

INTERVIEW

Betty Allen

President, Harlem School of the Arts

'Children have the right to Classical education'

Betty Allen, mezzo-soprano, was born in Campbell, Ohio in 1930. She studied at Wilberforce University of Ohio, the Hartford Conservatory, and privately with Sarah Peck More, Zinka Milanov, and Carolina Segrera. Her opera debut took place in 1964 at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, in 1973 at the New York City Opera, and in 1974 at the Metropolitan Opera. Since 1979 she has been Executive Director and now President of the Harlem School of the Arts (H.S.A.) in New York, and teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and Curtis Institute. This interview was conducted by Kathy Wolfe on March 15, 1993.



niques used to "round" the voice, elevate it into its lawful place, and vibrate the tone. By the end of the week, literally everyone in the conservatory had begun to sing.

The high point of the week's workshops came when Director Fakhoury, himself an accomplished musician and composer from Lebanon, applied the concepts to the string orchestra of the conservatory. The orchestra, which includes tots who are just beginners as well as accomplished students and their teachers, was asked to perform the first movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto at the common pitch of A = 440 Hz and then at the scientific tuning of A = 432 (C = 256). Students and teachers immediately heard the musical difference in the clear articulation of voices, which made it possible for each instrument to be heard.

To translate the point Mrs. Jones had been stressing all week with individual string students, Fakhoury had the orchestra "sing" its music. First, he asked the players to put down their instruments and sing their parts for the first movement. Then, he had them sing and play their parts at the same time. Finally, he had them play only, but continuing to "sing in the head." The qualitative leap made by the orchestra through this exercise, performed at the lower tuning, was astounding. Students were thrilled, as the piece suddenly came alive. Most important was the fact that each orchestra member could fully hear, as a sovereign musical voice in dialogue with other musical voices, his or her own voice. This revolutionized the self-conception of each component.

Fakhoury seized on this feature, and commented, "At the higher tuning, every musician feels overshadowed by the first violin, which is dominant, whereas at C = 256, every voice is heard." Transposing the musical fact into social terms, he added, "It is as if the lower tuning allowed everyone in the orchestra to play a crucial role, and to hear that this crucial role is grasped. Society," he said, "is like an orchestra, in which each individual has a very important part to play."

Fidelio: What's your view of the Schiller Institute campaign to return musical tuning to C = 256 Hz, the lower "Verdi A"?

Allen: I'm very curious about it, my mind is open, I'm interested to know more about what the project will entail. I would never say "I don't want to know."

For example, one pianist, an accompanist at H.S.A. said, when I posed the idea of returning to the old lower pitch, "Do you know how much trouble this is going to cause? I don't even want to hear this! I don't want to read

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about it, take part in it, or even to know about it!" Because he has perfect pitch, at least at today's pitch of A = 440 Hz.

My response is a bit different, because I indeed *do* know how much trouble the whole issue is—since this is not my first experience with changes in the pitch! As a student I encountered a big controversy over the *raising* of the pitch, at the Boston Symphony.

I went to Tanglewood in 1951, on a full scholarship to sing with the chorus. When I got there, I realized their pitch was much higher than what I'd been used to in college in Ohio, in fact it was up to A = 444. The conductor Serge Koussevitsky had done it well before I got there, during the 1940's, because he said he wanted the brightest, most lively sound in the world. So he raised the pitch to A = 444! And of course he caused great confusion to all the musicians coming through. Every violinist who visited Tanglewood complained about how tight and wired-up their strings were at A = 444. The official piano at Tanglewood was Baldwin, but the artists who came through sometimes brought their own pianos or if they were Steinway artists had to bring in Steinway pianos, and every one of them had to have their pianos tuned up to A = 444.

In singing the Beethoven *Missa Solennis*, a most difficult piece, in which the soprano hangs in the highest *tessitura*, I recall people complaining strongly. They felt that they were having to sing this almost a half-step too high, that it felt as though when they were singing the repeated B \flat 's and B's, they were really having to sing B's and C's!

It really bothered the tenors and sopranos—and it bothered the basses badly, in the high passages; everybody was in a flap about it. The choral director had absolute pitch, and he was utterly distraught, since in his head he was being forced to transpose *up* all the time. So he'd go around shouting "heee-ho," giving the Tanglewood pitch, and then screaming that it was wrong, singing his lower pitch. But

everyone had to adjust, because this was the Boston Symphony, and they'd announced, "This is our pitch, and therefore you'll do it or die."

Fidelio: How did you end up at Tanglewood?

Allen: I had five years of Latin in high school and two years of German, and when I got to Wilberforce my German was so good that the professor made me his assistant and I got a scholarship. I started out in pre-med, doing invertebrate zoology. I thought I was going to be a doctor like my grandfather.

