

Interview: Grace Bumbry



Verdi's tuning will allow singers to interpret great music better

The following interview was conducted in Bonn, West Germany on Jan. 15, 1989, by Liliana Celani and Hartmut Cramer, for the German-language Ibykus magazine, which has kindly permitted EIR to reprint it here. Metropolitan Opera soprano Grace Bumbry has the unusual distinction of combining the careers of an operatic artist and a distinguished recitalist in the German Lieder repertoire. A student of the famous German singer Lotte Lehmann, she began her career as a mezzo-soprano and later, took up the more dramatic soprano operatic roles.

Ibykus: Miss Bumbry, you signed the Schiller Institute petition to go back to Verdi's tuning in Verona recently. What is your opinion about the present "tuning war," as the international press chose to call it?

Bumbry: My opinion about the "tuning war" is that they who are against A = 432 Hz do not realize the damage they are doing to voices and at the same time to the vocal literature. Because in order for singers to interpret a piece of music they have to be able to interpret it in the key that the composer wanted it. As far as the opera is concerned, I think it is absolutely mandatory to go back to Verdi's tuning, because the young voices cannot keep up. They simply cannot hold up to that. Their voices will be ruined. It is difficult enough at A = 440 to sing a high C; to sing a high C at 442, 444, 446, when your voice has been trained at 440, or even lower, is criminal.

Thank God, I have a very wide range. So I can manage these notes if I'm warned in advance. But that's not what singing is all about. Anybody can manage, but you want to do more than manage. You want to be able to portray what the composer has written, what the librettist has written. You can't do that if you're screaming, trying to manage your voice. I believe that the lower tuning will bring about an easier way of singing whereby the singers will be more able to interpret the music. Now at the moment they are just thinking about producing the notes: Let me first get the note out and maybe next time . . . maybe next year . . . well, that's too late, you know.

If you are serious about music, you want to be able to

bring the whole "package," not just the vocal production. You want to touch the audience, but in the way the composer has written, and the librettist has written, not just by how well you sing. I think this is the only way of performing recitals.

Anyway, most recital music is not written for the high voice, but for the middle part of the voice. The voice speaks to the human being, to the person who is listening. The higher up you get, the less audible is the text anyway. You have to sort of alter the text in order to get the tones out. That is the reason why we always try to put the literature in the middle voice, in the part of the voice that speaks to the audience.

I also feel that the human voice can only stand so much. You can only stretch it so far. You don't want a coloratura to sing Aida. You don't want a very, very high voice to sing Luisa [in Verdi's *Luisa Miller*]. You want a certain coloration of sound. How can you portray sadness, when it's very, very, very high?

Ibykus: It's impossible.

Bumbry: Yes. A similar problem comes up in the case where the text of an opera is translated. I think we tend to be more pliable when we are translating a piece of music from one language to another. I'll give you a good example: Janacek's opera *Jenufa*, which is very often done in a foreign language. When I do it, for example at La Scala, in Italian, I feel very uncomfortable: I feel like walking lop-sided, with one leg shorter than the other, because so often the musical accents are placed wrongly, on the wrong word.

The same is true, if you sing a piece of music in a transposed key. Especially in opera. If you are singing an opera that was written to be performed at A = 432 Hz, at 446-448 vibrations, it puts a given word in the wrong color. It means that you are changing the interpretation, because that word is supposed to be given at a darker color, because it was intended lower.

When you are a singer, you know what color you are looking for in a certain word. If I'm looking for the color, let's say, of the word *Tod*, [death, in German] I look for a dark color, as with the word *Schmerz* [pain]. If I sing *Tod* at

444, that *Tod* is no longer dark. It changes my whole thinking, when *Tod* is already brighter than I really want to make it.

Ibykus: What you are saying has special implications for singing *Lieder*.

Bumbry: Of course. Let's take Schubert's "Der Tod und das Mädchen," that's the best example. This particular piece was not transposed by Schubert, I think, because it has to be kept in that dark color. I think it goes down to a D natural, if you take the low note, but if you put it a little bit higher, then it no longer has that same sinister feeling or that same morose feeling.

I remember having sung that song in Vienna in concert and since I was on a recital-tour, I did that same program shortly afterwards in America, where the pitching was a bit lower, just a tiny bit, I think 440, as compared to 444 in Vienna. But this is a considerable color-change and I thought more comfortable to that particular song in America, because it had that color that I needed for that particular song.

If I had the choice, I would always do a piece of music in the tuning that the composer wanted, because he knew what he was writing and what he was looking for when he was writing. These great composers like Verdi, Mozart, Strauss, and Puccini were geniuses, whether we want to admit it or not. We have to realize and accept the fact that they were geniuses and we have to serve them. It is our job to serve them. It is not our job to serve ourselves or to serve the conductor XYZ, who also, really, is supposed to serve these wonderful composers.

