

Interview: Ruggero Raimondi



'Race to high tuning threatens the singers' vocal identity'

Ruggero Raimondi is one of the leading operatic bass-baritones of our time, who has sung in the great opera houses of Europe and at the Metropolitan of New York, excelling in the bass-baritone and "basso cantante" roles of Mozart and Verdi operas in particular. He sang the role of Don Giovanni in the film version of the Mozart opera. He granted the following interview to Liliana and Claudio Celani on April 12, 1988, in Bologna, Italy where he was singing the part of King Philip in Verdi's Don Carlo. First printed in the Italian review Il Machiavellico in July 1988 (Vol. VI, No. 2), the interview has been translated for EIR by Bonnie James.

The framework for this interview is given by the Schiller Institute's campaign to restore the tuning fork of Giuseppe Verdi, which set concert A at 432 Hertz, which in turn was calculated from the scientific middle C of 256 Hertz. The C=256 tuning, as numerous articles in EIR have shown, corresponds to fundamental laws of the physical universe. Before Verdi, the German classical composers Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, et al., also composed for a tuning fork where C was set at 256.

In July 1988, legislation to set A at 432 was introduced into the Italian Senate, and some 2,000 signatures of professional musicians, including most of the world's top opera stars, numerous voice teachers, and a number of outstanding instrumentalists and conductors, were collected in support of the initiative. In spring 1989, however, this bill was subverted to produce a different law, establishing A = 440 as the standard pitch in Italy, but this met with an outcry from the many leading musicians who had supported the original effort, and they have pledged to carry the battle forward internationally as well as in Italy, until the "Verdi A" triumphs.

The tuning controversy continues to stir up debate in the music world internationally as a unique effort to put art back on a scientific footing, as it was in every great renaissance of the past. During the coming 1989-90 London opera season, a concert version of Verdi's opera Rigoletto will be performed at the Verdi pitch, under the baton of Michel Sasson and with Piero Cappuccilli in the title role, as a demonstration that the proposed restoration of classical tuning is eminently feasible as well as desirable. According to

Italian press accounts, this Rigoletto will be televised and made available on recordings.

On Aug. 30, National Public Radio aired a lengthy segment on its Morning Edition, broadcast over some 150 radio stations in the United States, which featured an interview with the imprisoned statesman and philosopher Lyndon LaRouche, who inspired the C = 256 tuning campaign in the first place.

Q: You have been fighting high tuning for years, you said. Why?

Raimondi: I find various tuning forks, starting with Vienna, going to the Metropolitan, going to Covent Garden, going to Paris. You notice the difference in pitch. And you feel this in singing roles which have particularly demanding tessituras, because you perceive a lesser or greater comfort [in the voice] according to whether the tuning fork is lower or higher. Therefore, I think it is very important to bring back the tuning fork, after having read your letter of Verdi's, to what Verdi wanted. If Verdi composed a given musical piece, he was thinking of a certain pitch when he composed it, which does not correspond to what happens today with these orchestras [whose pitches are being] pushed to the maximum.

Q: From the standpoint of the register shift for the bass, what kind of problem does this create? Some people think that a higher tuning facilitates the low notes for a bass, whereas some basses have told us that there is even a problem for the bass, and even on the low notes.

Raimondi: It shifts everything by a half-step, completely changing the *passaggio* both going down and coming up. Because obviously, the *passaggio*, when going down, is on B and C, whereas in ascending, the C must already be covered by a bass. Instead, with the high tuning it becomes a C-sharp, and if you have to go up to higher notes, the E-flat becomes a more covered sound, even though it ought to be a sound of preparation for covering the E [see Glossary].

All this creates sizable problems of placement and it creates hybrid voices, because a half-step can determine a much lower voice in an opera, and it can determine the

dramatic baritone, the lyric baritone, the light baritone, as well as the dramatic tenor. Nowadays, these differentiations that once existed, no longer exist! Why? Because obviously, this half-step, and perhaps even more than half-step, has uniformly created a certain pushed sound. You no longer hear the sounds supported on the breath, you always hear pushed sounds, and this may also explain why many careers do not go beyond five, six, seven years, even in the case of very beautiful voices. Obviously, because of this continuing exasperation of higher sound, they do not succeed in finding the right placement which permits them to sing effortlessly.

Q: Is it true that many high voices are forced to sing lower tessituras, for example, many tenors forced to sing as baritones?

