
Interview: Fiorenza Cossotto and Ivo Vinco

Verdi, the master of the voice, set pitch to keep register, color

*The following interview with Italian mezzo-soprano Fiorenza Cossotto and her husband, bass Ivo Vinco, was conducted Oct. 11, 1988 in Guttenberg, New Jersey by Schiller Institute representative Jeanne Percesepe Bell. Miss Cossotto was in town for the New York Metropolitan Opera season's opening, and sang the role of Azucena in the opening night performance of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. In the summer of 1988, she had endorsed the Schiller Institute's campaign in Italy to lower the tuning pitch to A=432.*

EIR: What is your opinion of the current trend internationally, to constantly raise the tuning pitch?

Cossotto: I start from one consideration: the period in which Giuseppe Verdi composed his works—*Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Aïda*, *Don Carlo*—all the great works. I am sure that the vocal technique of the great singers of the time had reached perhaps even the limit of human possibility; to wit, they had subjected the vocal organ to a correct, adequate effort spanning two octaves—the tenor, for example, singing two octaves up to the C of the second octave; and we all know that a bass goes from an F to an F, etc. Verdi, in composing these works, based himself on these human possibilities of his time, and for me they were the highest, the best possibilities, because they were the great singers who had experienced, even before Verdi, the possibility of maximum exploitation of the human voice, which cannot go beyond the true human voice.

The true voice of an opera singer cannot go beyond two octaves, because if it is stretched too high, the bottom is lost. One can sing a high C-sharp, but lose the low D-flat or low C-sharp, of the two octaves. It is like the bedcovers; if you take the blanket and pull it up too much, the feet are exposed; if instead, the feet are covered too far down, now the head is exposed!

To expand on this, these singers made great careers, they were singing all of Verdi, and surely they based themselves on this tuning fork of 432, that of his time. It was his ideal because he tuned the orchestra to it, in order to be able to execute well all these roles, even the most difficult.

By raising the tuning pitch, I am sure that the voices cannot be preserved, because they are subjected to a physiological strain beyond the normal, beyond the maximum of the possibilities which I am convinced that these singers

attained. In fact, today with the tuning getting higher and higher, we have fewer and fewer singers; their careers are shorter, careers that last three, four, five years, because they are subjected to inappropriate repertoires, but also because they are subjected to anti-human force. The vocal cords are organs—muscles—which the good Lord has given to us, but if we subject them to too much stretching, forcing them by overly-high tuning, first of all the low zone is lost, then even the center—which is the basis of the entire voice—and afterward, one strains so hard, that it is like a spring or an elastic band which by stretching too much, loses the physiological strength of this muscle.

On the other hand, an instrument, such as a wind instrument—above all, the wind instruments—the trumpet, the horn, and oboe, the more they are played in the orchestra, the more they warm up, and the more the pitch rises. Their approach is based on their tone being brilliant, and they do not take into consideration the fact that their instrument is made of [inert] material, while we have an instrument which is physiological and ours does not change. It is always the same way, and the vocal cords of 100 years ago had the same musculature as today. We cannot follow the brilliancies intended by certain orchestra conductors who are not concerned with this, who are concerned only with the orchestra and leave the pitch up to the oboe, the wind instruments, which, I repeat, as they warm up go up in pitch. It is not like the harp—the more you use it, the lower the pitch—because the harp is not based on the same principle; because the harp is pegged to the wood and the peg in the wood, when it is played, goes back and makes a “nnnnnn” sound, and slackens. The violin rises in pitch—the steel strings and the gut strings rise. . . . But above all it is the winds . . . which go up in pitch as they get warmer. . . .

In fact, many times when there is an *Aïda*, the Egyptian trumpet players must go out [to the pit] an hour before at least, if they have a professional conscience, to play *pah-pah* . . . because otherwise, when they arrive, if they begin immediately to play without preparation, without warming the instrument and even their embouchure, these instruments are always flat. Thus, the more they play and warm up, the more they produce sounds at the right intonation.

But the vocal cords can not be subjected to this, and therefore I join with all the others for this reason: The vocal



Fiorenza Cossotto in the role of Azucena, from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*

ords cannot be stretched like violin strings and have absolutely to be protected, if we want to preserve voices for the future. This is my opinion.

EIR: What are your thoughts on the subject of the high tuning today, and Verdi's insistence on A = 432?

