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## Interview: Laila Andersson-Palme

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# 'On the warpath' for the true performance of great music

*Laila Andersson-Palme has been a soloist with the Royal Opera House in Stockholm, Sweden since 1962. She is also an appointed singer of the Swedish Royal Court. Lately she has sung Fidelio in Washington and Montreal; Salome at the Metropolitan in New York City, in Rio de Janeiro, Montreal, and Graz; Tosca in Bern and Stockholm; and Abigail in Graz. She was interviewed by Åsa Narde on Nov. 6, 1989.*

Laila Andersson-Palme, her face beaming, opens the door to her warm and comfortable home, where candles light up the November darkness. There is always a lively air around her, but as she sits down for the interview, it is easy for her to become one with the art of singing which fills her everyday life. She is now at the peak of her career, and many international offers are awaiting her response.

### The issue of scientific tuning

We met because she, at an early stage, supported the call by the Schiller Institute for lowering the orchestra pitch by a quarter-tone to  $A=432$ , which the composer Giuseppe Verdi had proposed and successfully established in Italy. Less than half a month before the interview took place, we participated in a very exciting cultural conference in Munich, at which, among other things, the so-called Verdian tuning was discussed. Andersson-Palme starts to talk about the controversial issue around today's high tuning, which sometimes is even as high as 450 oscillations per second.

"I strongly oppose today's high tuning," she says. "I have been singing both at the Vienna and Berlin opera houses, and in Berlin I particularly reacted when I sang Brunhilde. I did not understand why my musculature did not obey me in the way I was used to. But later I learned that the tuning had been very high, and I assume this was the reason. You react like a seismograph on stage, you are so charged. That is felt, of course, in the throat. And besides that, Brunhilde is a heavy role. Something has to happen on this question. I am on the warpath!"

Does she want to go as far as Verdi, to  $A=432$ ? That would mean a lowering of today's standard  $A=440$ , by a quarter-tone.

"I would like to find a piano tuned to  $A=432$ , because then I could sit down and practice and really feel how it is. My own piano most likely is tuned to  $A=440$ . I am convinced that it has to be right with a lower tuning, that it must be very comfortable. Singers who have been accompanied by old instruments, which already are tuned lower, think that it simply is fantastic. I am just curious about how it would influence my throat."

Andersson-Palme offers peppermint tea. She is very careful about living in a healthy way, since she has a sensitive instrument which she always carries with her. I bring up the idea that the human body is created with exactly the same precision as the nature in which we live. Sportsmen are tempted to exert their bodies more than they are built for. Many of them are more or less always injured. It seems as if the same tendency is applicable in musical life. You tune too high in order to let musicians and singers show off with high tones. We ask ourselves, whether it is for the sake of high tones that we listen to music. One thing is clear, the human body is not built for this tension, and many singers repeatedly get nodes on their vocal cords, as well as other injuries.

Andersson-Palme is involved in understanding natural law. She tells how every year she is fascinated by the precision of nature, when, for example, trees burst into leaf. She mentions Leonardo da Vinci, who was thinking in that context. Why would there not be the same type of lawfulness in the human body, which we must take into consideration?

Conductors normally do not seem to respect the laws of nature. Orchestral instruments can be rebuilt and improved if they break; but it is much more difficult to do the same, when it comes to the art of singing. Or does the conductor just replace a used-up singer? Does the conductor have any understanding of the fact that high tuning of the orchestra destroys voices?

"Yes, I think that some have that understanding. But many of them have no understanding whatsoever of us singers. We, singers, can move mountains when our voices are in order. We can perform anything. But when a singer does not feel good, there are really no conductors who say, 'Take it easy.' Then you recognize the attitude of the conductors,

whether they understand or not, whether they have a heart or not. There are few conductors who really respect a singer, as a musician.”

In former days, at the time of Mozart and Beethoven and the great composers, it was common that they, as children, sang in a church choir. Maybe you would wish that today’s conductors should learn to master singing during their education?

