

Tebaldi: High tuning is the cancer of the voice

Miss Renata Tebaldi, one of the most celebrated operatic sopranos of the twentieth century, was interviewed in Milan on June 18, 1987 by Liliana Celani and Giuseppe Matteucci of the Schiller Institute.

Q: Miss Tebaldi, we ask you, as we have other great Italian performers whom we have already interviewed, what is your opinion of the high tuning which today afflicts our opera houses? Do you think this is bad for the voice?

Tebaldi: Absolutely. For years I have been battling against high pitch, so much that I made it part of my contract. During the last international meeting on music, in England in 1939, pitch was very much a subject of discussion and it was set at A = 440. Then, with the increase in cutting records, it was noticed that a higher pitch produced a better sound from the record, especially symphonic work. And that's where the mistakes began. Then when the new orchestra conductors came along, it seems some of them found the high pitch more pleasing to the ear, and when they went into the recording studio to listen to a performance, their opinion was confirmed. A little bit one day, a little the next, they continued to raise the pitch until today orchestras are pitched extremely high. But even if, for example, an orchestra is dedicated only to performing symphonies, it disturbs the ear: I cannot, for example, manage to sit through a piece by Strauss, whose orchestration is already difficult enough: It makes me so nervous that at a certain point I have to leave. Why? Because those extra vibrations over and above those my ear would like to hear, bother me terribly; so I leave.

If the altered pitch were only for symphony orchestras,

let's say if it pleased orchestra conductors, even if it's wrong, we could have put up with it. But the problem is that these same conductors went on to become directors of lyric opera, and they brought this vice with them—and I call it “vice” because that's what it is; no one can claim it is good for everyone, above all for singers (although even the instruments have a tremendous strain put on them by the new pitch). When I refer to my contracts, I mean that I went around with my A = 440 tuning fork and demanded that the orchestras tune to that; because with the institution of electronic pitch, even the 440 disappeared.

Q: We are almost at 450.

Tebaldi: The only thing which gives the right pitch is in that form there (points to a picture of a tuning fork). So I demanded this in my contract. Naturally there was a huge—I wouldn't say scandal—but a battle royal because the musicians thought this was some kind of favor to me; but instead I said to them: “We all came from the conservatory, and speak the same language.”

Then I called the first oboe of an orchestra—he had been a friend of mine at the conservatory—and I asked him: “Clear something up for me. At what pitch does the orchestra begin?” He said: “We begin at 443 but since especially the wind instruments tend to raise pitch during the performance, you can imagine where we are at the end.” I then asked him if they couldn't drop down to where we were asking. He said “impossible.” Why? “Because when I was accepted into the orchestra I had to adjust to the pitch of my colleagues—it took me six months before I could get the reed to produce the

sound that was in tune with my colleagues.” (They say the same of the brass who have to shorten their instruments.)

I don’t know why some orchestras start with 443, others 444, others 445, and others almost a whole tone above where the composer wrote it. To be consistent, all the publishing houses (Ricordi, etc.) should redo all the scores, writing them a whole tone lower.

Q: Or we could return to the pitch for which they were written.

Tebaldi: Yes, we could return to the proper pitch for the instruments—it has gone through my head so many times: Keep this for the symphonies, but don’t try to use it for lyric opera, because the poor singers work with their breath. And we study above all for so many years to put the center of the voice in the right place, which then gives us the possibility for going up to the third (acuto) and fourth (sopracuto) registers. If during opera rehearsals we have to strain our voices to place them right where the orchestra is tuned; it is madness. In fact, you’ve probably noticed that in the first rehearsals of orchestra and chorus there’s always something wrong. It is because of this: We have to work with our voices and it’s a superhuman effort. Why? Because we have sensibilities, and we too can understand what note we’re producing, if we are at the right pitch.

For example when I, as a soprano, change registers (E, F, F sharp)—and the other voices each have their own register shift—that’s the most dangerous point. That’s where we sense what kind of note we’re producing. Now with the higher pitch, sensing the difficulty that you are having producing, for example, an F-sharp, what do you do? You exert a superhuman effort, force the throat, and end in disaster.

