

## INTERVIEW

### Maestro Carlo Bergonzi

# Return to the Verdi tuning, 'or opera could be finished!'

*Born at Polisene, near Parma, Italy, Carlo Bergonzi debuted in Italy as a baritone in 1948, and as a tenor in 1951, and in the U.S. at the Metropolitan Opera in 1956 as Radames in "Aida." During his 45-year world career, the beloved tenor has championed bel canto, and fought against the modern rise in pitch.*

*Following his farewell performance of "L'Elisir d'Amore" at the Baltimore Opera in March, 1993, Maestro Bergonzi traveled to New York to help bring out the Schiller Institute's new textbook, "A Manual on Tuning and Registration," which documents the need to return to Guiseppe Verdi's A of 432 Hz. On April 6, he taped a master class and interview on the Verdi A at WQXR-Radio FM in New York (which aired later on June 9), and on April 8, he gave a sold-out public master class, "Return to the Verdi Tuning!" at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, sponsored by the Institute. On April 6, Maestro Bergonzi spoke with Fidelio's Kathy Wolfe and Nora Hamerman.*

**Fidelio:** Maestro, you have stressed that the "Verdi A-432" is the only *scientific* tuning. Can you tell our new readers why it's "scientific?"

**Bergonzi:** Certainly: Because it is the most *natural* one, because this A is the most natural for the *human* voice. Not only for Verdi's operas—but for the whole repertoire. The A-432 tuning is ideal for voices, because Verdi wrote for the registral passage. If the tuning is raised higher, this *passaggio* is moved around.

I have a letter from Verdi in 1884, in which he placed his own A at 432 Hz. He said, "this A must be the A for opera." This is why today we

no longer have truly Verdian voices, because of today's overly high tuning.

**Fidelio:** Do you think that the Schiller Institute's new textbook will help to lower the pitch to the Verdi A?

**Bergonzi:** I think so. I can

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only compliment the Schiller Institute for this initiative, because it is not understood that we are facing a very frightening situation. If we don't return to the natural lower tuning, we will no longer have the voices for singing opera! People have to understand this. They can insist on A-442, 446, 448—but remember, that we are losing a great, enormous cultural heritage, because today in 1993 we already can hear that the voices are really starting to be missing, absolutely.

Today you can no longer put together a cast as you should, for Verdi,



Erika Davidson

or even for Donizetti, even Puccini, if the tuning does not come down. This is very important. I admire this initiative of the Schiller Institute. In fact, if it had not been for the Schiller Institute initiative, just fighting to at least put a damper on this situation, today we'd be at A-450, or A-455!

**Fidelio:** Do you think it would be helpful to use the Schiller Institute's *Manual on Tuning* in the singing schools or high schools?

**Bergonzi:** Certainly. The Schiller Institute's *Music Manual* is, without any doubt, an excellent initiative. It is particularly important to raise the question of tuning in connection with *bel canto* technique, since today's high tuning misplaces all register shifts, and makes it very difficult for a singer to let the sound pass above the breath. The sound does not have enough space. When an F# becomes a G, an A<sup>b</sup> becomes an A<sup>♯</sup>, a B<sup>b</sup> becomes a B<sup>♯</sup>, and a C becomes a D<sup>b</sup>, what comes out is a false sound. It is difficult to distribute the sound, and to support it, because everything is misplaced almost half a tone—and the technique fails.

This is why it is correct to raise the issue of the Verdi tuning in connection with *bel canto* technique. Young voices coming to my Bel Canto Academy in Busseto, face serious problems later, when they start singing in the public opera theatres.

I also like the hypothesis in this *Manual* that instrumental music is an imitation, a derivation, of vocal music. Instrumental music, too, sounds false, when played at a high tuning. The sound is as unnatural in instruments, as it is in voices. A violin can play a high tone which is as dull and flat, as a sung high tone. In the attempt to sound more brilliant, a violin can produce a sound which is too tight, and not soft. What is true for the voice, is also true for instruments.

**Fidelio:** You've said that in the 1950's you regularly sang the original duet cadenza with the tenor's D above high C from *Lucia di Lamermoor*, which is not sung anymore. Many who sang at the Met in the 1950's remember the pitch at around A-435. They say voices were much richer. Do you remember the pitch being lower then?

**Bergonzi:** Yes, yes it was lower in the 1950's. Yes, I think it was around A-435 or A-438. We are saying that the composers are wrong—but we're the ones making the mistake!

