

## MUSIC

### *Behind the Notes*

# Student-Teacher Dialogues from a Master Class

In May 1996, this writer enjoyed the opportunity of attending a series of master classes on vocal music featuring master musicians William Warfield, George Shirley, Sylvia Olden Lee (who doubled as an accompanist), and Raymond Jackson (accompanist), organized by the Schiller Institute under the title, “Marian Anderson Annual Tribute—The Poetic Principle in Music.” The two-day workshop opened with the artists and a select number of student participants performing a concert of Classical German *lieder*, African-American Spirituals, and poems by the turn-of-the-century African-American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, recited by Maestro Warfield.

The intention of the master-class work, was to cause both the student musicians and audience to become conscious of how motivic thorough-composition’s (*Motivführung*) poetic principle (i.e., generation of metaphors) is causally related to the production of art in composition and in performance. The context was the work by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., on the thematic element of the forthcoming Volume II of the Schiller Institute’s “Music Manual” (*A Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*)—namely, the motivic method of composition, as this was expressed in the series of revolutionary discoveries effected by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

The range of singing experience among the twenty-one participants varied, including less experienced teenagers and adults, who derived their singing knowledge from work as soloists within the choruses of social or religious institutions, and adults with

*Dr. William Warfield coaches student Jennifer Kreingold.*

many years of vocal coaching, who wished to further their efforts to become professional soloists.

The accompaniment was performed on a piano pitched to the scientific tuning of middle C=256 Hz, permitting each vocalist the opportunity to execute the natural voice-register shifts of his/her species of voice according to the composer’s musical idea, which is a prerequisite of their coherent rendering.

As each student’s presentation and teacher’s coaching-response proceeded, my “mind’s eye” reflected upon Lyndon LaRouche’s elaboration of the hypotheses underlying the necessary origins and development of *Motivführung*: man’s revolutionary leaps in his capacity to transform the universe.

LaRouche has shown that “the principle of *Motivführung* goes directly to the most fundamental principles of the human mind,” whose creative powers of memory are the basis for the art of musical performance and composition.

My thoughts scanned their exchanges, to see whether or not the student rendition, and teacher critique, employed a method shaped by the char-



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Left to right: Dr. William Warfield, Sylvia Olden Lee, and Prof. George Shirley, at a 1994 organizing conference for a National Conservatory of Music, sponsored by the Schiller Institute.

acteristic features of musical memory identified by LaRouche: (1) Did the student's presentation demonstrate memory of the composition as an indivisible, continuing unit of conception, from the first to the last tone of its performance? (2) Were the series of transitions presented as an evolving process of the emerging indivisible conception, each one carefully shaped as, itself, an indivisible unit-idea? (3) Was each transition linked to its predecessor, in such a manner as to develop both the idea of the transition, and that under the governance of the unit-idea? I.e., did the performance achieve musical coherence?

What follows is a sampling of the teacher-student dialogues which occurred after each presentation.

\* \* \*

The singer, a sixteen-year-old male ("contra-tenor"), has just sung the aria, "O, Thou that tellest good tidings of Zion," from Handel's *Messiah*,<sup>1</sup> observing a pro-vibrato, *bel-canto* mezzosoprano registrational quality of voice. The young singer intoned each individual note with a clean, beautiful shape, but evinced difficulty developing the phrasing (of the series of individual transitions) in an equivalent manner.

Although he lacked the informed musical insight necessary to unfold the aria as a developing idea, the youth's unpretentious rendition nevertheless

conveyed his internal cathexis to, and respect for, the aria's sacred text, the strain of which issued forth musically.

\* \* \*

**Professor Shirley:** Now, before you begin to sing, prepare yourself spiritually to do what you need to do. So that, when the music starts, you're not caught unprepared. So, you get yourself ready. She's [*accompanist Sylvia Olden Lee*] going to give you an introduction [*there are sixteen measures of introduction before the voice enters*]. . . . Don't look at her and say, "I'm ready"—because, that means you're not ready. If you get yourself ready, internally, and then you pull yourself out of being ready to say, "let's go," that has nothing to do with your reality as the person who's going to tell us whatever message it is, you're going to tell us. So, raise your head; get in character, and she will start. [*Introduction begins, the singer*

**Dr. William Warfield**, baritone, is past president of the National Association of Negro Musicians (1985-1990) and one of the world's leading experts on Spirituals and *lieder*.

**George Shirley**, tenor, debuted at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1961, singing there for over two decades. He now teaches at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

*enters, and sings just the opening measures*]

**Professor Shirley:** Okay. Fine. Now, what was going on in your mind, when she was playing the introduction? What were you thinking?