Raimondi: I have the impression that, yes, there is a great hybridization, as I said before, there is no longer a precise distinction among dramatic roles, lyric, and light-lyric; and very often, some tenors who cannot reach certain high notes sing baritone, light baritone, just as the baritone who does not succeed in singing a certain passage, turns into a bass-baritone, and this is due to this differentiation of pitch.

Q: But then what happens to the voice?

Raimondi: Obviously, a voice which is continually pushed, is under a continuous strain. The vocal cords can have problems, paresis; they can end up with cysts, polyps, nodes, and this can create some big problems. Thus, the career comes to an end. I remember some stupendous tenor voices that after five, six years were finished.

Q: In the postwar period?

Raimondi: Yes. I began my career in 1964, and I began with these voices, very beautiful voices, even basses, which are disappearing from circulation. The *basso profondo* cannot push his voice to an F which becomes an F-sharp, or an E which becomes an F; he has to be contained within a vocal range more suitable to the quality of a dark bass, such as Giulio Neri had. It is obvious that these persons have tremendous difficulties, because they have very big, heavy, dark, deep voices. For example, in [Verdi's] *Simon Boccanegra* when there is the final invective: It goes to F, then becomes an F-sharp. In the last scene, the notes are all very high, the E becomes F, the Fs become F-sharps, they are already almost baritone sounds. All this damages the voice and creates huge problems of vocal identity for the various singers.

Q: You said before that you were led to become a bass-baritone because of this.

Raimondi: I do not know if because of this, or for other reasons. My voice is a little unusual, it tends to baritone and to bass, it has a certain range. If this *passaggio* of a half-tone lower were there, I would be able to take up some of the more interesting baritone roles.

Glossary

Tessitura: This Italian term refers to the range of notes in which a given voice moves with the greatest facility; and hence has also come to refer to the voice type, for which a composition was designed. While the major voice *species* are soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, and bass, there are various tessituras within each species—such as the big distinction between the highest tenor voice (“light tenor”) and the lowest, heaviest tenor (“dramatic”)—distinctions which are reflected in different repertoire. Thus, operatic and classical music respects an individuality in voices which is totally unknown to popular music—let alone the rock subculture, where it is often impossible to distinguish the gender of the singer, let alone his or her tessitura!

Passaggio: The Italian word for “passage” refers to the notes between which the voice must pass from a lower to a higher register, or vice versa. All trained voices have at least three *registers*, a term most narrowly defined as a series of notes produced by a similar procedure; and in the case of the higher tessituras (sopranos, tenors) as well as many other operatic voices, there is at least one additional register. The registers, and their respective shifts, are located in specific places in the musical scale, which are unique to each principal voice species.

Covering: We have here translated as “covered” Maestro Raimondi’s term *raccolto*, which usually means “recollected,” or introspective, as in a religious attitude. Such terms represent an attempt to describe verbally the difference in tone color between a lower register and a higher one. What Ruggero Raimondi calls *raccolto* (covered) is also sometimes described as “darker,” in comparison to a “brighter,” or “broader” sound in the middle or low register. Needless to say, such descriptions can only be approximate until the ear is trained to appreciate the distinction, which is one of the great delights of fine singing. “Covering” is the process which allows trained singers to protect their voices and still project them, without microphones or other artificial aids, while singing notes in the third (high) register.

Q: Which up until now you have not been able to do?

Raimondi: Up till now, no.

Q: But, is it possible to pass from King Philip to the baritone role of Rigoletto?

Raimondi: From the bass of King Philip to Rigoletto? It is necessary to have a somewhat exceptional voice. Normally, no.

Q: Would you like the role of Rigoletto?