**Fidelio:** Now, in Europe how high does it go? You said that in Vienna they were at A-450 a few years ago.

**Bergonzi:** Yes, yes! There are opera houses which even have A-452. La Scala is at A-442. Florence is very high, A-448. Because in Italian concert halls they don't have separate orchestras, the orchestra that plays symphonies also plays for the opera. So they tune their instruments up for the symphonies, to make the violin "vibrant."

For example, "Celeste Aida." This aria at the beginning of *Aida* is frightful for the tenor because it is one of the most beautiful arias, yet so difficult. At the Verdi A, you can still sing this aria at age seventy. At A-442, when you get to be about forty-five, you start thinking it over very carefully.

When Verdi wrote *Aida*, he wrote it for the lower pitch. He respected the *passagios* of the voices, and the human vocal chords. That explains why Giuseppe Verdi has written so many things, which today seem to hover right around the *passagio*—because he actually wrote them at the lower pitch. If he'd been at a tuning of A-442 or 444, he would never have written so much in this *tessitura*.

I explain this because it's our young people who are at stake. If you are studying singing at this high tuning, you have changed the entire vocal spectrum. If you sing on the *passagio* at F, you are actually singing an F#. That shifts the entire technique by a half-tone, from the low notes to the middle notes to the high notes. It is not the natural position.

The great conductor Tullio Serafin once said during the intermission of *Il Trovatore*, in a debate among friends, "They are starting to raise the tuning, and I'm sorry about one thing: the day will arrive, when true singers will no longer be heard. Instead of tenors, they will hear *castrati!*" I think that Maestro Serafin was a prophet.

The Verdi tuning is the one we need to develop young voices, and if we return to it, we will hear the great voices which existed at one time. If not, it could be that opera will be finished.

When I debuted, there were 100 tenors of the first category, and 100 of second rank, and those of the second rank at that time were better than the first rank tenors of today, because of the tuning question.

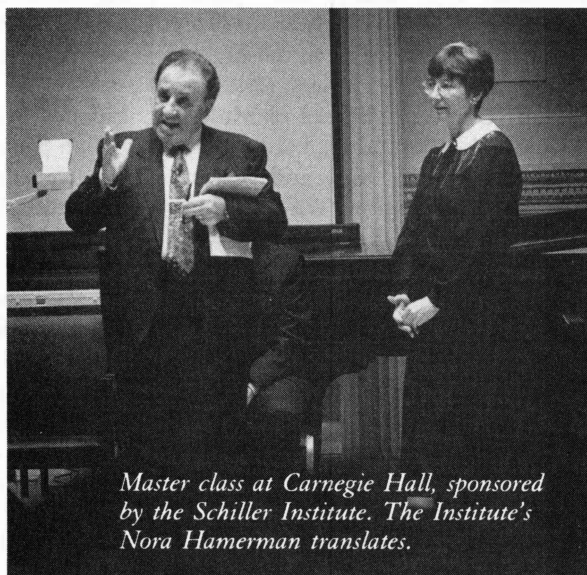
I don't say this to in-

sult anyone today, but to point out: What has changed today? It's the tuning! In 1951, there were 200 great tenors. Today, there are two and one-half!

**Fidelio:** Have you tried the Verdi A-432 at your Bel Canto Academy in Italy?

**Bergonzi:** For the moment, in my Academy I am using 440.

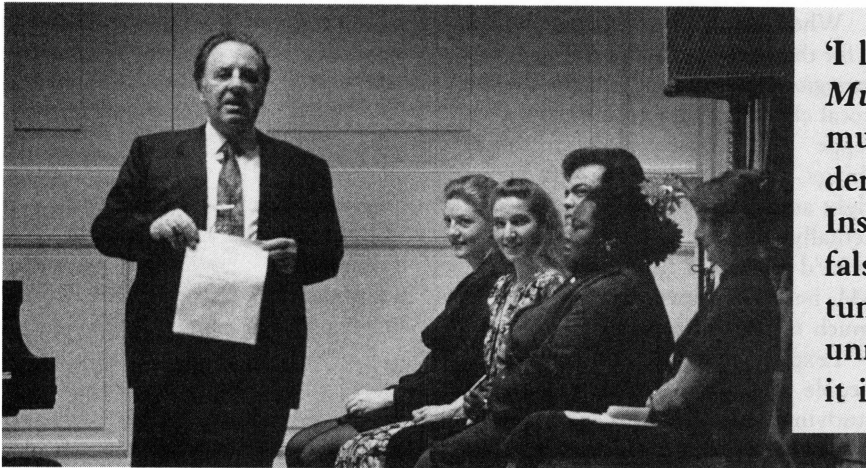
I cannot use the lower tuning, because afterward the students will go to sing elsewhere, and they will hurt themselves. What can one do? You are giving singing lessons. You use 432—then the poor fellow goes out to sing at 442, and what will he do? I use 440 or even a little lower, but lower than that I cannot use, for now.