**Student:** [*After a momentary pause*] Doing the piece . . . the way it should be done.

**Professor Shirley:** "The way it should be done." [*chuckles, takes a big breath*] What does that mean?

**Student:** That means doing it with the right . . . [*long pause, then whispers*] Oh, gosh! [*gives a chuckle, indicating he's baffled*]

**Professor Shirley:** All right. Let me ask you this: When you stand to say these things, to whomever it is you're saying it to; *why* are you saying it? Why are you saying, "O, Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion. Rejoice?" Why are you saying that?

**Student:** I'm saying that, so . . . [*starts again*] I'm presenting it. Presenting it to . . . [*pause*]

**Professor Shirley:** To whom?

**Student:** My audience.

**Professor Shirley:** Well, you could be presenting it to an audience. But, where is this from? What is the text from?

**Student:** Uhhmm. Isaiah, in the Bible?

**Professor Shirley:** And, who is saying these words?

**Student:** [*long pause*] Uh . . .

**Professor Shirley:** Okay. You'll have to do a little research. All right? So that you know what this text is about, why it's being delivered. But, you can make success of this, and be comfortable with it, without knowing that—if you believe the words that you are given to speak: "O, Thou that—" . . . what is the text?

**Student:** [*recites*]

**Professor Shirley:** Okay. So you're

**Sylvia Olden Lee**, Metropolitan Opera Vocal Coach from 1954 to 1956, has been Professor of Vocal Interpretation at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia for more than twenty years.

**Dr. Raymond Jackson** is currently Professor of Music and Coordinator of Applied Music Studies, at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

announcing, what?

**Student:** To behold your God. To the cities of Judah.

**Professor Shirely:** You're announcing? [*long silence*] Is this the announcement of the birth?

**Student:** Ummhumm.

**Professor Shirely:** Of?

**Student:** Jesus Christ.

**Professor Shirely:** Okay. So, you can do that. To everyone here. But, you have to believe, what it is that you're saying. And, you have to know why you're saying it. [*presents a hypothetical example of the reason to be saying such, in a new voice:*] "I'm saying this because, I want each of you to know this good news, this Gospel. And, I'm saying to each and everyone of you: 'Behold! Your God is born this day. Go! Announce this everywhere.'" [*ends example*]

So, you can make it real for yourself. But, you must believe what you're saying. Now, throughout this whole first part, the introduction: I will suggest to you, that it's more profitable for you, rather than saying, "I've got to sing this song right. I've got to make sure all the notes are in place. I've got to, etc." [*begins to recite the first words of the aria, in a blurring manner. Student and audience laugh*] Instead, think thoughts that are in character with what you have to say. Focus your thoughts, in character, thinking in character; so that, when you open your mouth to speak, you're just continuing what you've already established for yourself. Thinking is the first thing, folks. Thinking.

\* \* \*

Professor Shirley advises those present, that fixating upon technical aspects of the voice, etc., is not in character with delivering the message of the musical idea. The professor informs the singer that, generally, to focus the mind of his students, he has them take the time to compose a little speech as the song's speaker, and commit it to memory. During the piano introduction, the student would recite, to himself, the text of such a speech. In this way, the student "would already be speaking," and "thinking in character," prior to the aria's vocal entrance.

Following this discussion, the stu-

dent demonstrated remarkable improvement, in every way. First, in place of the musical introduction, he delivered aloud his thoughts, in the form of a brief speech, speaking as the character in the aria. And immediately, as a continuation of the speech, he sang the aria's opening measures.

Following this exercise, the sixteen-measure piano accompaniment was added, with the student giving the speech, silently in his mind, and immediately singing aloud when the aria's vocal entrance arrived. His entrance was



*Professor Shirley coaches Samayya Ali, with Miss Lee at the piano.*

accomplished as a natural, relaxed continuation of the piano accompaniment.

He performed the entire aria, again; but, now, singing from the perspective of this newly formed insight into the aria's meaning. The role of individual phrases found definition. Consciously thinking of what idea should ultimately be communicated, a concept of the interplay between that notion and how the meaning of the phrases should unfold, overall, to shape the entirety, this student's "final" rendition afforded the listener a momentary glimpse of the sublime joy he himself experiences when singing the aria.

Before proceeding to a dialogue of another type, we should note Professor Shirley's reminder, that singing demands *thinking!* Thinking being a subjective, rather than objective, activity of the human mind.

Unfortunately, not every student

demonstrated the presence of mind, "on the spot," to relinquish the flawed idea from which their initial performance issued. A failure to rethink the complete idea governing the phrasal changes, offered from the musical insight of the artists guiding him, would leave the student articulating *the changes* only; singing them, but within the old geometry of his or her initial, ill-conceived notion. This is equivalent to the Aristotelean, who tries to reach the circle, by infinitely increasing the number of the polygon's sides. The action creating the circle's existence sub-

sumes, and is superior to, that from which the polygon is derived; an entirely new conception has to be born in the mind of the singer, which will lawfully order the new phrasing. The Many (phrases) require a subsuming One (principle of change), through which the improved performance may unfold as a coherent, new conception.

