

# U.S. crisis in education is focus of debate at singing conference

by Kathy Wolfe

The First American Vocal Arts Congress at the University of Maryland July 16-20 saw a passionate debate on the crisis in music education and lack of government action to halt the shutdown of classical education in the United States. The conference was sponsored by the university's Maryland Summer Institute for the Creative and Performing Arts at College Park, and chaired by veteran Verdi baritone Sherrill Milnes.

The great Marian Anderson, 84, was honored by a simultaneous "International Marian Anderson Vocal Arts Competition," held in conjunction with the conference, with 40 singers from a dozen countries.

Most important were the questions from the almost 100 singing teachers in the audience, from across the country. While I was able to attend only a few sessions, participants said discussion throughout revolved around the need to reverse musical illiteracy in America.

A lecture-demonstration of opera singing and direction by Prof. Robert Gay of Northwestern University, also served as a poignant reminder of the body of knowledge of musical score from previous centuries which is today being lost.

## 'Children can't think!'

The basic format of the conference was a panel discussion in the morning, a lecture-recital or demonstration in the afternoon, and a concert in the evening. Mr. Milnes and leading singers such as Martina Arroyo, Mady Mesplé, and Benita Valente gave two concerts, and the competition semi-final and final recitals were heard on two other evenings.

There was a dinner honoring Marian Anderson July 18, which the diva, whose physicians advised her to stay home because of the heat, addressed with her usual wit and good humor by telephone hook-up from her farm in Connecticut.

The format would have been excellent if these were normal times. It's a great idea to discuss, then study in a workshop, and finally to hear real music. Unfortunately, the collapse of musical culture in the U.S. today meant that the vocal arts congress could only touch the surface of the problem.

First, there was need for much more discussion time, especially from the audience. This was not only because the quality of the panel speakers was mixed, to be polite, but because teachers in the audience were boiling over.

The panel "Opera in America: Artistic vs. Commercialism" on the morning of July 20 was begun incisively by Marc

Overton, music director of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. "We are forcing all our artists to become businessmen today, and music is not a business," he said, "unless you want to qualify as business, the changing of human lives through art. . . . An opera company driven as most are today by the 'bottom line' cannot produce art."

Moderator Sherrill Milnes to his eternal credit immediately invited questions. Metropolitan Opera singer George Shirley, now professor at the University of Michigan, jumped up. "The arts are being eliminated on campus, financing canceled, in favor of producing students who can compete in business," he said. "And by the time we get these children in college, they are musically at zero, they have learned nothing in grade school. What can we *do* about this? We must do something about this!"

"Yes, we've got to get music back into the schools from the start, from kindergarten," Overton said, "so that children can learn to think! It is only in music and other arts, at a very young age—not in front of a television—that children learn to spend time alone and think! It is what happens inside one's own head that creates music, art, and is created by art! People today are afraid to be alone and to think!"

## 'The almighty dollar'

"It's remarkable that this same issue has come up every day," Milnes noted. Unfortunately, subsequent speakers, George Jellinek of New York's classical commercial radio station WQXR, Metropolitan Opera conductor Richard Woi-tach, and other professionals, turned to banal presentations on survival in the business world.

Woi-tach quoted the saying of Leonard Bernstein's mentor, the Russian emigré Serge Koussevitzky: "I only dare to dream the dreams that can come true—so I always come in under budget!" Jellinek said, "I'm in radio and I tell you commercialism is good. We're not dealing with balancing a budget. We're dealing with survival! Opera companies and classical music organizations are closing their doors nationally because they can't raise money. It's dangerous for us *not* to be commercial, because if we all go under, that is the end of music."

This, however, barely staved off the audience's demand to focus on the main concerns: the children, and the government. Another teacher rose to say, "Look, it's arts education that's the problem. Opera can't compete in business with

television! The problem is, our elected representatives won't support music, because they are the victims of a total lack of exposure to music as children. It's not just broccoli they missed. They're ignorant! We've got to change that."