Master class at Carnegie Hall, sponsored by the Schiller Institute. The Institute's Nora Hamerman translates.

EIFNS/Jessica Primack

**'If we don't return to the natural lower tuning, we will no longer have the voices for singing opera! You can no longer put together a cast for Verdi, or Donizetti, or even Puccini, if the tuning does not come down. And if it had not been for the Schiller Institutue initiative, we'd be at A-450 Hz or A-455 Hz today!'**



Master class, with student participants. The Institute's Kathy Wolfe is at right.

EIRNS Jessica Primack

**'I like the hypothesis in your *Music Manual* that instrumental music is an imitation, a derivation, of vocal music. Instrumental music also sounds false when played at a high tuning. The sound is as unnatural in instruments, as it is in voices.'**

**Fidelio:** What if we succeed in implementing the Verdi tuning, however, at the major conservatories?

**Bergonzi:** Yes, that's the point! Whenever I speak publicly about singing, I always say we have too high a tuning. At all the conservatories, at Boston [University School of Music], at Yale [School of Music], I always say, "We are tuning too high, and *we don't have the natural voices*. We can teach all we want, but if the tuning fork here does not come down, there is nothing we can do."

**Fidelio:** We must lower the pitch first at the *major* music schools, that's where the high pitch is imposed?

**Bergonzi:** Yes, necessarily. What's the use of teaching singing, if the big schools go on teaching at A-442? If their standard pitch does not come down, it's worthless. Students must study from the beginning at the natural tuning, that's the point!

The Schiller Institute should do these lectures in all the singing schools and conservatories in America! This is important. And we should give demonstrations, such as we did today on the radio, and as we will do April 8. You have to take this right into the singing schools, not just to the opera halls and the conductors.

For example, next month we'd go to Boston University and to Yale School of Music. The month after that, we'd go to Chicago, and then—wher-

ever there are singing schools! And then invite *all* the singing teachers. We should hold a conference for the singing teachers, and show the musical examples at A-442, and A-432. This is very important.

**Fidelio:** We had the petition to the Italian Senate to lower the pitch. Is it possible to re-start this now?

**Bergonzi:** Yes—insist, and never back down. Because you will end up losing your cause. If we want to save the vocal heritage, in which Italy is still in the first rank, we must adhere to the A-432 tuning. Italy has always been an exporter of voices and even though all the other nations are in difficulty like us, we are still the fatherland of *bel canto*, and I think that it's also in the government's interest to safeguard this heritage.

**Fidelio:** Would it be good for those who signed the petition to endorse the *Manual on Tuning* for use in schools?

**Bergonzi:** That would be great. You could bring out a little booklet which would relate the tuning question totally to vocal technique.

You should send the *Manual on Tuning*, and also send leaflets with a few of these musical examples, to the European singing schools. Not just to schools in America. This is universal.

Most important is to make the singing schools understand these things. Then even the orchestra conductors

will have to follow your advice. But if you don't insist on the singing schools, they don't give a hoot.

**Fidelio:** Italy, the fatherland of *bel canto*, is right now as a nation itself in a serious crisis. People are afraid for the republic. Do you believe that we can use the revival of the Verdi tuning, of great music, to save Italy? Is the political situation more open now?

**Bergonzi:** It would be good for politics. It would be a beautiful thing, because the public needs this, needs beautiful music. The public needs *art*. The public needs something, not "new," but "renewed." We are talking about the tuning fork. This is something that we have to renew, because it already exists—right? It's higher but it exists. We want to go back to the lower tuning, the right tuning. So also in political life, we need a renewal, we need to get back to something honest, and clean, in politics as well.

**Fidelio:** Without great culture it is hard to have a good society. Do you think that if we improve the quality of music, we'll improve society?

**Bergonzi:** Without doubt! There is not the slightest doubt. Surely.

**Fidelio:** Do you think that it is right for a political statesman like Lyndon LaRouche to try to help art in the way that he has, with the lowering of the pitch?

**Bergonzi:** Of course. Moreover, it's very important. LaRouche deserves to be complimented for his insisting on

this matter, and who feels it, and who does it with his heart, and doesn't do it so he can show off, but because he feels strongly about and wants to carry it forward.

