

SYMPOSIUM

'What Touches People Is When We Sing from Our Hearts and Our Souls'

The two-day tribute to Sylvia Olden Lee concluded with a symposium on "The Aesthetic Education of Humanity Through Music." The following dialogue—between bass-baritone Simon Estes and Dennis Speed, with a tribute from mezzo-soprano Elvira Green—was a part of the symposium. The event was held at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, on Friday, June 30, 2017.

Dennis Speed: We are now going to have a conversation. I may have had a Catholic upbringing, but I don't consider myself the Grand Inquisitor. This is Simon Estes ... [applause] I think everybody knows this man!

There are many things that come to mind, but I first would like you, sir, to tell us all about your deep familiarity, from the age of two, of Classical music—or not!

Simon Estes: Well I would start saying, I didn't know anything about—really, that's not quite true. I grew up in a little town in Iowa, called Centerville, and it was about 8,000 people there, and a lot of people came in from, really, many different countries, because of the coal mines. My father came from Virginia, but his father, my grandfather was slave. Sold for \$500. I have pictures of him. My father came to Centerville—he was born in 1891; my mother was born 1910. They were nineteen years different, but they had a beautiful marriage, and I have three wonderful older sisters. I was the last, little scrawny child to come along.

But we had a musical home. Had my mother not been born in 1910, I believe she would have been one of the greatest singers at the Met, the Metropolitan Opera House. She had an incredible voice, incredible range. She could sing soprano, and she could sing mezzo, and she could sing alto, and when she was about eighty-nine years of age, she could sing a low D that I sing as a bass, and that's absolutely true. [laughter]

God had given her this exceptional voice. In our

home, we didn't have Classical music, but my oldest sister had a great voice, too; she played piano, and she played a lot of Chopin and Grieg. So I did have a little introduction to Classical music, but I didn't really know anything about it until I went to the University of Iowa. I graduated out of high school in 1956, and when I was in junior high school, the high school choral director asked the principal of the junior high school if I could come sing in the high school choir. And that was allowed, and I went over, and I sang first soprano, in the soprano section—until my senior year. [laughter] I played basketball and track, and football, all the sports.

What's Opera?

When we went for rehearsal,— football practice starts before classes begin, because sports are more important than music [laughter], and so I went to football practice, and then we had a choral rehearsal, with Don Gunderson, who was the choir director at Centerville High School. So I went to sing something, "aarghh"—nothing really came out! And Don Gunderson, the choir director, sent me to a doctor, because I was eighteen years of age, and he assumed my voice was never going to change, and I didn't know anything about singing, except just singing.

So I go to a family doctor, and he looked in my throat; all he did, he had to take his little wooden stick and looked in there. And he said, "Well, I don't think there's anything wrong with your throat." I didn't think he even saw my vocal chords, but he said, "I have a feeling, your voice is changing." And that's what happened. When I sang first soprano, I could hit an octave higher than high C, that the sopranos sang. I'm not saying this to try and impress you, because God gave me the gift anyhow; but I could do that.

So I sang in the choir. Then I went to the University of Iowa in 1957. I went one year to a community college in Centerville in 1956, and then I transferred to the University of Iowa. I thought, "Well, I'll be a doctor,

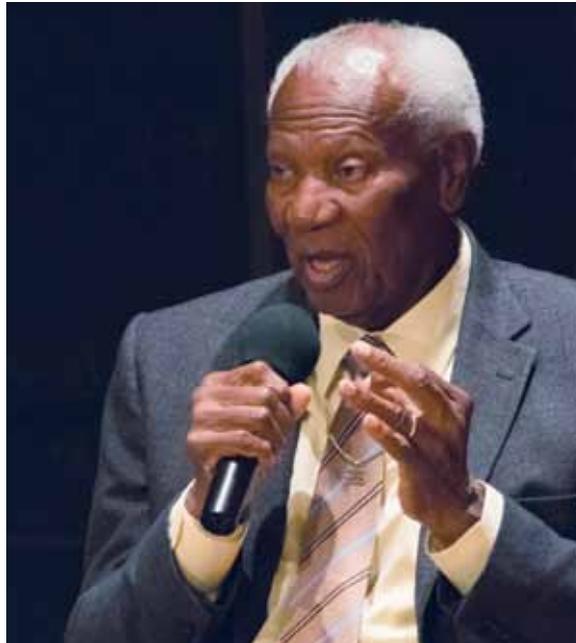
and then I can't sing any more." So, I went pre-med, and a voice teacher came to the University of Iowa, and heard me singing. Had it not been for him—his name was Charles Kellis—I wouldn't be sitting here today. I wanted to sing in the University choir, back in the mid to late 1950s, and I went to the choir director. I won't mention his name—he's deceased, but nonetheless, he was the head of the voice department and the main choral director. I said to him, "I'd like to sing in the University choir." They had three hundred voices, and he said, "No, your voice isn't good enough." And I said,— I was very naive, incidentally, but I said, "You're the head of the voice department; can I take voice lessons with you?" He said, "No, no! I wouldn't waste my time with you. You don't have any talent." [laughter]