Most of today's conductors do not realize the fact, that it is not they who are at the center, but the music. They are not playing an instrument and they are not singing. They really should be serving all the rest of us; we are the ones who are the instruments and they are just conducting the instruments which are being used.

Ibykus: Speaking about conductors and orchestras, can you give us an example of the effect the lower tuning has on performing instrumental music?

Bumbry: Oh yes. You know that Eugene Ormandy used to conduct the Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra for many, many years. I heard them once in a concert in New York City and I was very much impressed with the warmth of their sound. Since I very often go to orchestra concerts and especially had been accustomed to the New York Philharmonic, I could make a comparison. There was a clear distinction for which I didn't know the reason; I just thought that this orchestra is just superior to the New York Philharmonic.

Then I found out that the reason was their tuning; it was somewhat lower, I think they tuned at 437. But for a trained ear, even without knowing what the reason was, I knew that there was a difference in what I heard and felt, and I imagine that this was also obvious to the rest of the people in the auditorium. Now, the wide masses surely didn't know whether

the tuning was 437, 440, or 429 or whatever, and they probably didn't care. All they knew is that they felt this enveloping warmth around them. . . .

Ibykus: Yes. Coming back to singing *Lieder*; there, the question of tuning seems to be even more important, because they are all based on the relationship between the text, the poetic text, and the music—

Bumbry: —sure. Very often, when I prepare a new recital program with my accompanist, we go through all of the keys that a certain piece of music has been transposed to, in order to find the specific color that I am looking for in this particular piece of music. Sometimes, even if we don't find a transcribed transposition, we make our own transposition. My accompanist has perfect pitch and he can write out the transposition for me so that it will fit exactly the key I want.

Ibykus: Isn't there a contradiction? In the beginning you said, you want to have the pitch in which the composer has written. Now you say, that you transpose very often?

Bumbry: Yes and no. I don't know what tuning Schubert wrote most of his literature in. All I know, is the color I was looking for, which I hope he was looking for, too.

Now, every piece of music says what the original key is, and so I try to do it in that key. With my vocal range and with my vocal color, which is quite considerable, I will try to sing it in that original key. If I don't find the color, then I have to find it in another key.

Ibykus: Maybe the reason that the "original" key is not any more the really original one, is today's higher tuning?

Bumbry: Exactly. I am sure that is the reason. I am absolutely sure. Take the case of "Casta diva" from Bellini's *Norma*, which is normally transposed to F from the original, which is G.

If a soprano does this, people say: "Well, she wasn't really a soprano, she was a mezzo-soprano; she did it because of her vocal problems." But that is not the case at all. Why did Joan Sutherland, who was one of the highest coloratura we have had these last 20-30 years, prefer to sing this aria in F? This example tells you something, because the whole color of "Casta diva" is not a brilliant one. It is not a brilliant piece of music, but a prayer, and you don't put a prayer in a high bright color, which will undoubtedly happen in the high tuning. So even Joan brings it down to F, and if *she* brings it down to an F, I think we can certainly feel at ease in an F, too.

Ibykus: She signed the petition for the lower tuning together with her husband, the conductor Richard Bonyngue.

Bumbry: Of course, anybody with that right understanding would have signed it. Sure.

Ibykus: Also Bellini would agree.

Bumbry: Absolutely. I don't know what his pitching was,



Courtesy of Columbia Artists

Miss Bumbry in two heroic early-Verdi soprano roles (left, Abigaille in Nabucco, right, Lady MacBeth in MacBeth. Since this interview was granted, the Italian A = 432 tuning bill was subverted to become an A = 440 bill. The world-famous opera singers Tebaldi and Cappuccilli, among others, have denounced this sabotage and vowed to continue the fight for the original Verdi tuning with new initiatives.

but I am sure we could find out what his pitch was, when he wrote it.

Ibykus: Around the same as Verdi.

Bumbry: I think so, and no matter who the composer was, from the early days, it certainly was not 440 and it certainly was not 444. This means that we, in order to get the color we think the composer wanted, have to transpose. I find almost every piece of music that I sing in recital music has got to be transposed because of the high tuning.

Ibykus: It is not transposing; it is trying to go back to the original tuning.

Bumbry: Right. And very often I find a review saying: "Why is she doing it in the mezzo-key?" But it is not the mezzo-key or the soprano-key, it's not anybody's key. It's the key that I think fits this particular piece of music.

Ibykus: And comes closest to the composer's intention.

Bumbry: Exactly. As a matter of fact, after having transposed the music in order to find the right color and then looking again to the original key, we found out in many cases, that the key we have transposed it to, is very, very close to the original one, like maybe a half-tone, sometimes maybe a tone.

Ibykus: Let's assume the legislation for the lower tuning will be approved by the Italian Senate in the next one or two months. Do you think it will spread out to the rest of Europe

and the United States? This kind of legislation, or at least the artistic adoption of Verdi's tuning?