**Fidelio:** Some people say you can't mix art and politics.

**Bergonzi:** : This does not mean mixing art and politics. In this, he speaks of art, and politics is something else. If LaRouche talks about bringing the tuning fork to normalcy, to help the whole sound, to help the voices, then you have to compliment him. You have to say that he is a person for whom one must have great esteem and approve that for which he is campaigning. And you have to campaign to carry forward his discussion.

**Fidelio:** The Schiller Institute and Mr. and Mrs. LaRouche are concerned especially about the children. How do you see the future of children in the schools today without classical music?

**Bergonzi:** That's bad. Classical music ought to be put into the elementary schools to give the youngster a culture. We have to start from when the child first goes to school. If you change him there, you can give him a culture. You can't take an adult who likes rock, and tell him he has to listen to symphonies. He won't go any more at his age. You have to catch the children in elementary school and give them this instruction, and teach them *solfeggio* so they get excited about music.

**Fidelio:** And you were a singer as a boy?

**Bergonzi:** I sang in church, and I had a darker voice always, and sang as a contralto.

**Fidelio:** Do you think that singing in Church is a good experience for children?

**Bergonzi:** For sure. It is a great experience to sing in church, to get a passion for it. A singer is born with an innate passion for singing. In school, you can teach, but if there is no passion, it's hard.

**Fidelio:** The fact that you at 68 are still singing, and still singing well, is a proof of a certain technical basis which in many cases today is missing. Many singers start well but end after a very short career.

**Bergonzi:** One cause is the tuning fork, which strains the voices. Second, they are in too big a hurry to debut, to make money singing, singing works not suited to their voices, wrong repertoire. The third is the fault of theater directors who cast voices which are not right for the repertory they give them to sing. They take the light tenor who should sing the Conte D'Almaviva in the *Barber of Seville*, who has a high C, and they say, "We have found a Manrico" [the dramatic tenor in *Il Trovatore*]. No matter that the voice is small, large, or medium. For them, he has a high C, and so he's Manrico.

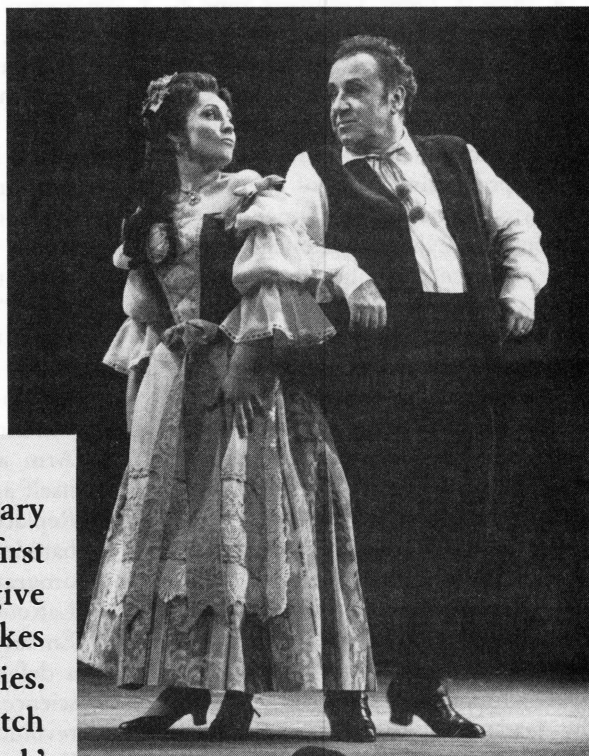
**Fidelio:** So to sum up, you're concentrating now on future generations?

**Bergonzi:** This is not a battle which I'm carrying forward because I'm trying to make a career! My career is coming to an end. I'm doing this for the young people.

The people singing when my career was born, included Tito Schipa, Lauri Volpi. But don't tell me that there are no longer being born voices such as these, voices like those of De Stefano, Corelli, del Monaco, Jussi Bjorling, Richard Tucker. There are many beautiful voices here in America and many excellent teachers, although there are some bad ones.

But the singing teachers have to carry forward this battle, to save the voices of the young singers, to save the future of opera, and to return again to the true opera of former times.

If we receive support for this initiative, we can save this entire heritage. If we go back to the right tuning, you will see, that within five years there will be a major change in improvement of the voices.



Aaron Levin

Performing with Andrea Rost in the Baltimore Opera production of Donizetti's "L'Elisir d'Amore."

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