

# Sylvia Olden Lee at Work

*The life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction, in the life of the nation, is close to the center of a nation's purpose—and is a test to the quality of a nation's civilization.*

—John F. Kennedy

*The following is an excerpt from the book The Memoirs of Sylvia Olden Lee, Premier African-American Vocal Coach: Who Is Sylvia, by Sylvia Olden Lee and Elizabeth Nash.*

In 1992, Kathy [Battle] had asked me to attend a rehearsal which was to be filmed at 165th Street and Broadway. Sony intended to release it in connection with Kathy and Wynton Marsalis' planned recording of Baroque Duet.

I was at Elvira Green's in Queens and had just washed my hair when I got a call at eight A.M. "I'm phoning," said Peter Gelb, "because Kathy would like you to come today."

"Yes," I replied. "I'll be there today at four."

"No," he explained. "She'd like you to be here at ten o'clock. Could you come?"

"I'm in Queens," I said, "and my head is dripping."

"Would you please put it up and get in a cab," he persisted. "We'll pay for it."

Elvira drove me all the way in, while I put my hair up in curlers. I got into the apartment house lobby and had to be announced. "Yes," the doorman said, "you can go up." So I got in the elevator, and the attendant let me out. Then I rang the bell, and Kathy opened the door. Out came a klieg light with a mike in front of it.

"Good Morning, Mrs. Lee," she said. "Oh lord," I muttered. With curlers in my hair and a scarf thrown over them, I looked as if I had water on the brain.

"Oh, come in," Kathy added and helped me remove the curlers.

With my hair still wet, I went in and sat down at the piano. The men had left us alone.

"Well," I said, "I guess I can get my red pencil." I didn't know we were being taped, or I would never have said the things I did.



Sylvia Olden Lee (right) working with Kathleen Battle on Bach Cantata 51.

Then Kathy announced: "I want you to hear the Bach cantata 51, *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen* (Exhalt God in all Lands), I'm going to do."

"What can I do at the last minute, girl?" I asked.

"I just want you to hear it," she answered.

"You've done it, haven't you?" I asked.

"Not so successfully," she answered, "Because I was huffing and puffing. Too many notes were dead, not vibrat-

ing." Kathy then sang: "Jahhahahah..."

"All right," I interrupted, "would you go back and praise God! You've got to be so enthusiastic because you are saying: *Jauchzet Gott*. It's got to have the face of Kathy which looks jubilant. Aren't you happy?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"You ought to be ecstatic!" After she finished, I said: "Eighty percent. I'm so glad to get that, because you did a lot. You do breathe where you have to, and every time you breathe where you have to, there is another place where you ought to, because you've got just as much time. *Jauchzet*, breathe, *Jauchzet*. You ought to breathe there. You know that."

"Yeah. I did take a breath there."

"I don't know. I didn't hear it." Make all the *zets* staccato so it's not *Jauchzet*. No. *Jauch zet*. Kathy, what's *Jauchzet*?"

"Praise."

"How do we say praise?"

"Praise."

"How do they say that down there where you come from in Portsmouth, Ohio, which is like Alabama?"

"Prai——se!" She gestured like a shout.

"Well don't you think Germans praise?"

I phoned my daughter in California and asked, "*Loben* means praise, what is *jauchzet*?" "*Loben* and

*preisen* are ‘praise’, but *jauchzet* is ‘yeaaaaaaaaah!’”

So I said to Kathy: “You will have to sing this Yahahahahah with joy and praise in your heart, or it’s going to sound like a vocalise.” She sang yahahahahah with nothing happening. So we worked on it for about twenty minutes, and that girl works. If I had a trumpet, I would brazen forth that Kathy Battle has never been anything but sincere, generous, and totally devoted to whatever I had to do with her. She’s a lovely, hospitable, though brilliant person.

After our session, we went in her kitchen. “I know you like orange juice,” she said. Then she brought out this empty container and handed it to me.