Vinco: For me, the master of the singing voice is Giuseppe Verdi, and I will tell you why: because Giuseppe Verdi, first of all, teaches us to connect [the tones, in phrases]; to create 'cello-like singing lines, a *legato*, which is perhaps greater even than Bellini's, not to mention Mozart. Mozart, as we know, was not the master of *legato*, but Verdi created melodies with 'cello-like singing lines for all the voices and prepared for the difficulties in the high notes with preceding notes that assist you, like a springboard for a jumper. An athlete who must take a jump, uses a base from which to arrive at the height with facility, whereas we find in other composers certain huge leaps, taking a low note and then immediately a high note, like weight-lifting. Verdi is a master, the great master for the voice. Whoever sings Verdi, and sings it well, can never ruin his voice. . . .

EIR: Miss Cossotto, you've performed the heroic roles in Verdi, which are most difficult. Could you describe what problems the higher tuning poses in the performance of a role such as Eboli [the mezzo-soprano role in *Don Carlo*].

Cossotto: Before speaking about Eboli, I would like to speak in general. I think that no one knew vocal technique as Verdi did, because he had a particular genius and also because of an historical fact. Before Verdi, since Rossini, Donizetti above all, and even before that, they were basing themselves on instrumental song; that is, they were imitating the instruments. Then, they were making all these ornaments, and



The Italian bass, Ivo Vinco.

flourishes, and a little of this is still found in Bellini, but much less. Until Bellini, there is still this tendency to imitate instruments with the voice.

With Verdi, no. Verdi composed in such a way that the voice would be in its full capacity to produce the maximum that two vocal cords are able to produce, not imitating a vocal cord which is artificial, and made of metal. Verdi studied the human vocal cords and wrote his music based on their difficulties, not on the difficulties of instrumental song. Then, with the tuning fork, he set the tuning fork at this correct level, at 432.

Because, in the human voice—I am a mezzo-soprano, and I speak of myself, because I have my experience—in the human voice there are, in the mezzo-soprano, three vocal registers; in the soprano, there are two. The mezzo-soprano has the lower, central, and upper registers. Between the lower, and the central, there exist two or three notes which are called notes of the *passaggio*. Between the center and the upper, there are other notes of *passaggio*, for which reason, in order to get to the upper register, it is necessary to study these notes well. This is a physiological passage, which everyone has, sopranos, tenors, and basses, too. They have it there in particular notes, they are not all equal. The mezzo-soprano has them in certain notes, the soprano, they are a bit shifted upward, she has two registers. The soprano has the middle and the upper; the tenor, the middle and the upper only, they do not have the lower register; they don't have the added difficulty of the lower *passaggio*.

Now, Giuseppe Verdi studied this, but very profoundly, because his music intentionally dealt with the human voice and for the difficulties that he wrote into his music, as in Eboli. He wrote the music and the difficulty of the voice itself because he knew where the difficulties of the voice were.

What happens? If a voice is entirely shifted upward, you will lose the harmonics, the round voice that Verdi wanted in the mezzo-soprano, because he wanted a voice rich in harmonics above all in the middle and lower notes, because the center is what characterizes the mezzo-soprano. Shifting much of the middle zone to the high notes causes the voice to become thinner, smaller. By shifting the tuning fork, the voice becomes smaller, thinner. The true mezzo-soprano voice cannot be subjected to a great force, because it means that then if it is a big voice, it is not able to make the stretch and go up to the very high notes. It must go to the high notes written by Verdi, but written with Verdi's tuning fork, that of Verdi's time.

Now it happens that in order to remedy this mistake of the tuning fork—that the tuning fork is too high—they bring on sopranos who sing as mezzo-sopranos. And they take very light voices who sing in place of the mezzo-sopranos, and who must act as mezzo-sopranos. All the light voices who sing the Eboli repertoire, the high repertoire, are false voices, and the orchestra directors choose sopranos to do Adalgisa, who is typically a mezzo-soprano, to contrast to the color of Norma's voice [in Bellini's opera *Norma*]. Now, with the heightened tuning fork, they take small-voiced sopranos to sing the roles like Eboli, Adalgisa, and everything is ruined. I ask myself if [the great dramatic tenor Enrico] Caruso could sing today, given that they don't want the dark voices anymore; they want light voices, due precisely to the tuning fork. . . .