Let's hear a dialogue of this less successful type.

\* \* \*

At the request of one of the teachers, the singer, a young woman, is asked, before beginning, to present the operatic setting for the recitative-aria, "Mi tradi quell'alma ingrata," sung by the character Donna Elvira, in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*.

**Student:** She's very angry, at this point in the opera. And, Don Giovanni is full of schemes; this is just one of the



schemes that he was involved in with Leporello, the scene before. It's finally come to her knowledge that he has to perish, because his way can not go on. He's too bad, and evil. But, she [Elvira] loves him. So, she's angry and . . . also torn between the love that she has for him, and the duty to save other women, and the world [from his deceits].

She the sings the recitative, followed by its aria.

The singer's proficiency in the Italian language, and singing technique, reveal a more-than-passing knowledge of how

no's lower vocal register, were muddled, while those emphasizing the "switch" from second to third register, were, often, produced with the same quality of voice. She rushed to bring the entire presentation to conclusion; a disappointment, given such a lovely, textured voice, her lucid enunciation of the Italian text, and her capacity to sing unhindered in the higher register of the voice.

Let's return to the dialogue.

\* \* \*

**Sylvia Olden Lee:** I'd like to congratu-



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to handle her beautiful vocal "instrument." Yet, in the recitative, we do not witness Donna Elvira's spirited awakening to the fact that Giovanni, whom she faithfully loves, is an evil creature, doomed to destruction; nor do we hear, in the aria which follows, the untiring strain of her reflective anguish.

Mozart scored the aria, such that it is sung mainly at the top of the soprano's middle voice register, punctuated by continuous, brisk phrases, that move in-and-out of the (third) register above; this is colored by occasional drops into the soprano's lower (chest) register; and, the entirety is to be performed *allegretto*. This contrasts sharply with the much spirited quality of the recitative, which pivots around the soprano's registrational "breaking-point," in the region of F-natural and F-sharp, rarely going above or below the F-natural.

None of this was observed by the singer. Phrases, to be sung in the sopra-

late her on her instrument. She's a good musician. About the aria, explain to us, the first thing you said, when you were telling us about Elvira?

**Student:** She's very angry.

**Miss Lee:** What?

**Student:** She's very angry, she's . . .

**Miss Lee:** Then, my hope is— [to audience] Did any of you . . . get that anguish? Not that she had to pull her own hair, or beat her chest, or spit, or froth. Did you get angry? [audience responds in the negative] But the face [of the singer] is a beautiful face; I never saw any of it, . . . but you see that in your audience's [faces] . . . I could not get angry. . . . When you're seething and boiling [in this aria], this is the only thing I live for, . . . is to see that kind of devotion to truth. I can not get angry [from this presentation]. [An exchange about Miss Lee's admonishing Kathleen Battle about the deadness of her "Jauzet . . ." ensues.]

**Student:** [finally beginning to display a bit

of perturbation] So: no anger. All right! I get it!

**Professor Shirley:** I think, I would like to hear the recitative a little less . . . rushed. There were some places where, I think there's some expansion wanted. And you didn't allow it. [He asks her to sing the recitative again, stopping her, a few measures into it] That's a case in point. Whenever you have chords, under a rest, it's a good idea to give them their space; because, they reflect something that has either just happened in you or is going to happen. If you rush them, then you don't give them [the words indicating the character's state of mind] a chance to sound, in *secco recitative*. . . . [He demonstrates the phrase in Italian, without the piano punctuation] There's another idea that comes to your mind. . . . That's those "tah dum!" chords.

**Miss Lee:** [to Professor Shirley] Did you agree about that [non-expressive face]?

**Professor Shirley:** Sure.

**Miss Lee:** That face is such a Madonna face. . . . I only mean that in the best—that it does not seem to me to have any anger, or meanness in it at all. [to the student] "Over-do" what you think, and then, cut off some of the hamming. It's got to have a lot more steam to it. And, "sciagurato," what does that mean?

**Student:** "Sciagurato." . . . I know it. It's, uh, . . . "miserable one." "Miserable one," "sciagurato."

**Professor Shirley:** That's one meaning of it.

**Student:** [confidently] "Miserable."

**Miss Lee:** That's a nice way to say it. But, you really need to get—

**Professor Shirley:** Wretch!

**Miss Lee:** Thank you. "Traacherous."

**Student:** [giggling nervously] "Miserable wretch." Uh-huh.

**Miss Lee:** Good. Because you just sang [imitates a casual sing-song] "Sciagurato" [meaning] "You son-of-a so-and-so." [all laugh] Do you understand?