So he said, "However, there's a young voice teacher coming here, and maybe he will take you." I said, "Well, OK," because all I wanted to do was sing. And that was this man, Charles Kellis, who came out there in 1961. He heard me singing in a choral group called the Old Gold Singers, and he said, "You know, you have a voice to sing opera," and having come from Centerville, Iowa, I said, "What's opera?" [laughter]

This is all absolutely true. So he loaned me some recordings, those big thirty-three and a third [rpm records]—Cesare Siepi, who was a terrible Italian bass! [laughter] I say that to be facetious, because he was the greatest to me. I heard that recording, and he gave me a recording of Leontyne Price, Maria Callas, Jerome Hines, and a symphonic work, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, because he wanted me to hear this type of music. So I listened to them, and when I took them back to Mr. Kellis, I said, "I really like that stuff!" I just called it "stuff." [laughter]

He started giving me voice lessons, and he said, "You know, you really can be an opera singer." And at

that time I didn't—I changed my major four times, incidentally, at the University of Iowa. I always tell students, "do as I say, not as I did"; but he got me into music. I thank God that he sent this man out to Centerville, Iowa to discover me, because otherwise I wouldn't have known anything about opera, or Classical music. And I'm sure most of you at my age— I'll be eighty years of age in a few months [applause], but I had been really blessed. And I pray to God, and I thank God for



Schiller Institute/Jason Ross

Simon Estes at the June 30, 2017 symposium, which concluded the two-day tribute to Sylvia Olden Lee.

the talent that he gave Bach and Brahms, and Beethoven, Schubert, and Verdi and Wagner, and Strauss, and Puccini, all of these great composers, that I didn't even know existed in Centerville, Iowa. And I've had the humbling honor of having sung all of those works. I've sung one hundred two roles in opera; I've probably sung fifty-five orchestral works; I've done most of Bach's works, and Haydn's *Creation*, Haydn's *The Seasons*—all because God gave talent to these great men. I think women would have had it, too, but unfortunately, the reality is they were men.

And of course, we all know, all the pieces that Bach wrote, at the end, he always said, "To the Glory of God." And God is a giver of all talent, whether you are a singer, or Michael Jordan—he received those talents. Because—stop and think of those composers—because I've lived in Europe more than half my life. I lived in Europe since 1965, and two of my daughters were born in Switzerland, and one in the States. I went to the places where Bach played the organ in Eisenach and where Wagner wrote *Tannhäuser*, to experience—there's something that you feel when you're around these areas where these great people composed music.

Messengers of Peace and Love

The reason I say that talent really comes from God: Think of these composers that wrote symphonies at six and seven years of age. They had never gone to kinder-

garten; they never went to elementary school, let alone a conservatory or Juilliard; but God gave them the talent to write this music, and I think all of us, who can sing, and play this music, we are indeed blessed, because this period [applause]—thank you, cousin, because it all comes from God. I don't think this period will ever be repeated again, going back to the Baroque period and the Romantic period and the Classical period; all of these great composers that we get to enjoy today as singers and as instrumentalists, we are very blessed and very fortunate.

So, because of Charles Kellis, who came to the University of Iowa, I sang one hundred two roles in opera; I've sung with one hundred fifteen different orchestras, all around the world—and that's not to try to impress you—and eighty-four different opera houses. And all because of a little Greek man named Kiriakos, Charles Kellis, came to the University of Iowa.

As for this teacher who said I had no talent, and I couldn't even sing in a choir of three hundred voices: After I had been singing, he retired and went to San Antonio and was teaching privately. I had been invited to sing with the orchestra in San Antonio, Texas. And I sang the “*Fort auf das Meer*” in *The Flying Dutchman*, and Wotan arias. After the performance, he came up to me and he said, “Well, Simon, I see you've done quite well for yourself.” [laughter] And he walked away, and some of my colleagues said, “Why don't you wipe him out?” I said “No, it wasn't necessary.” I said, “that took a lot of *Mut*, chutzpah, for him to come back and just say, ‘well, you've done quite well for yourself.’”