Then you might ask, why should contralto voices no longer exist? Mezzosoprano voices make me laugh; where are true mezzosoprano voices, with such a full color as, for example, Fedora Barbieri? The last one, Fiorenza Cossotto, already has a higher range and less substance to the voice by an order of magnitude.

Why should there no longer be deep bass voices? You can’t find them. The only baritones are light baritones; and then there are the light lyric sopranini [sic], who suffer less because, having a smaller voice, they can bear this tremendous tension caused by the raised pitch more easily. The lack of these full voices is certainly not due to a change in vocal cords because our anatomy has not changed. Our vocal cords are two muscles which can function in various ways according to the talents we are born with. But with the high pitch, the throat, looking for a way to compensate for this defect, instinctively tightens, and I don’t know why these great musicians can’t quite understand that this is a disaster. I will give it an ugly name: This high pitch is a cancer for the voice.

It is not possible that in the country that gave birth to the most beautiful voices in the world, they should have disappeared as if by enchantment. There are those who say the

vocal cords have changed, but I think this is stupid. The cause is more important and more dangerous: It is the change of tonality caused by the high pitch. For that reason I stipulated in my contracts that I would not sing with higher tuning: In fact the last time I performed “Gioconda” in Naples, I caused a pandemonium.

Q: When was that?

Tebaldi: I think around 1964-65. In America I made that same stipulation, and the Metropolitan, at least while I was singing there, was at 440—I checked it with my tuning fork. Now the Met is no longer at 440—naturally since a young director came in, Levine, who began his work at Salzburg under the influence of Von Karajan.

Q: Was it Karajan who raised the A almost to 450?

Tebaldi: He was one of the first to worship this type of sound. . . .

Q: So-called “brilliant” sound.

Tebaldi: Because he had done so many things in recording studies that by now he was used to that tonality. The only problem is that he has maintained this sound for his orchestra and also for opera work; and that cannot go on any longer. If nothing else, if they do not change, there will be only hybrid voices, without color, which means it won’t matter if Tom, Dick, or Harry sing because they will not have the possibility of letting us hear the distinguishing characteristics of their voice, because it is impossible to do so.

Q: When we spoke with violinists who use old instruments, and when we read documents written in 1884, we discovered that these instruments are severely damaged by high pitch. For example, the fundamental resonance of a Stradivarius or a Guarneri is C = 256, which corresponds to A = 432, which is what Verdi wanted; and it has been calculated that the tension added to a violin with the high pitch is about nine pounds, and must be tons for the piano. All the singers we have spoken to up till now, told us that the excuse given is that the oboe cannot be changed. But all the wind instruments were changed in 1884; and at the time Mozart was composing, all the wind instruments had exchangeable parts for varied pitch—so it is possible. Our hypothesis is that it is harmful not only for the voice but also for instruments, and that it is a conscious attempt to destroy the musical intention of the composer; you can also see that from the way the pieces are performed. What is your experience as a singer with these young, modern conductors; what kind of comprehension of the composer’s purpose do you see in their interpretation?

Tebaldi: It is very striking. I have, I repeat, a very sensitive ear and some of those sounds I cannot bear. For example, not long ago I heard Uto Ughi, and as much as I admired the color which he drew from the violin in the middle region, I was disturbed that much by the excessive pitch of the high

notes: I was not well for the rest of the evening. It is unbearable. We no longer hear music in the original key; it is all distorted. It is such a shame because we have so many masterpieces; why should we not venerate them? Why should we not be in the first ranks of those who live in music? Why must it be we who destroy these things? That astounds me. Today it's not that we don't have good musicians and good conductors—we do. But why don't they draw the line? I remember Maestro De Sabata who demanded A = 440 of the orchestra; and Toscanini even somewhat lower pitch because he scrupulously kept to what Verdi et al. said about pitch. Toscanini wanted that color; he demanded it. So before he called out the performers or the chorus, he spent half an hour tuning up the orchestra, section-by-section. He had that kind of patience. After him came Maestro De Sabata; after De Sabata, Maestro Giulini, a student of De Sabata. After that period, no one was any longer concerned with the tuning of the orchestra. They have instituted this electronic pitch which in no way corresponds to A = 440; and they even got rid of that because the conductors wanted to raise pitch some more, so now they use the first violin or the oboe.