Teachers lined up four deep at the three audience microphones. "I'm from an inner city high school in Newark, New Jersey," said one woman. "These kids never had any music. I had to buy my own second-hand record player, to play some for them. We've got to do something!"

"I was trained in the Detroit public schools," George Shirley said, "which until 1977 had the best music education system in the U.S.; but because of the almighty bottom line, they shut down the entire music program in 1977! Did you know that the entire school system of Los Angeles County from grade school through high school now has only *two* music teachers?"

"I'd like to hear an African Pamina [from Mozart's "Magic Flute"] to get black people interested," said one black teacher. "But at this point, *any* Pamina at all would be better than no Pamina, which is what they get today!"

Although numerous teachers put forth ideas for action and lobbying in Washington from the audience, no one on the panel had any solutions, and the session ended on this note as time ran out. American music teachers are ready to fight for classical music, but will need better leadership to win such a fight.

## Lost European tradition

One of the afternoon workshops, a lecture-demonstration on "The Singing Actor and Opera Director," by Prof. Emeritus Robert Gay of Northwestern University, was priceless. Professor Gay's intimacy with Mozart's and other scores reminded us that there was another level entirely of musical literacy in the European classical tradition of the last generation.

Earlier, in discussion with the teachers, Mr. Milnes had asked, "Where are the coaches and accompanists trained in the old European tradition, the ones who came over from Europe during the Nazi Holocaust of World War II, whom we used to have, to train young singers? Why aren't we producing them? That's why we're not training singers!"

It is precisely the ability to speak the language of Mozart, the 19th-century European classical tradition, which *government policy* has driven from the schools. Until that is reversed, our schools will not be equipped to transmit this language to future generations.

Professor Gay, a distinguished gentleman nearing 80, trained Sherrill Milnes in opera at Northwestern in the late 1950s. How he did such a good job, was summed up in his motto: "Remember, Mozart is the director!" Professor Gay is also a leading colleague of opera theorist Boris Goldovsky, but avoided his romantic method acting.

Using three Northwestern vocal students, he demonstrated how to teach a composer's idea, in several scenes from Mozart's "Così Fan Tutte" and "Marriage of Figaro," as

well as Puccini's "La Bohème," and a modern comedy by Menotti, which even came slightly alive.

## 'Mozart is the director'

"Rule number one," Gay began "is: 'The composer is the director.' It is the composer of the music in an opera, who decides what the words mean, because music is a higher principle than words, and in fact is more specific than words in speaking directly to us. Often I misunderstand what someone says to me, but Mozart never confuses me. This means, of course, that the singer and director must know the entire score, never singing an aria from some anthology, but knowing every note of the full orchestral score, the entire emotional context, holding that all in their mind.

"The libretto is never meant to be heard alone as literature. You must also know the background text—for example, Beaumarchais's three plays in the case of Mozart's 'Figaro'—through and through. You must know the history of the period. You must know the painting.

"But the main point is: *Mozart is the director*. He decides what a word means."

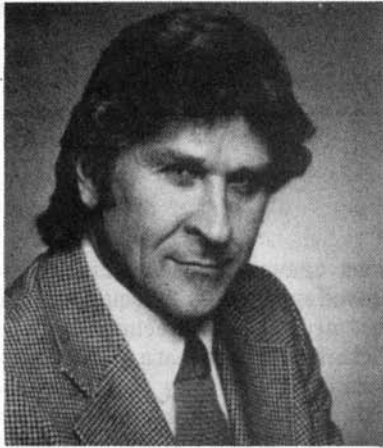
Gay then proceeded to demonstrate that the space on the opera stage is created by a geometry of distinct voices *in the music*, both different human voices, such as a soprano versus a mezzo, and also distinct orchestral voices, such as 'cellos versus flutes. His point was that Mozart's *voicing* gives you the staging.

"I require the singing actor to become alert to the entrance of new ideas in the music," he said, bringing on a young soprano and mezzo. "For example, in their first duet in 'Così Fan Tutte,' the two sisters, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, are identified to you *by Mozart* before they open their mouths!"