But this is not right! This is ruining singing, causing the vocal art to die. It is a debasement and a shame to have arrived at this point. It happens so often that in order to place a small voice to sing a part which should be done by a mezzo-soprano voice, they must put an even smaller voice in the soprano role. If they have a soprano who sings Adalgisa, they have to make a light soprano do Norma, such as the ones who now sing Lucia [in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a lyric-coloratura soprano role].

Vinco: The dramatic voices are no longer wanted.

Cossotto: They take voices not written by the composers. And it shows that the composers wanted the dark voice, the true voice of the mezzo-soprano, like the true voice of the dramatic tenor, the dramatic soprano. It shows because in the orchestrations of Giuseppe Verdi, which are always short, he uses trumpets, dramatic instruments to produce a dramatic atmosphere; he wants the voice to be heard over these instruments; to reach the audience he does not want tiny, little voices there. Instead, today there is a fight against the big voices, against the true voices.

One studies an entire life to achieve perfection, even in the high notes, but also in the center register, because the center is the foundation of a voice. When the center is there, it is the telltale sign, which says, "you are a mezzo-soprano; you are a soprano"; if the center is dark, it is a mezzo-soprano; if the center is light, it is a soprano, not a mezzo. Today, sopranos sing without the center.

Vinco: Because they pass from the upper register to the chest notes, and do not have the center.

Cossotto: But by singing that way they do not last long, because they sing wrong. It is a physiological thing, and unfortunately the degeneration has even led to a fashion—not for the public, the public must suffer this abuse of power of certain gentlemen who can publish their opinions in the newspapers or in books, but this is not the opinion of the public—they are contributing to the decadence of the voice, of the vocal art, of singing.

EIR: Renata Tebaldi, at the Schiller Institute conference in Milan on April 9, 1988, said that Italy, which has given bel canto to the world, has the possibility of reviving today these great voices, which are there, but cannot develop for reasons of the high tuning. Is this what you mean when you say that Caruso could not sing today?

Cossotto: I am sure that the voices are there. They are not developing because the high tuning goes against the nature of the voice. It is a physiological thing. I am an exception, after all, because I have a large voice, and I go up, but I am an exception; because I sing *Cavalleria Rusticana* and I sing *Un Ballo in Maschera*, but how long can I keep it up? It is not normal.

Vinco: Conclusion. If this system continues, only the lightest voices will sing; they will no longer be able to do *Trovatore*, *Aida*, *Otello*, these dramatic operas of Verdi, they will no longer be able to perform them, or they will be performed in a wrong way, totally wrong. . . .

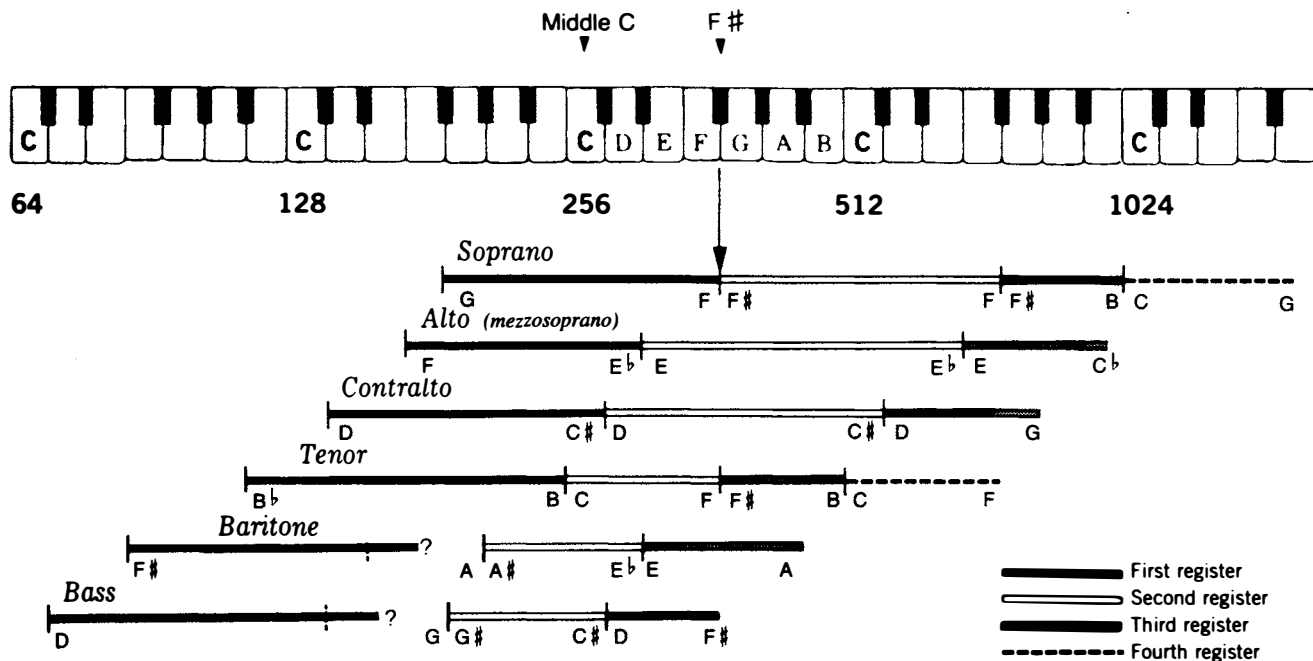
Not long ago, a top, a celebrated orchestra director produced *Aida* in his theater with a light, lyric soprano, a light, lyric tenor, and a Rossinian mezzo-soprano. The young people who have not known the voices of [Mario] Del Monaco, [Franco] Corelli, how will they know what a dramatic tenor sounds like?