Q: But in terms of what you said earlier, it's a problem of construction. The instrument maker can make the oboe lower. Of course if the conductor wants A = 445-450, they make the oboe higher.

Tebaldi: But it is, above all, up to the musician to adjust the reed according to the intonation they want. It depends in the conductor: It's he who directs the orchestra.

Q: What we are asking ourselves—also because we have a series of initiatives regarding pitch in the works—a decree, such as the one during Verdi's time by the Defense Ministry, would not be possible today? Or is it more difficult because of the fact that these same political groups which control the theatre would prevent it?

Tebaldi: But look, the political groups which control the theatre control them in such a way that no one cares about them. In the theatre there is no one who notices what's going on in the theatre. A state superintendent almost never attends rehearsals; he never knows what the stage manager has put together until general rehearsal; or the theatre director: This way it cannot work.

Once, the person actually responsible used to be the orchestra conductor, and I still consider this to be so. So if a theatre director is wrong, it must be the conductor who says: "No, my friend, I'm sorry, but that's not suitable for the music that I want my musicians to play; so forget it and do something else." He is the authority; he's supposed to control putting on a performance.

It's a battle; I continue to fight. I haven't sung for 11 years but I continue to fight. I don't know how many interviews I have given on the subject of pitch. It may get a little boring because I'm always playing the same tune; but it's essential.

Q: It is essential. The question of pitch goes hand in hand with other tendencies, such as speeding up the tempo, the which ruins the interpretation of not only opera but also symphonic and piano pieces.

Tebaldi: It's just getting all messed up. In fact today, when I hear Chopin, it doesn't affect me at all. There was a time it moved me so much I could even cry; today I get nothing emotional from it. I can say, "What marvelous technique," because some performers do have that—but nothing else. It's the same in singing. I go to the opera hoping to be stirred even slightly, but nothing. I can say, "That was a long line to do in one breath"; I can admire "pianissimo" singing; but when I leave, I have received nothing.

Q: When comparing your performances to those of "up-and-coming" voices, one notes an abysmal difference: in quality, roundness (which is often lacking, you sometimes hear shouting), but also in interpretation. What ever happened to the "bel canto" school? How do you see the education problem?

Tebaldi: It has come to a terrible end, because today everyone wants to sing everything; no one sticks to their repertoire. And then when you hear the mezzosopranos, who are such today by default, they are but sopranos manqués, who choose to sing mezzosoprano for convenience, but also because of the pitch, because they too have to go up. But if we were to hear these voices with the pitch as it should be, I wager that they would go back to producing all the real coloring of the voice.

Q: This is a question that we are very interested in. Do you think that the lack of intermediate voices is caused by the high pitch?

Tebaldi: In my opinion, yes. By now I've heard so many of these voices. I was involved in judging some competitions but I don't go anymore because I don't like certain things—because with too many judges, it is hard to reach agreement on voice. Then there are those who judge by inexact standards—not like one who has sung and is competent to judge a voice. I was so enraged that I threw up my hands. It's painful.

In fact, let's see what comes out of these competitions. They give prizes because they wish to: not to do so would be to slacken the public's interest in international competitions. For example, they get nervous thinking: "It's been three years since we've given a first prize; this year we must give it." But what kind of reasoning is that? You must give the prize? This I don't understand.

Italy is crammed with international competitions; would that there were some national ones with all the young people who love to sing who still exist today in Italy. Life in the theatre, as well as outside it, has become based on money; it's become routine; something to make a buck.

I don't want to say "In my day"—my career spanned 33

RENATA TEBALDI, shown here in one of her favorite roles, the title role of Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, is one of the most celebrated "spinto" sopranos of the twentieth century. She was born in Pesaro in 1922 and went to live at an early age with her mother and maternal grandparents in Langhirano, near Parma. Her first musical instruction came from her mother, a singer, and her father, a 'cellist by profession. Her thorough vocal training came from soprano Carmen Melis in Pesaro.