I do really feel very blessed. My mother and my father taught me humility, and my sisters and I want all of you to know, I'm not trying to tell you how to live your spiritual lives. But I love the Lord, and I know he gave this talent to me, and before I sing, I always pray and ask God that somebody's heart will be touched in the audience, to love Him and to love one another.

I think we are really messengers of peace and love through music. When I work with students, there's one thing,—I know how important vocal technique is—but I said, “Sing from your heart. That's what touches people, when we sing from our hearts and our souls.” And I cannot tell all of you here, how blessed and humble I am, to think that I've had this honor of having sung with all of these great orchestras in the world, in

America, going back to Eugene Ormandy, Erich Leinsdorf, Leonard Bernstein; and sung with people like Birgit Nilsson, Joan Sutherland, and Leontyne Price; the tenors—I've sung with all the great tenors. We forget about some of the other tenors like Carlo Bergonzi, and Nicolai Gedda, and these people; I sang with those guys in addition to the “three tenors”—what're their names? [laughter]

But I've learned a lot, and sang with Birgit Nilsson, as Wotan and she did Brünnhilde; and I don't want to tell you a compliment she gave me, because I don't like to boast, and I was taught never to do that; but I was very touched by something that she said to me and Leontyne Price. I want to ask all of you a question, it's not going to be a test, but just a question. Do you know who the first composer was? [After a pause, several people said, “God.”]

Well, God, yes, but in human form! We know that God came down here in the form of Jesus Christ, and said, “God be with you.” So let's put it this way: Who was the first person that God gave talent to for music and to compose music? [Several: “King David.”]

King David! That's right. “Little David, play on your harp, hallelu, hallelu.” When Saul was going crazy, who did he call upon? [Audience: “David.”] David. He played the lyre, the harp—that's how long ago that music got started. And I think one of the earliest composers I sang was Monteverdi, his opera, *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* [Ulysses' Return to His Homeland]. But all through that, I've sung all these great composers, and so, I just want you to know that I thank God for this journey that He's put me on. When we talked privately, you wanted me to mention a little bit about my life, so that's enough about my life. What do you want to go to now?

Speed: Sure. But, Mr. Kellis was there last night.

Estes: He was there last night, ninety years of age! [applause] And he's still doing well, because he's married to a young lady, forty-five years younger than he is. [much laughter] She's from Poland and has a beautiful voice. [laughter]

Speed: [joking] We're going to TMI [too much information] now! [more laughter]

Speed: OK, but in passing, you said something about your grandfather, who was born in 1837, it was one hundred eighty years ago.

Estes: Yes, one hundred eighty years ago. I have pictures of my grandfather and grandmother. Slaves, sold for \$500—yes.

The Power of Prayer

Speed: Obviously, knowing that, and having the career you had— But at the same time, there’s something else we should certainly touch upon, especially with this audience, which is the discrimination and racism that Sylvia, and you, and George Shirley, and others had to fight, to be able to get up and sing at all, in these places. And we know people like Bill Warfield just, you know, didn’t even try to deal with it.

Tell us something about how both of you confronted it—what that was, how you confronted it, and what you think about that issue today?

Michelle Rasmussen, Schiller Institute, Denmark: Were you rejected from the college choir because you were Black?

Estes: Yes. Just to be quite honest, yes. But, you know, my parents taught me at a young age to follow the philosophy of Jesus, Who was a man of love. And so, when I was in high school in Centerville, Iowa—now keep in mind, I was born in 1938—if I would come home, as an example I’ll give you, I would tell my mother that a white boy called me the “n-word” or he hit me; my mother said, “Well, now, son, you get down on your knees and you pray for that boy.” But when you’re seven or eight years of age, you think there’s something wrong with your mother’s mind! [laughter] And so you say, “Mother, but wait a minute, he called me the n-word, and he hit me.” My mother said, “You get down on your knees, and you pray for that boy.”

In 1971, when I started singing opera, I was living here in New York, and I called my mother, and I’m not ashamed to admit it, I was in tears. I said, “Mother, I’ve sung in Paris, in London, in Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg,”—I’d even sung in Australia, at that point—and I said, “they won’t let me sing in some of the opera houses in my own country.” And I was crying. And she said, “Well, son, get down on your knees,” [laughter] “and you pray.” And after that, I sang in Chicago, San Francisco, eventually at the Met, in Boston, and so on, and I sang in most of the opera houses, Seattle, Portland, Oregon—kind of all over. But there was—and I regret and say this with great sadness—there still is discrimination.

I remember the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated. I was in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, singing a *Lieder* recital. I had the TV on while I was getting dressed, and there was Walter Cronkite, of course, and he said “Martin Luther King has been shot.” And five minutes later—I’m sure you have seen this many times—he took his glasses off, “Martin Luther King is dead.”