**Student:** [half-heartedly] Yeah.

**Professor Shirley:** Whenever— . . . I believe that, whenever a rhythm is written in *secco recitative*, that rhythm should be observed. We can speed up a phrase, and we can slow it down; but, I don't think we have the right to rearrange the rhythmic relationships of the notes. And where you have, "e



avvolto il sciagurato!” they’re all eighth notes, which says to me, that Mozart wanted that delivered in a major kind of way, given a different emotional thrust to what is said.

**Student:** [*mEEKly*] Yes.

**Professor Shirley:** Keep that in mind. Don’t change the rhythmic values. [*he demonstrates again in Italian*] Gives you more of that anger Miss Lee’s talking about.

**Student:** Yes, I agree.

**Professor Shirley:** [*requests that she begin the recitative again*] Also, we don’t have this music, unless we have you. This music all reflects what’s going on inside of you. And, it starts low, these little

the maestro stopping her, to explain the reason for observing various musical requirements, footprinted on the score. This is how things developed:

**Student:** [*lamenting, beginning to tire*] This is s-o-o-o hard.

**Professor Shirley:** It is difficult.

**Student:** It’s— . . . You’re starting angry, and it’s in the middle of the opera—

**Professor Shirley:** [*matter-of-fact, but assuring tone*] Tha-a-at’s right. But, you come on, and you’ve got all of this music [*indicating that something is boiling up inside of the character*]. Now. You’ve got to think about the music—something’s



*Student: Kevin Southall. Instructors: Dr. Warfield, Miss Lee.*

trills; and it builds, and builds! and builds—until it finally explodes in what comes out of your throat.

So, you’ve got to think about what’s going on inside of you, in your thoughts, that creates this music that we hear, before you open your mouth to speak to us.

\* \* \*

The room becomes absolutely still, as the opening measure of the piano introduction sounds. As the introduction proceeds, Professor Shirley quietly whispers the idea, “Horrendous!” before the singer’s entrance. With the first four measures sung, the student demonstrates improvement in adhering to the composer’s rhythmic pace of the recitative.

The student sings the opening four measures at least three more times, with

got to be boiling inside of you, or we don’t have the music.

**Miss Lee:** What’s “In quali eccessi”?

**Student:** [*casual manner*] “In quali eccessi”?— “In what excess.”

**Professor Shirley:** [*exclaims*] “Oh, gods, what excesses!”

**Student:** [*again casually*] “Excesses.”— Debauched, you know.

**Miss Lee:** Oh! “Debauched”?

**Student:** [*casually, again*] The excesses that lead to debauchery.

**Miss Lee:** How would you say that?

**Student:** [*merely pronouncing*] “Eccessi.”

**Miss Lee:** No. I mean *you*, being angry. How would *you* say it?

**Student:** [*becoming a little annoyed*] How would I say “eccessi,” when I’m angry?

**Miss Lee:** In English!

**Student:** [*casually, again*] “Excess.”

**Miss Lee:** [*exclaims*] “In what excesses!” How would *you* say it?

**Student:** [*repeats, again casually*] “In what excess.”

**Miss Lee:** No. You wouldn’t say it like that, if you’re mad, if you’re angry. In the first place, what happens before you make a tone?

**Student:** [*throws up her hands in dismay*]

**Miss Lee:** You don’t know? As Mr. George Shirley has said, two or three times: boiling and seething.

**Student:** [*reluctantly*] Yeah.

**Miss Lee:** When you’re working yourself up like this, then, when the sentence comes out, in English: [*she demonstrates, with an air of arrogance*] “What is this?!” How would you say that?

**Student:** [*a bit more annoyed*] “In what excess”?

**Miss Lee:** No. Madder!

**Student:** [*long silence, then very crisply and steaming with annoyance*] “In what excess!”

**Miss Lee:** Now, that’s great! [*applause!*] Isn’t that something? Now, put that into the Italian. And, be madder!

\* \* \*

However, the singing did not, nor could it, proceed; a completely new idea needed to find existence in the singer’s thoughts. One single idea needed to be called forth; expressing each of the particular new ideas, that were now introduced, as a necessary, lawful process of development of the entire performance—from the beginning of the recitative’s musical introduction, throughout both recitative and aria, to the aria’s last tone.

That weekend, twenty-one very intense, thorough individual lessons occurred; the two dialogues presented here, portray how, with any one of the singers, the idea-process characteristically unfolded. As well, the two distinct, and opposing kinds of resulting performances represented by the two singers here, speak typically for the majority of performances heard in both master classes.

The poetic insights communicated at each of the lessons, continue to this moment to impart to this writer an unforgettable air of truth.

—Cloret Richardson