Her operatic debut was in 1944 in Boito's *Mefistofele*. In 1946, she was chosen by Toscanini for the reopening of La Scala opera house in 1946, and performed there regularly in 1946-54. Besides performing regularly with La Scala (1949-54), she debuted at Covent Gardens, London in 1950 and sang with opera companies in Chicago (1955-69) and with New York's Metropolitan Opera (1955-73).

Her beautifully trained and exceptionally powerful "bel canto" voice has been outstanding especially in Verdi roles such as Violetta (*La Traviata*), Aida, and Desdemona (*Otello*).



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years—but we had a different spirit. Perhaps today's should also have a different spirit, but they are constrained in so many ways to do so many things that they don't want. It's not right that a theatre director or conductor should crush the personality of someone. You can't make music with a metronome; nor can a conductor demand that you follow his tempo. A conductor is in the service of the orchestra, of the stage—not vice versa. They must work together. Only thus does one enjoy singing. (They even beat the pause, how can this be possible?)

Q: The same is true of opera theatre directors.

Tebaldi: The first or second plague. It's as if some fine day we were to go to the Louvre, and out of boredom of always seeing the Mona Lisa, with that smile, we painted a moustache on her. Well, why do we have to let certain unbalanced—and unbalanced they are—touch the sublimity of Verdi's or Puccini's music? And must the unfortunate Ken Russell be given the chance to set "Madame Butterfly" in a bordello? They don't even read the score.

Today there are so many young people who go to the opera, why don't we give them a performance as it should be done? If not, they play the record at home and say: "But what is it that we went to hear?" From a recording they hear a particular color, but when they go to the opera, they hear tiny voices which would be dramatic sopranos. Then they ask each other, "Are they singing or not?"

This business of recordings is also robbery. You have to take your hat off to the technicians who perform miracles—

but it stops there. It's just as well that they put out pirated recordings with musical and vocal mistakes, but they are recordings made from live performances, or from the period when I was beginning. To find an outfit that will record live, probably only Riccardo Muti could do it—three or four years ago it was already difficult. The conductor records all the orchestra parts; then the singers arrive in their own sweet time and record with headphones. Naturally, finding the tempo already pre-set.

Q: How long have they been recording this way?

Tebaldi: Three or four years. Now with the digital, who knows what will happen.

Q: You can get a sense of this when you look, for example, for rare records of [Pablo] Casals, [Alfred] Cortot, and [Paul] Thibaud, which are no longer on the market because "they don't sell." It seems that the record companies and the conductors who promote the Karajan-types, are doing their best to make traditional music go out of circulation.

Tebaldi: Yes, but it cannot go on. For example, three or four years ago, when Mario del Monaco was still alive, we had a discussion on tuning that went on for days and days at Sirmione. We talked about everything; even sound technicians came. It was organized by Zecchillo.

Q: Did you come to some kind of conclusion?

Tebaldi: No. Some said that you can't turn back the clock; things are this way now, and yet you have to accept them. I

know certain artists, on the other hand—I won't mention names—who no longer go to sing in Vienna because they get lost there. If they are not coloratura "sopranini," but heavy voices, they can't manage it.

Q: How did you study when you began to sing?

Tebaldi: It was hard work. I, for example, studied with Carmen Melis who was able to tell me about breathing, support, and putting the sound in "the mask." But you know today there are so many teachers who tell their students that they have to stop the sound here [indicating the palate]. They don't let the sound go up—which it must do.

Q: Do you know that recently Placido Domingo gave an interview to *Die Welt* in which he asked for a lowering of pitch, saying that it's time they did something?

Tebaldi: I believe it. No one can hold out any longer. Everyone agrees.

Q: The astonishing thing is that everyone's in agreement, yet nothing has been done.

Tebaldi: You know they invited me to Strasbourg. I was supposed to go and say all the things I've just said to you. I was going to say all this, about the theatre directors, and the way they are massacring our opera. But I am shy. I might still do it, though, because I get so worked up when I talk of these things.



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