“Yes, then they would get closer to singing from within, which you ought to master. I recognize it so well, if a pianist knows the instrument of the singer as he sits down to play an opera. If he does not know it, he plays without pausing. If he has mastered that art, he is able to follow the breathing. It is not a question of pausing for eternity when the singer has to breathe; it is a question of some thousandths of a second. I have also experienced fantastic conductors, who understand this. Frans-Paul Decker, for example, with whom I sang Salome in Montreal, is one of them. Sixten Ehrling is extraordinarily good in this. Hollreiser in Berlin is a fantastic conductor for singers. It is really very comfortable when a conductor masters and understands the art of singing. Then you never need to discuss it; you do not need to interrupt. You only need to say, ‘I need a little help here, a little bit quicker there,’ and they fix it. That is a great conductor. A great conductor simplifies the difficulties.”

On Oct. 15-16, the Private Academy for Humanist Studies sponsored a conference in Munich on the Verdi tuning. Laila Andersson-Palme participated in the conference, and I ask her about her impressions of it.

“I thought it was highly interesting to hear the tenor Miguel Baraldes sing examples from Verdi operas at both A=440 and A=432. It was an audible difference. When he sang in the lower tuning, his voice was darker, the transitional notes in the arias also were heard as lighter. I felt it liberating in my body. You were not as afraid. As a singer, I have a sort of fear around the passages that I know are difficult. It felt more relaxed.”

Lyndon LaRouche, who is a politician and the originator of the idea to lower the tuning to A=432, is unfortunately today sitting as a political prisoner in an American jail. What do you think about that?

“I think it would be nice to sing for LaRouche, and wonderful if this could take place without bars between us.”

### **A lifetime devoted to music**

Andersson-Palme is a dramatic soprano, but she started her career as a lyric coloratura. Therefore, she has been able to sing most of the lyric roles, including the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*. I ask her how she has been able to develop her voice, and what about her singing technique? She jokingly says that it is of great importance that you be as relaxed as the lion in the MGM film, at the same time that you must maintain total concentration. Singing technique is important, but the way she reached the opera stage is at least

as fascinating. What spurred her to become an opera singer?

“I just knew that I wanted to become one, already in my early childhood. But I did not know anything about opera, since I never had seen any. I went into the forest and sang to the mushrooms and the flowers, which looked at me. I was ecstatic.”

Andersson-Palme grew up in Blekinge in the south of Sweden, and is the daughter of a carpenter. When she was seven years old, her mother and father bought her a piano. She relates that they suffered for years in order to pay for it. As a teenager, she worked as a housemaid. She worked at a household which put music in the center of family life. The children played the violin, they sang, and Laila played the piano, enjoying music with them in the afternoons. The mistress of the house soon discovered that Laila had a beautiful voice.

One day she read an advertisement in the newspaper, which offered singing lessons in the nearby town of Ronneby. A Romanian, Sylvia Mang-Borenberg, became Laila’s first singing teacher. She was really inspiring. Andersson-Palme explains that she had that wonderful feeling for culture which she had longed so much for, and now she could discuss poetry and all interesting aspects of art. After four years of studies, Sylvia Mang-Borenberg brought her pupil to the yearly exhibition for singing teachers in Stockholm. Laila won the competition splendidly, and thus achieved her first breakthrough. After that, she studied at a public high school in Brakne-Hoby. One day, the old King arrived to personally hand out scholarships. Laila got 3,000 crowns. In 1960, she was accepted as a student at the Royal Music High School, ranking number one among all the contestants. It was a tremendous event in her life. Her singing teachers in Stockholm were Ragnar Hultén and Isobel Gazal-Ohman, but she finally ended up with Hjordis Schymberg, who became her favorite teacher.

“Hjordis Schymberg taught me the craft. She knew everything about how to place the tongue and the larynx, how to pronounce, how to sing in the mask, the phrasing, and to look up the original composition. She made me aware of all of that. I am very, very grateful that I could study with her. She had studied a lot in Italy. She knew the great teachers and learned the Italian way of singing, and how you equalize the voice. She really is a craftsman in the art of singing. We also have a ‘fingering,’ just like the violinists have theirs; we singers have our fingering in the throat. But the difficult thing is that we never can show it.”