I started singing accidentally. When they asked me as a freshman, "What can you do?" I said, well I can sing a

little song; I'd sung in church choir and in high school chorus. I got to liking singing more and more, and the more I sang the more they asked me. Finally, they asked me to join their touring group, the Wilberforce Singers. The alto was Leontyne Price! And I was the soprano. At the end of the second year I decided I wanted to go to music school.

I used to work summers in Hartford, Connecticut. One of my friends told me about this wonderful lady who came up to Hartford one day a week to teach private voice lessons, Sarah Peck More. She wouldn't have anything to do with the schools, she was very particular about that. I sang for



Above: Dorothy Maynor. Below: Outside the Harlem School of the Arts.

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her, and then I left Wilberforce and came to Hartford and began studying with her privately, and enrolled at what's now Hartford Conservatory for all my non-singing musical classes. While I was in Hartford, Miss More sent me to sing for the choral conductor at Tanglewood, Hugh Ross. He had me sight read the inner lines of choruses, and gave me a chorus scholarship to Tanglewood.

Tanglewood was a big beginning for me. It was the first place I'd been where music was made honorable, where nobody laughed at me for wanting to be a musician. It was the first time in my life that someone said to me that it was all right to pursue music as an actual career, something which grown people do. Until then it was something I did for the fun of it.

Fidelio: How did you meet Dorothy Maynor?

Allen: We all knew about Dorothy and the H.S.A. even while I was in school. Everyone knew Dorothy Maynor, Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson, they were our famous quartet.

Fidelio: And Miss Maynor founded the school in the recreation room of her husband's church?

Allen: Yes, she founded the Harlem School of the Arts in 1964, to bring beauty into the lives of children in Harlem, to develop their minds. She used to say, "the music lover was the first astronaut, because through music we raise ourselves above the cares of this world. Music provides the wings upon which we soar."

When she started H.S.A., she was teacher, administrator, and janitor, with only twenty students, first in piano, then music theory and *bel canto* singing. She posted notices in local schools saying children could register that Saturday if accompanied by a parent, and there was a stampede! She didn't want them to feel they were charity cases, so she set fees, but at 50¢, or even 10¢, so anyone could afford it. With all the students wanting to attend, soon she had to hire two more teachers, for dance and for painting.

By the late 1960's she had 500 students.

Fidelio: Did you study or perform with Miss Maynor?

Allen: No, she began to call me when she was looking for a successor to run the school, many years later. I did sing one concert for her, a benefit to raise money for H.S.A., at the Cosmopolitan Club, where both she and I were members; and she spoke there about the school. I have no idea how she lit on me exactly; she had her own ways of finding things out. I think our ideas did coincide, philosophically, about children, about the arts, about the need for the arts in the community, the need for the arts as a civilizing factor in peoples' lives, and all those things I articulated in public every now and then. She insisted upon the family unit as a strong core, in which I also believed.

She came to me because I was a singer, she wanted another singer to take over when she left, but I had no experience. I asked her whether she'd rather not have an administrator, and she looked very disdainful and said, "Nobody would follow anyone like that! I want someone to inspire children, to make them think that the arts are wonderful, make them look for something exciting and uplifting in the arts, and an administrator would not be someone who'd necessarily inspire children!"

I said, "But I've had no business administration courses, not even any education courses." And she said "Well, you run your own home, don't you? Then you can run the school—if you just imagine that this is your home and you treat it lovingly and carefully and kindly, as though it were your home, and take care of it and see it is never mistreated." I kept saying, "I don't know if I could," but she just refuted everything I said, and answered, "Yes, I think you can." This was at our first meeting.

I began during the summer of 1979 to come in as an adjunct to her, coming in to work along with her for a while. She was a very hard act to follow, those were very big shoes to fill. The school at the time was somewhat insular and

didn't have a great many performing units. It was a well-kept secret at the time, because Miss Maynor never intended the children to have to become performers. I, on the other hand, think that no child can practice and work without having a venue to show what they've learned; to practice an hour a day and never have the opportunity to show the results. At that time the school was relatively small, the number of children was one-third of today, as was the budget, which at the time was \$500,000 (it's \$1.8 million now). There were 500 children. Now there are 1,500, so there's been quite a growth.

Fidelio: Please tell us about the H.S.A.'s programs today.

Allen: One very important thing which Miss Maynor began just before she left was "Arts in Education," or "Opportunities for Learning in the Arts," O.L.A. as we call it now. You know that the public school systems in New York and elsewhere in the U.S. have dropped music and other arts programs because of the budget crisis in the cities. Up through 1975, 1976, there were music and arts teachers in every school in the New York system, but in 1976, these programs were all simply stopped, the city funding stopped. By 1977 when we began our program here, there were no music or arts teachers left in the elementary schools in New York.

Fidelio: What do you think about the fact that the creditors of New York City, the bankers, did that?

