

Italian parliament will debate bill to lower musical tuning

by Muriel Mirak

In September, when the Italian Parliament reconvenes after its summer recess, it will be called upon to pass legislation of a most unusual nature. Not new tax increases, nor environmentalist measures, will be the order of the day, but the correct tuning for musical performances. As the Milan daily *La Stampa* editorialized on July 10, one would assume most people's first reaction to be cynical: "With all the problems, crises, nuisances, and catastrophes raining down on us, look at what our parliamentarians are concerned with!" Yet, exactly the opposite is the case. The greatest names in the music world, cheered on by music-lovers throughout the media and population at large, are rallying to the call for lower tuning, with an enthusiasm not seen in decades.

And it is this sense of uniting around a national mission of historical dimensions, which, in the last analysis, will open the way for solutions to the grave problems weighing on Italy.

'War of the tuning forks'

The issue, which has been dubbed the "war of the tuning forks," revolves around the pitch assigned to A, the note used by orchestras to tune their instruments. Giuseppe Verdi, the father of Italian opera and symbol of the country's national unity, established the standard pitch in 1884, when, after lengthy consultations with scientific experts, he ascertained that A equal to 432 vibrations per second (Hertz) corresponded to the "natural" human voice. The scientific grounds for this tuning have been more finely worked out by Lyndon LaRouche and collaborators, who have shown that this "natural" tuning of A-432, corresponding to C-256, agrees with the very organization of our planetary system.

Verdi's tuning, which became the official standard through a decree issued by the War Ministry in 1884, was soon thereafter abandoned by a conference in Vienna the following year. From that time on, orchestra conductors have felt free to exploit the misconstrued notion of "artistic freedom" to raise tuning as they saw fit. The rush toward higher tuning was facilitated in part by technological changes in wind instruments, and in part by the concern, felt by orchestra directors, that larger concert halls required a more "brilliant" sound,

which could only be attained by raising the pitch. The result has been that many orchestras, for example, in Florence, Vienna, and Herbert von Karajan's Philharmonic in Berlin, have blithely raced past the allegedly "conventional" A-440, to reach 445, 450, and beyond, wreaking havoc on instruments and voices alike.

The effects of higher tuning are deleterious, both for the instruments thus tuned and the human voices striving to keep up with them. For Stradivarius violins, for example, acknowledged as the most perfectly constructed string instruments, Dr. Sergio Renzi of the International Lute Builders Institute in Cremona, has demonstrated that raised pitch creates a strain equivalent to about 14 kilograms on the instrument, leading, sooner or later, to its utter destruction.

For the human voice, the damage is more dramatic. Higher tuning places undue strain on vocal chords, leading to actual physical damage. Furthermore, as opera soprano Renata Tebaldi has explained, elevated tuning places the lyrical repertoire out of the reach of many competent, well-schooled sopranos or tenors, for example, who, to adjust to the cranked-up scores, often decide to sing the repertoire for a lower voice, say mezzo-soprano or baritone. The result is that the specific "color" and "timbre" which actually characterizes the kind of singing voice, more than range or extension per se, is lost. Thus, one laments the fact that "we no longer have great voices as we did in the past." The reason, however, is not that such great voices may be exceptional occurrences once in a century, but rather that high tuning has displaced the identification of types of voices. Under the reign of elevated tuning, singers are taught incorrectly, develop their voices incorrectly, sing the wrong repertoires, and end up not developing the full potentialities of their natural instruments.

More fundamentally, by shifting tuning upward, conductors are literally altering the musical score; those notes at which the composer intended the human voice to shift from one register to the next, signaling a conceptual moment in the development of the musical idea, are simply displaced, thus changing the meaning of the idea itself. If a conscientious singer tries to effect the register shift where the com-

poser intended it, say, on the F-sharp in the score, then, with a higher tuning, the singer risks straining the voice and incurring irreparable damage.

The obvious solution to this complex of problems is to lower tuning, taking it back down to where Verdi—and Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven before him—meant it to be.

Which is what the Italian Parliament is about to do.