### **The moral role of opera**

When Andersson-Palme knows what is right about the art of singing, she is not afraid of waging a fight about it. She believes, among other things, that it is wrong that, on the Swedish opera stage, most of the time the operas are sung in Swedish, and not in the original language.

“A consensus has emerged here, after many debates, that



*Andersson-Palme on stage, as Tosca: "We singers have our 'fingering' in the throat."*

we preferably should sing everything in Swedish, but it has also varied depending upon which director we have had at the Stockholm Opera House. Personally, I have always been against translations, because so incredibly much gets lost, since they not always are musically thought through. It turns into a kind of eternal compromising. You have to add notes, subtract notes, the phrasing goes wrong, not to mention the sound, which becomes totally different, because you sing on totally different vowels. If you sing Italian opera and provide it with Swedish text, then it is almost impossible to make it as magnificent as the Italian, with glissandos as you should have. It is wrong, it turns into cement in the mouth. I always start out singing a role in the original language, so I do know the difference. Then it is easier for me to correct myself if I am forced to sing in another language. Operatic compositions are thoroughly considered by an author and a composer; they have worked together for years, struggled and made alterations until they have reached perfection, and then someone translates it, and sometimes without thinking; this I find wrong." (Just shortly after this interview was conducted, something revolutionary occurred at the Stockholm Opera House: A subtitle display was installed over the stage, and today most operas are sung in Italian.)

Friedrich Schiller has written a small essay about the stage which is well worth reading. He writes that the task of art is not only to entertain the audience, but that it has a higher purpose, namely to make people greater. Verdi wrote many of his operas for the liberation of Italy. Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* brings up the question of man's longing for freedom. It is very interesting that Giuseppe Verdi and Ludwig van Beethoven both were very much influenced by the thinking of Schiller.

Do you believe that the opera stage has an advantage over other forms of art in its capacity to ennoble men?

"I like what Schiller says. It is not only a question of entertaining, but also sometimes a question of curing human beings who have psychological problems. A medical doctor

might not always be in a position to help such a person, but many artists can assist that person to endure, in order to go on living and cure oneself; this, I have ample proof of.

"You look at a performance. You see different emotional encounters, and fortunately, when all singers sing well, and everything works, it has a very soothing effect. That is a task which we indeed have."

Andersson-Palme also has very clear opinions about how operas are to be performed, and this is not really too remarkable. When opera singers study their roles, they often learn the piece in the same careful way that a producer does. Producers often do not have the kind of musical insight which many opera singers naturally have. Why is it so common that producers put forth their own personal ideas, instead of following the intentions of the composer?

"They do not want to trust the music. That is the big problem. Instead, they have to invent all kinds of awkward things. To trust the music is, when you read it, to understand how it is composed, how it sounds, and how it is conceptualized. That is the way you have to get your ideas. If the piano reduction reads that the female singer should appear 'weak,' many producers would demand that she sing it laughingly. The composer had written, very carefully, 'weak.' It is as if you have to do the opposite. Then I always ask myself, why? And in such a situation, the singer clashes with the producer. Such clashes are common when a person does not trust the music. It is also very important that you work with the tempi intended by the composer.

"The problem with producers, is that they want everything to be as crazy as possible, as well as ugly and grotesque. It must not be beautiful. I think that that is a pity—very boring. I cannot stand having to view ugliness all the time. It is very stressful when they, for example, insist on directing a spotlight from above, in order to endlessly show the audience a face surrounded by darkness. The eyes just cannot stand it."

Andersson-Palme has a jolly and explosive spirit. You recognize that she wants to learn from life, and that her personality expresses an unspoken morality which has provided her with a stable platform in life.

What has your experience in life meant for your professional life as a singer?

"I have to thank my parents, because they have had a very high moral standard. They have taught me to have a conscience, to distinguish between right and wrong, and to be humble. In my professional life, I have lived according to these principles, and I have not done anything whatever in order to reach my goals. I have often restrained myself. I wanted to make an honest career. You do not reach the same level of fame this way; there are not as many circles around you, but you feel good inside, and I think that I have managed this very difficult balancing act. I know that I can end my professional career and say to myself: I made it in an honest way."