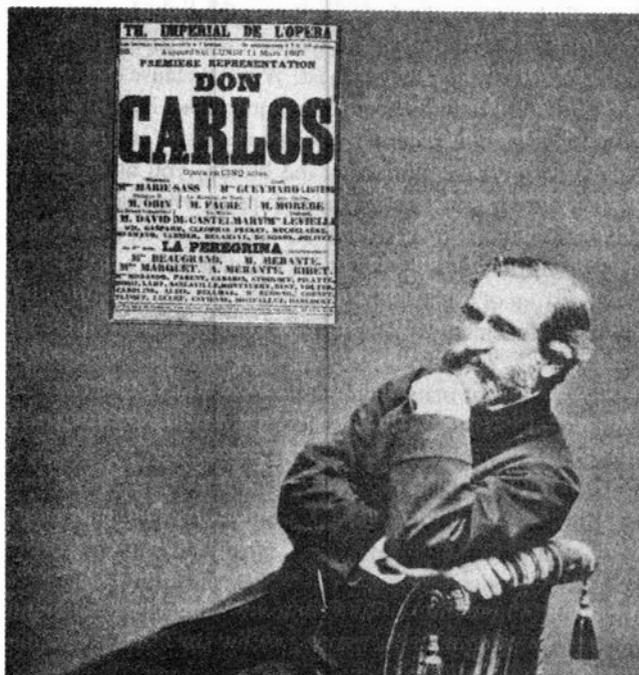
Raimondi: Here there is another problem. To me the characters are very interesting. I start always from the dramatic idea, and then I see if I can execute this character vocally, and also musically. If I do not succeed, I abandon the project, but as for Falstaff, and Scarpia, they are two roles which I did because I was extremely attracted by the character, therefore I examined to the maximum whether it was possible for my voice to succeed in arriving at certain vocal expressions which are surely not those of a bass. But this came after some study. It is obvious that if the pitch were lower it would be easier.

Q: What attracted you in the character of Rigoletto?

Raimondi: That's a murderous question. But I believe that there is in this role a very strong drama, which is reflected in Verdi himself, the drama of the father, the internal problems, crippled not so much in the body, but much more in the mind itself of the character, the drama of innocence, of the unawareness, of the malevolence, at bottom, of this character who is redeemed, but at the price of his daughter's death. All these emotions are able to create interpretive contrasts which can be very interesting.

Q: How do you find yourself in the role of King Philip, here in Bologna, but also in general?

Raimondi: Great suffering, great beauty. It is not that I am a masochist, I also do such roles as Mustafa. Philip II is a character of exceptional interest, also because his emotions are not on a single plane, they are three-dimensional, because he is a father jealous of his son, in love with his wife who had been betrothed to the son. He sees in Posa a danger which he does not admit, but which he knows exists, because Posa is a person who believes in law, who makes himself a protector of the law, and at that time, such a person was dangerous, not only for the Church, but also for King Philip. Moreover, there is his solitude, due to his problematic inner life, and an almost tyrannical character before the people, which makes him a strong, hard person, whereas in his solitude he is an extremely weak, empty, lost character who asks for comfort from the Church, from the Inquisition, from the Grand Inquisitor, asks permission to kill his son, because he is creating terrible problems, and fundamentally, he feels guilty—not so much about the death of his son, but by the fact of protecting Posa—who is very disturbing because he opens the people's eyes. In Schiller, the central role is the Marquis de Posa. Verdi chose to make Philip the central character, precisely because he had these all-consuming, dramatic colors,



The composer Giuseppe Verdi at the time of the Paris opening of his opera Don Carlos. Where Schiller had made the Marquis de Posa the central character of the drama, Verdi shifted the focus to Philip II.

in this relationship to his son. But in Schiller, the Marquis de Posa is the character who illuminates the entire drama.

Q: So you think that there is a difference between the *Don Carlos* of Schiller and that of Verdi?

Raimondi: A difference in the sense that I would have given a greater space to Posa, as a character in the opera, than to Don Carlo. I would have made Don Carlo perhaps more glimpsed, less prominent, because it is difficult to portray a role like Don Carlo—epileptic, crazy—on a stage.

Q: I found it one of the most successful operas.

Raimondi: It is one of the most beautiful, and most theatrical of Verdi's operas, which demands not only singing, but also interpretation, which therefore demands good direction, preparation, and knowledge, and it is very difficult to bring to the stage. It is important to succeed to give an interpretation as actors, to succeed in conveying emotions not only from the vocal point of view, but also from the expressive point of view, to the public. Today's public no longer goes to the opera just to hear the "chest high C." Yes, there are still those who do it, but God willing, tastes are changing, and people go to the theater also to see a totality of things, and not only to hear a voice.

Returning to the matter of the tuning fork, if beyond this, we succeed in bringing an orchestra within this pitch limit, I think there will be no problem in finding singers to stage a

[Puccini's] *Bohème* or a [Bellini's] *Puritani*; it would be much easier and much more human. When nowadays an orchestra conductor refuses to lower the "Gelida manina" [the famous tenor aria in *La Bohème*] by a half-step, for me this is not right. He ought to consider that perhaps at the time of Puccini, the tuning was a semitone lower.