The bill, presented by Christian Democratic Senators Carlo Boggio and Giuseppe Mezzapesa, grew out of a proposal launched by Lyndon LaRouche and elaborated by the Schiller Institute, which convened a conference in Milan last April on the issue. It calls for opera houses and conservatories to adopt A-432 as standard pitch for performance. It enjoys the support of several hundred renowned performers, among them, Renata Tebaldi, Piero Cappuccilli, Mirella Freni, Birgit Nilsson, Ruggiero Raimondi, Carlo Bergonzi, Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, Monserrat Caballé, Edda Moser, Alfredo Kraus, Kurt Moll, and Fedora Barbieri, to name just a few.

On July 13 and 14, when the Schiller Institute held press conferences to announce the legislative initiative in Rome and Milan together with the Christian Democratic sponsors, singer Piero Cappuccilli, Professors Renzi and Barosi of the Cremona International Lute Builders Institute, and Arturo Sacchetti of Vatican Radio, the press arrived en masse. Lead items reporting of the “war of the tuning forks,” appeared in Italy’s *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, and *Il Giorno*; Spain’s *El País*; France’s *Le Quotidien de Paris*; and Denmark’s *Jyllands Posten* and *Aktuellt*.

In Italy, the tuning issue has taken on the quality of a mass-supported campaign to defend the national culture. Two Sundays in a row, the popular national radio program, “The Music Hour,” featured 90-minute discussions with leading music experts on tuning. Commentator Padellaro led off her second transmission by calling on Lyndon LaRouche, for his comments. Although LaRouche could not be present in the studio, listeners heard remarks he had made in an interview with Liliana Celani, an Italian Schiller Institute member, who had conducted the decisive historical research into Verdi’s work on tuning. In answer to a question regarding his view of the present situation in Italy, Celani quoted LaRouche saying, “I weep for Italy, as I weep for many other nations.” Yet, he identified two rays of hope for the country. “One is the beginning of a musical renaissance, the other is the precious, fundamental scientific activity in the tradition of Leonardo da Vinci and the circle of scientists around Betti and Beltrami.” LaRouche continued that through “what we call the *bel canto* school and the heritage of Leonardo, Italy can be reawakened and encouraged to rebuild itself.”

By restoring classical tuning, the great musical culture of Verdi can be revived, and with it, the same kind of optimistic outlook which informed the struggle for national unification in Verdi’s lifetime, a national effort for which Verdi was, in

fact, the symbol. Thus it was no surprise that, in closing her program with a call to support the Schiller Institute’s initiative, Mrs. Padellaro gave voice to the sentiment of all music-lovers in Italy and abroad, who have already joined the campaign, by exclaiming: “Viva Verdi!”

Documentation

Placido Domingo’s view

We excerpt from an interview opera tenor Placido Domingo gave July 12 to the Danish daily Jyllands Posten.

Placido Domingo is often there when it comes to supporting his colleagues or new singers. That is at least his reputation.

When the Schiller Society [sic] had a conference in Milan, April 9, on the subject of the high pitch at which singers are forced to sing, he sent a telegram of support. Why is that?

“Many of my colleagues from the great opera scenes in the world participated at the conference, but unfortunately, I could not come.

“It is very important that we singers start doing something, because the conductors are tuning the orchestras way too high today . . . and that means that a singer does not last long.

“So far, we have been obedient and sung without complaints, but throughout my career, the pitch has just gone up and up.

“Even the 440 cycles [for A], which is the standard today, is much higher than, for instance, at the time of Verdi. And now there are even some conductors that tune at 445-446, because they believe that this gives a specially beautiful sound and brilliance. . . . This is simply outrageous.

“I remember one time, when we had to sing ‘La Bohème’ with the Boston Symphony, Renata Tebaldi arrived before the performance and gave the oboist an A . . . boing. He got very offended and said: ‘Madame Tebaldi, what is this supposed to mean?’ ‘That you are too high,’ she answered. ‘That you don’t have to tell me, I know my work,’ he said, and then a lot of trouble and confusion arose.

“But the end of it was, that the orchestra was tuned in the original way and this was actually a very good experience . . . that is just fair. What? . . . A strike? . . . Yes, maybe that is a very good idea; it could be exciting, if all the singers, for a trial period, at least, said ‘As the composer wrote it, or no singing.’