I realized when I went out for my recital, I had to change it, because I didn’t feel like singing any jovial songs. And the people in Canada, they had a reception for me afterwards, and they said, “Why don’t you come and live in Canada, because we won’t discriminate against you.” And I said, “No, because I’m going to stay in my country and fight the battle to try to win equality.” I told them,—because at that time we had about ten million African American people—I said, “If they come to Canada you’ll have a problem, too. Not that we are intrinsically the problem, but there’s just a difference. So, I will not give up my citizenship, but I will stay and continue the struggle.”

Skinny Colored Kid from Centerville

And so the way I have endured discrimination has been without bitterness, without hate, but love can conquer everything. Love can do that. [applause] I’m not saying that Germany and Italy and France and Spain and Russia and Poland, all these places where I’ve sung, they’re perfect. But in Germany, when I first started my singing career, I sang Ramfis [the high priest] in [Verdi’s] *Aida* in 1965—April 19th, I will not forget that date. They would judge someone more on, as Martin Luther King said, the quality of their character, but [in this case we should say] the quality of the voice. Because they have makeup, they can make somebody look like ET if they want to today. [laughter] And I remember when I did the Ramfis in Berlin, I sang with Richard Cassilly; I’m sure you know Richard Cassilly. He was Radames, and Gloria Davy, African American soprano, sang *Aida*; Ruth Hesse sang Amneris. They made me up—and this is really true—as white as snow [laughter]. And I remember I was sitting in the makeup chair and looked in the mirror, and I said, “If my mother could only see me now!” [laughter] But I went ahead and sang.

Can I tell you another little story? Mr. Kellis—he always called me “Simoné’,”—his parents were both born in Greece, and of course he was a Greek and an

American—he said, you need to go to an all-musical school. So he arranged an audition for me at Juilliard School of Music. Now, having come from Centerville, Iowa, I didn't understand the magnitude of Juilliard School of Music. I look back on it now, and I realize it was a blessing; because I came up to New York, I'd never been on an airplane before—this was 1963, and I was more excited about seeing the tall buildings, than just this “Juilliard School of Music,” or whatever it was. So I sang the audition. Some of you remember the name Sergius Kagen; he was there, and I had a coaching session with him. I finished my three songs—in fact I did King Philip's aria from [Verdi's] *Don Carlo*, and I did “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” and one of the *Vier Ernste Gesänge* song [by Brahms]s.

I finished singing, and they said, “Would you just wait outside the door, there?” That was up on 125th Street, the old Juilliard. And I went out, and I was just sniffing the halls—they smelled great to me. [laughter] No, they really did; it was fascinating! And I didn't know, still, the importance of Juilliard. After about ten minutes they called me back in, and I go in—I was a little, skinny colored kid from Centerville, Iowa—and they said, “Well, you know, we want to give you a full scholarship to come to Juilliard.” And I said, “Oh, thanks.” [laughter] I didn't really know ...! And Mr. Kellis had told them my financial status, and they said, “And we'll get you a Martha Baird Rockefeller Family grant.” I thought, some Rockefeller, dealing rocks,— I didn't know ... [laughter]

But I look back on that now, and it was a blessing that I was so naive, because I didn't have enough—we say, “sense”— but I didn't have enough knowledge to be nervous singing at the Juilliard School of Music. It was like singing in the colored Second Baptist Church in Centerville, Iowa; we got a group of people sitting there, and you just go out and sing! So I went and sang my pieces and left! So I tell that, because knowing what I know now, I would have been a nervous wreck, auditioning Juilliard.

The Universe Will Keep Us Singing

So the way I conquered the racial—not conquered—but the way I worked on the racial situation was through courage, determination, no bitterness. And I do believe in science and I do believe in facts, so when I would talk about it—and I would get a lot of interviews about it, in

Europe as well as in the United States—I would just say, back in the middle-1960s when I started my career,— I remember when I was singing out in Salem, Washington, a recital, and they said, “Why aren't you singing at the Met?” I said—and I don't bring up this topic—but I said, “Well, there are sociological reasons.” And they kept pressing me, and so I said, “Well, how many singers of color, and especially males, do we have singing leading roles at the Metropolitan Opera?” “Well, you're wrong, there's uh, uh, there's Leontyne Price ...” and I said, “Yes.” “Uh, uh, Martina Arroyo.” “Yes, yes.” I said, “How many men?” “Well, there's uh, uh...” and they didn't remember George Shirley, but George was there.