“Kathy,” I said, “there’s none here.” Now I wouldn’t have said that if I’d known the television men were there with telescopic lenses and distance mikes in the dining room.

As we were sitting at the table, Kathy hummed a scale and said: “Is there a spiritual called ‘Where did my voice go?’”

“Well,” I answered, “that would be necessary for some people, but not for you. *Jauchzet Gott*. You know that, all right—show me how you are going to do *Jauchzet*. You realize you’re singing about God now. Don’t please me.”

“I know, I’m all ready for the first one, and then I’m thinking how I’m going to get the ‘G.’”

“One step at a time,” I admonished. So she sang: *Jauch——zet*.

“No,” I said. “That’s dead, because your face is dead. You got all the *Jauch* and the *zet*. Where is God?”

“I haven’t gotten to Him yet,” she replied.

“God, or *Gott* is just before you sing *Jauchzet*. You’ve got to think it right away, because you can hardly wait. You are so impatient to say it, you almost anticipate the orchestra. It’s just jubilation! It’s just exhalation!”

I never have to worry about her taking my criticism too negatively. Kathy knew that it didn’t mean that *she* was dead, but that she’s singing something in a “dead” fashion. These great artists have that confidence which comes from deep study, application, and meditation.

But I would never have said that if I’d known it was going to be on television. “My dear,” I would have suggested, “would you give it a little more of the life that we were working on just now?” I never thought this footage was for a broadcast to be shown both here and abroad. She had to approve every inch of that film before it was released, and letting me criticize her in that way shows what a great woman Kathy Battle is.

Then we went to the recording studio, and the musicians were warming up. I had never spoken to an orchestra, but there I’d been asked to offer some comments.

(Because Everett was a violist, I knew that after, they say: “Oh, hell, let’s get the heck on out. Just play the music.”)

“Gentlemen,” I began, “please forgive me. I have a husband who was a violinist like you in New York City and got to be a conductor. I know that you are wonderful musicians, otherwise you would not be here on this job. They don’t have time or money to waste on people who can’t play this with virtuosity. Look, don’t be sitting here sawing away and turning to each other saying: ‘You think you’ll make the 5:08 train this afternoon?’ Don’t be doing it absently. Now, I don’t care whether you call Him God, Yahweh, Jehovah, or Allah, but think about Him when you are playing this introduction. You have thirty-two bars to introduce one of the most marvelous things ever written.” It has only about four or five lines of words to it.

Although I didn’t yet know him, I also spoke to Mr. Wynton Marsalis. “You, too,” I said. “You’ve been talking about how you ‘gave up some gigs to get your Baroque style back.’ Don’t stand up here doing ‘doodle doodle doodle,’ riffing. You’ve got thirty bars before Ms. Battle has even entered. You set the thing up for her. It ought to be so glorious and full of praise that she doesn’t need to sing. Come here.”

I took him to the window and pointed: “See that cloud out there? Your name is Gabriel. Now don’t toot a note without thinking about Him.”

When it was all over, we were listening to the rushes. “It’s not happy enough,” I said to Kathy. “Whether you are happy or not, you have to act as though you’re one seraph up there with all those angels.”

“That goes for all of us,” stated Wynton.

“I think you are absolutely right.” “Kathy,” I added, “if you start the attitude two beats ahead, it would help us get it. If we could get you to just shake your head, go *Jauchzet*, and then look for God,”

“That’s right,” observed Wynton, “because I have to look for God too. And when you’re here in New York City, you might not find Him.”

“You don’t have to look for Him,” I exclaimed. “He’s here, and you see Him. Praise Him!”

People have said that was wonderful. Is that anything great to say? Don’t we all know it?

*There will be a Centennial Celebration Concert in honor of Sylvia Olden Lee in New York City’s Carnegie Hall on June 29, sponsored by the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture, in collaboration with the Schiller Institute and the Harlem Opera Theater. The website for the event may be found [here](#).*