Since Andersson-Palme for years have been employed at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm, she sometimes also has to sing newly written operas, which from time to time demand a lot of patient work. I ask her what advice she would like to give to composers who want to write new operas, and whether she believes that it is destructive for the voice to sing modern music.

"They should learn how the instrument of a singer functions, that you do not write only to invent something. There are horrendous pieces, which only say 'plipp-plupp,' to and fro. Of course you can do such things, but I do not understand why I have to sacrifice my life for that.

"Yes, [it is destructive for the voice] if you only are allowed to sing modern works and you are not allowed to sing the classical repertoire in-between, to calm down your musculature. It takes longer for the voice to recover from modern compositions, and especially so since modern operas mix speaking, recitative, and singing. That wears out the voice more than if you only have recitative and singing, since your larynx then is positioned only for singing. But it is important to learn, and new operas are exciting. I ask for better transitions in the works of modern composers. They

should provide a springboard for the higher registers, so that the singer gets a chance to sing long notes, in order for the tone to reach out and vibrate, and thereby ensure that you do not only sing short notes. You have to recover. When you sing long notes, you regain your breathing. With short notes, you have a lot of 'bang-bang-bang' staccatos down in the stomach. Long notes caress the soul of the listener; short notes irritate more."

Do you believe that classical music has a role to play among people who are oppressed? I am thinking of the Chinese students, who played Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Tiananmen Square. Do the oppressed people in the East need—

"Yes, much more. They love artists and they love opera. I can only speak of opera. I understand that it must be liberating to see something which brings hope, and to hear something beautiful when you are constantly oppressed, and you must struggle to get an apple or to find nice cloth material. I have only sung in the East once, in East Berlin. It was terrible, not because I got sick and could not sing a note, but because there was no flower shop. How could any leaders allow something as stupid as that?"

## Leading violinist to play concert for LaRouche

Noted violinist Norbert Brainin, founder and first violinist of the legendary Amadeus Quartet, in a statement on May 3 demanded the U.S. government act at once to free political prisoner Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. Announcing his plans to perform in concert in Mr. LaRouche's honor at the Lisner Auditorium of Washington, D.C. on June 6, Mr. Brainin released the following statement from his home near London:

"It is my deep-felt desire to express in this way—through a concert of classical music in the scientific tuning as laid down by Giuseppe Verdi—my friendship with Lyndon LaRouche, who, years ago, initiated the fight to restore this level of musical tuning.

"I know Lyndon LaRouche, who is currently being forced to suffer great injustice, as a gentle and learned man; as a poet, philosopher, extraordinary politician, and historian, as a man who is versed in literature and music. He has always fought for the idea, which I share, that great classical art, especially music, is the best way to

ennoble people and uplift their spirits, above all in times of great crisis, an idea which is being borne out again, as the recent events in Eastern Europe and now in Lithuania prove.

"I consider it a shame for the United States of America, a country which I love and whose Constitution, unrivaled in the world, I admire greatly, to be treating one of its most brilliant minds in such a fashion; and I hope that full justice will be granted Lyndon LaRouche immediately."

Mr. Brainin's June concert in Washington, sponsored by the Schiller Institute, will be the first purely instrumental concert in the United States for the C=256 movement, which has gained hundreds of prominent signators among musicians internationally. The Schiller Institute, headquartered in Laatz, F.R.G. and Washington, D.C., was founded by Mrs. Helga Zepp-LaRouche. Mr. Brainin has given several concerts for the lower classical pitch of C=256 for the Schiller Institute in Europe.

Besides fighting for artistic truth, Norbert Brainin, who because of his Jewish origin was forced to flee his native Vienna in 1938 and emigrate to England, where he began his career as one of the world's leading chamber musicians, is known for his support for human rights and freedom. Last December, he gave a free, all-Beethoven concert, sponsored by the Schiller Institute, in Berlin for East Germany's citizens, to honor the fall of the hated Berlin Wall.