Cossotto: The true theatrical voice is sacrificed for all the others which are not theatrical voices. The true operatic voices, instead of becoming popular, become less popular because they are not allowed to sing anymore, because they have mediocrities sing. If the tuning fork were as Giuseppe Verdi wished, and as it ought to be for the nature of the voice, a lyric soprano who sings as a mezzo-soprano would not be able to sing, because the register passage of the voice, being lower, has more difficulty, and the center would be ruined in short order. The history of singing has degenerated from the time of Verdi to today.

EIR: What message can we give to conductors and directors in the United States who are looking at this initiative in Italy?

Cossotto: I would like to bring a message, that they not allow themselves to be influenced by what has become a kind of fashion, of having small voices sing what the composer did not want. This is not to say that the smaller voices must not sing, but they ought to sing their repertoire, and leave room for those who truly have great possibilities; don't pay

The six species of the human singing-voice



The range and natural register-shifts of the six species of the human voice is shown, according to information assembled by a team of researchers working with the Schiller Institute. The upper and lower extremes of each voice are based on passages found in actual classical compositions; however, most voices have sub-species which concentrate only on a portion of the range shown here. Thus, although the register-shifts remain the same in all compositions for that voice species, within any single composition the range for a particular voice will usually be narrower than what is represented here.

attention to whether they are foreigners or if they are Americans, because this is a gross wrong which is done to the vocal art, and to the paying public. . . .

Another message to the orchestra directors: Do not let yourselves be influenced by any faction which is able to support this or that artist, for business reasons, because it's all business, and art gets left behind. But the public pays to hear art, to hear a beautiful voice, and to experience emotions, emotions which can only be produced with the color of voice that the composer wanted, that is to say, with the low tuning. If Verdi has written a dramatic phrase, I cannot sing it with a thread of a voice, with a light voice. The voice is like a painting, like a palette of colors. I must produce a color of dark voice, dramatic, and when I must produce a word that the composer has wanted very sweet, I must produce it with the color of a light voice. The artist studies for years to produce a palette of colors, this is the perfect voice. It must have so many colors, because the words that it speaks in the role it performs reflect so many colors, and it is not possible to have always the color of a white, light voice.

Vinco: Conclusion: less business and more opera! Beniamino Gigli used to say that the singer should only publicize himself in the evenings on stage.

EIR: Television, above all in America, often broadcasts the operas of the Metropolitan, but it has created the myth of the superstar. What effect does this have on opera?

Cossotto: For me, it is a completely mistaken effect, and completely harmful for true opera. It is a false effect.

I can say one thing: Television has done much to popularize the art, especially in cases where one is unable to go to the theater, either because one has no money, or because it is too far away. But it is still an artificial thing, because it has created big stars, but held back many others from emerging.

Vinco: Not only television, but recordings. There are only five recording companies in the world. I know many singers, many basses, who are murdered by the monopoly of the record industry.

Cossotto: Many hear a great voice on a record, or on TV, then they hear it in a theater and get disappointed. A star, be it woman or man, imposes on the theater, the artists with whom he will work. "I do not want this artist." Why don't you want him? Because he is good, because he or she wants to prevail? The star does not want the young ones who are better than the star! It is a phenomenon which has been going on for several years.