Bumbry: Undoubtedly, it will spread. And after some time, given the right arguments, I think it could become widespread. . . .

Ibykus: On the question of tuning and coloring: How do you solve the problem of the difference in tuning in the various places?

Bumbry: Imagine I have to sing a certain song which the composer has written, let's say in the key of G, in a place where the tuning is going to be a bit higher than normal—what I call normal—then I will have to make a "concession." And that concession is to transpose that piece of music into the tonality which I think the composer wanted.

The question of transposing obviously involves a lot of background work, not just the music, but all the background work that I can find about that piece of music.

Who else does this? Who else goes to such lengths to find the right color? But since I have such a wide color palette in my voice, I like to make use of those colors. I also think that this is partially the reason for my success with the public. The people know that I have done the utmost to portray whatever piece of music I have chosen to interpret, let it be opera or recital music.

I would just like to say right here, that it is most unfortunate, that the order of the recital music of *Lieder* has somehow fallen by the wayside or under the table. I would like it very much to be able to uplift this medium, which seems to have

fallen into disrepair.

Ibykus: What do you think is the cause for this, and given the fact that you are singing *Lieder* often both in Europe and the United States, do you see a difference between these two continents on this question?

Bumbry: First of all, there is a difference, and I don't know whether it is just because of the fact that America is an English-speaking country which lacks an enormous recital tradition. Of course you might find pockets in the U.S. where there is a tradition in *Lieder*-recitals, like in New York City, Boston, or Chicago. There you have people who used to have recital subscriptions. But unfortunately the recital-subscribers no longer exist, because somehow, maybe for money reasons, it seems to be no longer interesting to do recitals. I really don't understand why. . . .

Ibykus: How do you see the role of an artist? Like Schiller conceived it, as a mission to uplift people?

Bumbry: Yes, I do; I certainly do. I don't think that all artists have that understanding, but I think certain artists do and I believe that is my calling.

I often wonder, what am I here for? I have no children, I am no longer married, so it must be something else. I fought constantly with my husband about musical values and I really think that the reason he and I got divorced was because of a discrepancy in our musical values. For me there was and is either music or not; either you give or you don't.

Ibykus: How do you think about the realization of those values today? The United States of America used to be a country where everybody who had talent could accomplish anything. This was the case when you started your career. What about today?

Bumbry: Well, maybe it is always the case that, if you have a talent, if you have really a great talent, you will always succeed. It is like oil and water: The oil always rises to the top, as does the cream in the milk, doesn't it?

But it is getting more and more difficult. I find that somehow people don't strive for greatness anymore, they feel comfortable to be mediocre, they even enjoy mediocrity. I have never enjoyed mediocrity. I always felt that one has to strive for greatness and that is the reason why, speaking about my country, I feel so sad about the death of Martin Luther King and the death of John F. Kennedy. I thought that we were on the road to greatness then and with those persons being put aside, we as Americans, seem to have abruptly stopped the advancement in our form of civilization, in our form of culture.

If there is some way that we could reach that point again, to say nothing about striving beyond that, I would like to be part of it, of course.

Ibykus: Miss Bumbry, thank you very much.

More fraud expected in Mexico elections

by Hector Apolinar

The July 2 election of deputies to the state congress of the Mexican state of Michoacán is currently the primary political concern of the group around President Carlos Salinas de Gortari which is determined to wipe the nationalist movement headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solorzano from the political map of Mexico, whatever the cost.

The stakes are high for President Salinas. Since the disputed 1988 presidential elections—in which Cárdenas, and not Salinas de Gortari, won a majority of the votes, according to many in Mexico—Cárdenas's movement has become the rallying point for national resistance against foreign bankers' looting of the country, the policy which Salinas has championed. Salinas, now in the middle of negotiations with those foreign creditors on Mexico's debt, is desperate to maintain the illusion that his government, and economic program, are firmly in control of the country.

Salinas's problem, according to the widest range of sources available to *EIR*, is that the situation in Michoacán today is of a dramatic Cardenist ferment which promises to give the election to Cárdenas's followers by a landslide. According to all impartial observers, the local campaigns of the ruling PRI party candidates have been a dismal failure; their electoral rallies have been likened to hopeless preaching in the desert.

Michoacán is especially important because it is Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's place of birth; he was governor of the state until 1986. His father, President and Gen. Lázaro Cárdenas, revered as the founder of Mexico's national oil industry, also comes from Michoacán, and was governor there during the 1930s. In the 1988 elections, the Cardenist candidates in Michoacán won all the federal deputy posts and the two state senator posts, taking 95% of the state vote.

There is no way the ruling PRI party can face such a Cardenist fortress in an honest election, and win.

Victory for the candidates of Cárdenas's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) would also create a situation in which the state governor, a member of the PRI party, would be obliged to subject his public actions to the dictates of the Constitution and to the scrutiny of the state congress. Such a situation would be unprecedented in Mexican modern history.