So I explained, I said, “there is a problem there, but I would rather not go into it. This is a reception, after my recital, I don't want,”—because, I'm sorry to say, they were all Caucasian—“I don't want to mess up the reception.” So, my whole career, my life, I realized I had to be well prepared because I couldn't be, as a human being, equal with a white colleague. I had to be better. Not that I was intrinsically, and I'm not any better, and I've never in my life, ever said that I was great, because I would never say that about myself. I just go out and try to do the job.

But I conquered it with prayer; I would pray. I listened to my mother and took her advice. And I grew up in a family that, economically speaking, we were poor. We didn't have electricity in our house; when I was a little boy, we had coal oil lamps, and we didn't have running water in my house—in Iowa it gets cold in the winter—until my sophomore year in high school. But we had faith, we had courage, we had compassion, and we had forgiveness. So that's what has enabled me to overcome a lot of the racial discrimination.

And I always was very sad for Paul Robeson. I knew his son and I sang in a great concert once, honoring Paul Robeson. And Bill Warfield—I could almost cry right now—he never sang at the Met. And he should have sung there, but he didn't get a chance.

So, I tell all of my young African American men, “don't give up. You just can't give up.” Just work hard, study hard, don't become bitter, because then you damage your own heart, and that heart is the source of love and where blood comes, and that's where we're supposed to sing from, and play the piano from.

When I came to Juilliard—something else interest-

ing, and I hope you won't be upset with me (I'm thinking of the voice teacher, Carmela Altamura, there in the audience), I bought hardly any recordings of singers. I bought piano recordings of Rudolph Serkin, Rubinstein, Glenn Gould—pianists—and I would just sit and listen to the [Bach] Goldberg Variations that Gould played, that first recording! I would listen to it so much, I think I could have sung all of them! And Rubinstein. Once in a while he hit a wrong note, but you know what? Didn't matter, because what did he do? He played from his heart. And that's what touched the people.

And I bought symphonic,— I used to listen to the Mahler Fifth Symphony so many times, and especially the Adagio movement. I used to listen to Samuel Barber's famous *Adagio for Strings*. This is where I learned my musicianship, from these great artists. And then, as my career,— Incidentally, Horowitz was almost my neighbor in New York, and I remember him. But I don't know why it was, that I just listened to symphonic and piano music, and very few singers.

To answer your question about the racism, unfortunately, it does still exist, and I really hope and pray that the day will come, when the only "color" there will be, will be the way somebody colors their voice, or the way they make beautiful, colorful music and sounds with the piano and the violin!

I was so honored to have known Isaac Stern, because you know, at one point they were going to tear down Carnegie Hall—some of you who are in advanced years, like I am, will remember—and Isaac Stern came, and I sang in a concert, and we saved Carnegie Hall. I have a medal saying, "Help Save Carnegie Hall."

We just have to keep on struggling, and I just hope the day will come when we don't see color. I believe that God made us all of a different skin color, different shapes of our eyes, to test the character of us as human beings: Can we fail to love someone just because they don't look the same way we do? I think He's testing us. And those of us, if we want to win and get an A on the

test, we are going to have to love one another. And we're going to have to forgive! [applause]

Speed: What I'd like to do, and—Eve, are you here? Come down. And Gregory Hopkins, get up here, I need you up here. Simon, please stay here on the stage. And is Elvira here? Come up on the stage. Mr. Ray is here. And others? I don't know who else is out there, and since I don't know, forgive me because I'm just going with names I could call.

What I'd like to do,— let's take up the discussion from last night, and as a whole, especially from what Simon has just raised. Not merely the issue of discrimi-

nation but the issue of creating a great culture in the United States, which African Americans have always been at the center of, actually. What would be needed? And thinking about Sylvia in that regard.

Elvira Green: I think as long as we are conscious of who we are in this existence as musicians, as lovers of music, of people who are interested in feeling the love and comfort of the young voice as it is being saved, for a long singing career! That we pay attention, as Simon has said—may I say, Simon?

Estes: Of course!

Green: As Simon has said, we take what it is for which we live in this life, and infuse it in what we love in this life, which is music. That will then broaden the scope of who we are as the human person. It will broaden the desire of who we are as people who love music. We never, as I said yesterday, we should never reach the point that we no longer consider ourselves a student of the master's work, a student of the work that Sylvia created through her touch of the master's hand. And if we don't pigeon-hole ourselves in anyplace, then the universe will allow us to enhance our knowledge as human beings, enhance our knowledge as musicians, and keep us singing—forever. That's how I feel about this. [applause]



Schiller Institute/Jason Ross

Elvira Green participated in the symposium.