Allen: I think the whole thing shows a remarkable lack of insight into what true education is. What this did in an area like Harlem was particularly devastating. Not only did the children lose out on the arts programs, but they lost the chance to gain in self-esteem, to be individuals, to think things through, to do things better, the incentive to solve problems, to doing that with the thought processes, to feel you could improve, to have a role model to show you how to improve—all of these things which come through the arts, were taken away. A more be-

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nighted section of the city did not exist than Harlem or Brooklyn or the Bronx, where the children were already made to feel that they were not as good students as others, that they wrote poorly, did poorly in reading, didn't understand math or sciences. None of these roads to discipline, to self-knowledge and self-worth, were open to them.

We all see the lack of incentive, dedication, and commitment in the schools, which I believe the arts used to give to young people.

Fidelio: So Miss Maynor decided to take up the slack?

Allen: Yes, she decided H.S.A. must try to pick up what the public school system had dropped in New York, in this community at least. She began with a \$300,000 grant from CBS, and we have extended the program.

We teach singing, general music, drama, poetry, creative writing, and dance. They write their own poems and plays. And the visual arts, as you've seen around the building, paintings, masks, and so on.

Fidelio: How many children from the school system do you now bring in?

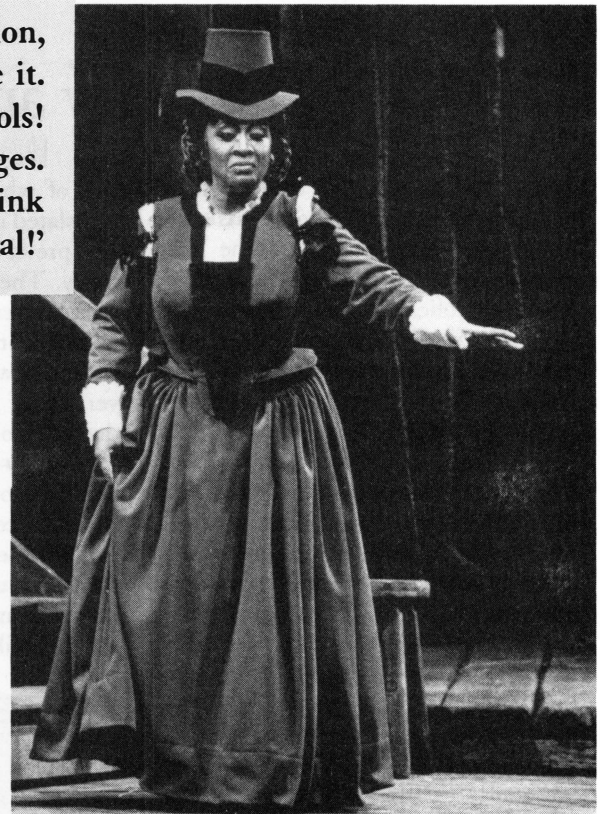
Allen: Slightly under 300, last year it was about 350, for the whole school year, from four schools, all elementary schools. If I could get pre-school I would! All between first and third grade! The younger you get them, the better! If you wait until fifth grade, they're lost to you. If you do not instill them with ideas, uplift them, then they will never understand that the arts are a part of their lives, if you wait until they're in junior high school or senior high (although we do have a

program for especially talented junior high or senior high school children).

Fidelio: The Schiller Institute is working closely with the Civil Rights movement, because we believe every child in the world has the civil right to this kind of an education. What's your view?

Allen: I believe that very strongly, that all children *do* have the right to what I call a Classical education. And it amazes me that American Blacks or African-Americans feel, that if you have this kind of education, that you are somehow perverting your rights as a Black. I don't feel that. No African fails to go to Oxford because he thinks it's going to subvert his rights! Think about that! No Jamaican or Trinidadian who travels to Cambridge feels that that has subverted his rights. He or she goes and is educated and still believes himself or herself to be a patriotic, educated, Trinidadian or African.

But we somehow have gotten so wrapped up that we feel if we get an education, if we gain another tool—then somehow we've forgotten who we are! I don't think feeling this is necessary. I have the *right* to the broadest possible education—and I've had it in my lifetime, and I want all the children I know to have it! I don't want only one tool—I want twenty tools! I don't want one language, I want twenty languages. I can speak five languages and I think it helps me a great deal!



Ken Howard

Betty Allen as Dame Quickly in Verdi's Falstaff.

That was what was so wonderful about growing up in a multilingual American melting pot community; everyone understood all these languages. No one said, "The Polish people don't know anything," but rather we all enjoyed each other's wonderful backgrounds. And that's exactly what we should be doing now, instead of fighting each other.

That's the whole problem with Political Correctness, with people saying you can only do so and so, if you want to be such and such. I don't think it's true; it certainly isn't true for me. Every child must be brought up to have the broadest possible education. If you then reject something, you may reject it—but not out of ignorance, out of knowledge. You may say, "Well, I know about this, and I don't wish to have to do with it." That's your right. But *don't* say: "I don't know, I've never seen, I've never heard, I can't speak—and don't want to!" That is stupidity.