Q: But when you have fought for this, you have been met with incomprehension?

Raimondi: With smiles. I have always been interested in this, speaking with orchestra musicians, with conductors, but they have all downplayed it, saying, "but in effect it is not a semitone, perhaps a quarter-tone, so it is not so important." I have always considered this very, very important, also for the purpose of more correctly identifying the vocal qualities of each singer.

Q: The baritone Piero Cappuccilli told us that even for the bass, the high tuning provokes so much tension in the vocal cords that even the low notes become a problem. How is this reflected in the low notes, for example, in the aria of King Philip, "Ella giammai m'amò"?

Raimondi: More than in "Ella giammai m'amò," the problem arises in *Simon Boccanegra*, because in the invectives of Fiesco, one goes from a high F, which would be an F-sharp, to a low F, thus there is an extension of two octaves, but always in tension, spoken with impetuosity and nastiness. It is not the *legato* of the aria "Ella giammai m'amò" in which a person supports his voice, that does not have the tension Cappuccilli was talking about, in which the vocal cords are tense and cannot relax. It is in *Simon Boccanegra* that this difficulty is created, because the role demands these two octaves always in tension, and with force.

Q: Another cause of the lack of voices, outside of the tuning fork, is that the bel canto school is becoming lost. You were speaking to us before of the experiment which you wanted to do with recordings of the voices of the past. You said that they sing better "in the mask" than today's voices.

Raimondi: First I will say that I am a curious person, very curious. When these records are heard at 78 rpm, some voices sound vibrated, very strong in the mask, something that is very difficult to hear in today's recordings. And so I ask myself, for amusement, for experiment, why not make some recordings with the same techniques that were used to record Caruso, Chaliapin, Titta Ruffo, and so on, in order to see what were the harmonic differences of these voices, in order to be able one day to study the difference from modern-day voices. Because with recordings at 33 rpm, outside of augmenting the frequency—the voices have been pushed, and you no longer know what kind of voices they really are, because by spinning the records faster, the voice rises. At 78 RPM, one hears that Caruso has a baritonesque voice, of a dark color. There is that duel in *Otello* between him and Titta

Ruffo in which you don't know which is the tenor and which the baritone. Why not try to do these things, even if only to seek to understand what the placement was? Let's not forget that Caruso had been operated on twice for nodules of the vocal cords. He was a person who pushed. Already then there were problems of placement.

In order to return to the sound of yesteryear, it would be necessary to return to the size of orchestras of the day, it would be necessary to sing again in the theaters as were built in that time, to place the orchestras again as they were then, even as to position. The singers came down to the front of the stage and they were already within the cupola. From what I have been told, at La Scala [in Milan] the stage had reached all the way to the first row of boxes. Therefore, all these things created a war or battle between the singers and the sonority of the orchestra. When one sings in Vienna, for example, the orchestra is at a very high level with respect to the stage, in terms of its position. When 120 people are playing all together, if you do not have a great conductor who knows how to do the *pianissimi*, it becomes an inhuman battle between the singer and the sound of the orchestra. How is one able to tell how it was, if we do not overcome all these problems which perhaps did not exist in the past? At one time, the purity of a voice was free to expand in a theater; nowadays a voice must fight against some distance from the audience, and against a sonority which I do not believe existed at the time of Stendahl. Speaking of bel canto, when one takes a score of Bellini or Rossini (Rossini himself complained that there were no more interesting voices), in order to understand what the situation is, we would need to return to those conditions, and in those conditions produce a singer of today, that is to say, to re-accustom him to sing in a given setting.

Q: Returning to the technique of recording, you said to us before that the new recording techniques tend to level out the vibrato a little.

Raimondi: I have the impression that most of the sound engineers do not listen to the singer in a recording studio, but they have the tendency to reconstruct the sound in the booth, and therefore they create imaginary sounds, smoothing out a little the vibrations of this or that other singer, and this decompensates the harmonics of one singer's voice or another. Moreover, I believe that with the technique arrived at today, there ought to be one microphone for deep voices and another for high voices, because obviously the way of receiving certain sounds changes. If there is a microphone which favors the tenor, obviously it disfavors the deep voices, because the voice of a tenor is much more powerful, it makes a microphone vibrate more easily, while the low voice has less impact. All that would have to be taken into consideration in the recordings.

Q: This is advice that ought to be taken.