea. The first of the six poems written by Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, and composed by Ludwig van Beethoven (**Figure 1**), goes as follows:

	Register
Gott, deine Güte reicht so weit	2
So weit, die Wolken gehen;	3
Du krönst uns mit Barmherzigkeit,	2
Und eilst, uns beizustehen.	2
Herr, meine Burg, mein Fels, mein Hort,	2
Vernimm mein Flehn, merk auf mein Wort;	2

Denn ich will vor dir beten,	2
Denn ich will vor dir beten!	1

* * *

God, Thy goodness reaches as far,
As far as the clouds go;

Thou crownest us with mercifulness,
And hastenest to our aid.
Lord, my fortress, my rock, my treasure,
Hear my pleading, mark my words;

For I shall pray to Thee,
For I shall pray to Thee!

The first line of this poem is a simple statement, "Gott! deine Güte reicht so weit." In the second line, this statement is expanded with the image "so weit." Up to then it is still not a new idea, but by means of the "Wolken gehen" God's majesty and his infiniteness are associated, since from the standpoint of men here on earth, the succession of clouds indeed seems to be never-ending.

register—even from the standpoint of tone-color alone—accentuates the heights which are associated with God.

The next four lines speak of those things in which God's goodness is expressed: He, the High and Infinite, makes us sublime by giving us the capacity for mercy—a deeply Christian idea, since the crown is associated not with the ruler's pride, but rather with mercifulness. And God even rushes to assist us—which is yet another expression of mercifulness. The following two lines make clear just how much man is in need of God's mercifulness:

Herr, meine Burg, mein Fels, mein Hort,
Vernimm mein Flehn, merk auf mein Wort.

Here the music underlines the urgency of this supplication. And then comes a new thought: "Denn ich will vor dir beten"; and this is repeated: "Denn ich will vor dir beten." The resolution of the song is in this "beten": the voice falls into its deepest register, deep below the F-sharp, into the E of the first register. Even from the purely vocal aspect—but also because it comes out as a singularity—this "beten" becomes endowed with the quality of deep devotion and concentration which it does in fact have. Whereas the lines sung in the second register still have the character of a *Stoßgebet* [a brief prayer reeled off during a sudden burst of religious fervor—ed.], this quality is altered by the final "beten": It has now become that state of tension and calm, of concentration, which is felt by him who attempts to arouse within himself the divine spark of creativity—as does the orchestra director just before he must step out and perform a great symphony, gathering all his creative tension into a single point. This form of prayer, in which the person, as *imago viva Dei*, seeks to imitate God's most magnificent quality—

namely, His role as the Creator—is something entirely different than a mere cry for help in time of need. The mere repetition of the seventh line already makes it clear that the subject here is this other quality of emotion, since the only sense in repeating it, would be to express something other than what has come before. And that is precisely what is made explicit by the shift in register.

Within this final word of the song, “beten,” lies all the devotion of which man is capable, his humility before God—a humility, however, in which he experiences at the same time his greatest sense of elevation, because in his perfect concentration upon God, he comes to most resemble Him. When in this way, a person is immersed in perfect devotion to God, that person is consummating his *capax Dei*, his participation in God. If instead, this final word “beten” were sung without any clear register shift, as is often the case when the singer does not use the belcanto method, then this deep meaning is, at the very least, only superficially rendered.

It is no accident, that modern composers have such a difficult time creating works which can even approximate the powerful effect of the works of Beethoven or Verdi, for example, or of the specific form of the Italian and the German art-song. One can not just throw aside the classical rules of polyphonic composition, and assert that it were better done by setting up new, arbitrary rules. On the contrary, we must study the rules of the great masters, practice them, and then create new things from these.

For some time now, the *Zeitgeist* has been going in the opposite direction, with increasing emphasis being put on the accidental aspects of composition and interpretation. As a result, truly beautiful performances are heard less and less often, and whenever a performance does succeed, it often has to do with the fact that well trained musicians speak the language of music with some fluency, and that they perhaps speak beautifully, but without any knowledge of the principles whereby they speak.

Verdi's music embodies the spirit of the national movement which was an echo of the Italian Renaissance. Verdi's ability even today, to move Italians to tears of joy, is a powerful weapon which can be used to raise the spirit of the Italian people out of the cultural pessimism into which this country has been sliding in recent years. And likewise, for the German nation, the *Lied* represents perhaps its most precious pearl, because it is able to unite poetic ease together with the great intensity which is associated with the cultural high-point of German classicism.

Without a revival of this spirit, we will never succeed—neither in Italy, nor in the Federal Republic of Germany, nor in any other country in Western civilization—in carrying out any political or economic program which could improve our situation. Today we need a cultural renaissance more urgently than ever before; and for this great undertaking, we can obtain our inspiration, first and foremost, from great classical music.

Where have all the great voices gone?

by Gino Bechi

Mr. Bechi, one of the great Italian baritones of the interwar era, offered the following comments to the conference “Giuseppe Verdi and the Scientific Tuning Fork,” held on June 20, 1989 at the Cini Foundation in Venice, Italy.

. . . The Italian tuning law established a solution which is contrary to what had been asked for, as far as I know. What was asked for was an A of 432 vibrations, but I have received a sheet from the Culture Commissioner which states that a tuning fork of 440 has been decided upon. This is not what we want—I mean, the Schiller Institute and the rest of us. We need a tuning fork of 432 vibrations . . . and we hope that the tuning fork will be adopted which Verdi seems to have promoted. (I say “seems” because I'm close to 80, but unfortunately I never had the chance to sing under Verdi, nor to attend his performances.) It is historically presumable that this is true, as it is historically verified that in the old days there was a certain arbitrary confusion: 432-435, 440-444, 480, were the tuning pitches in various places, with very clear signs of voices put out of phase in the different registers, although this was overcome in a masterly way by a great and extraordinarily valid vocal technique which was being taught in the various schools of that time.

I am happy to state that the emission of sounds coming out of the so-called “yawn position”—the true yawn, i.e., the sensation of the yawn—is the ideal position that permitted at that time—as it would today if they did it—the total elimination of the much-feared torment of those famous registral passages. This is the nub of the question, because if one can mechanically modify the sound of an instrument by pulling out the mouthpiece, changing the reed, with this or that instrument, the Eternal Father has not yet stuck a faucet on the vocal cords. Physiologically there is an obligatory passage which, in the low voices, starts with the F below middle C and then goes to the E (I am speaking about baritones); and then there is the most important one, which is on the E-natural.

I'd like to reveal the fact that today, with real teachers—