Northwestern's able conductor and coach-accompanist Frederick Ockwell then played the musical opening to the duet "Ah, guarda, sorella." The soprano Fiordiligi entered simply from stage right, using the first four bars, which are Mozart's musical statement or theme. Then, at the entrance of Mozart's musical *apposition*, his new idea from bar five on, the mezzo Dorabella entered from stage left. As Mozart's introduction closes, there are opposing and very humorous chromatic scales, one up, and one down. At the former, the soprano sat down. At the later, the mezzo sat down. No word. End demonstration.

The point was beautiful, and very clear. In the Act I duet between Susanna and Marcellina from "Figaro," Professor Gay told the audience, "Look, Wolfgang is *talking* to you! You have to find out what he's saying! It's simple: two different voices, who are insulting each other in a nice way. Marcellina is older and the instigator. Susanna is younger, she responds. You have to make them different, yet create artistic unity."

"Furthermore, in the first half of the duet, Susanna doesn't know what's coming. So Mozart gives her a delay in her entrance, so she can figure out the answer. *That's an idea, written into the music*. You have to bring it out. And



A 1785 illustration of the moment the Count discovers Cherubino hiding in a chair, from the Beaumarchais play, 'The Marriage of Figaro.' In Mozart's opera, "The libretto is never meant to be heard alone as literature. You must also know the background text—for example, Beaumarchais's three plays in the case of Mozart's 'Figaro'. You must know the history of the period. You must know the painting." Inset: Sherrill Milnes.



then, this has to be contrasted to the second half of the duet—where Susanna's heard it all already! Mozart changes the music: She *knows* what's coming, so her reply is instantaneous.

"Then you have little internal nuances which are very comic, such as the passage where Susanna finally breaks all the aristocratic conventions and tells Marcellina of her age. Marcellina's anger is heard—in the string basses," and he had the pianist play the relevant sharp arpeggio, to gales of laughter. "You have to tell the singers that these are ideas, which must be brought out."

Professor Gay noted that the singer and conductor must both have the score in their heads, and therefore work primarily by hearing each other. "Any conductor who demands eye contact with a singer is either insecure, or thinks the singer is insecure," he said. "It's just terrible when a singer has to look at the conductor and say, 'Now?'" he demonstrated to the laughter of the participants. He continued, "This is drama in which the music you hear has to be both the cause and the inevitable result of the dramatic action."

In passages where vocal-orchestral coordination is tricky, for example, the singer has to find ways to communicate with the conductor which lie within Mozart's idea-characterization: e.g., Mozart's impetuous young Cherubino in "Figaro," who has to sing her first aria with virtually no orchestral introduction. Professor Gay had his student sing the preceding recitative just as a child might do, standing on

a chair, and when ready, establish her tempo for the aria by leaping lightly to the floor:

"[Thump!] *Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio!* . . .

"I've seen Sherrill Milnes, when he has a tricky entrance with no introduction," said Gay, "fix things so that he is facing stage right, picks a time to turn 180 degrees, sweeping the orchestra pit as he goes, and then sings and the conductor can see what he's going to do. But you simply can do nothing which might distract the audience from the composer's forward motion.

"There are two kinds of ideas which Mozart shows us in the singers' heads," he said, "The simple kinds, such as we did in 'Così,' like 'I'll go over now and open the window,' and the more complex emotional ones which have to take place on the face." He illustrated this with the many twists and turns of thought in Count Almaviva's Act II recitative from Mozart's "Figaro."

"Do you hear that oboe entrance? That's an idea in the Count's mind! A new idea. Sometimes you can see the light bulb go on in the baritone's head. Mozart does that with the Countess, too, in her first aria, 'Porgi amor.' You hear that wrenching dissonant passage which comes in in the bassoons just before the end (just before her last 'O mi rende il mio tesoro. . .'), and you know, that is a terrible pain in her heart. I find it almost impossible not to cry whenever I hear that. These ideas were very real to Mozart. We have to make them real to the audience."