
Interview: Ruggero Raimondi

Our problem is that everybody is 'deaf'

Liliana Celani interviewed basso Ruggero Raimondi in Rome on June 15, during the rehearsals of Verdi's Simon Boccanegra at the Rome Opera Theater. Raimondi sang the role of Fiesco in that opera, and received critical acclaim.

"Regietheater," a German term mentioned by Raimondi, refers to the widespread practice of staging operas from the past in such a way as to impose a socio-political interpretation considered "relevant" to the present, including arbitrarily altering the composer's original directions for scenery, costume, and actions.

The interview was granted to the German cultural journal *Ibykus*, which kindly made it available to EIR.

Q: The rehearsals in the Rome Opera Theater have been interrupted by a strike, probably due to the recent [Lamberto] Dini decree about privatizing opera theaters, transforming them from state opera houses to "private foundations," which will force many of them in Italy to shut down. What do you think about this decree?

Raimondi: Foundations need sponsors, and the sponsor must have the possibility to deduct what he gives to the opera theater from the taxes he pays. This means that if this law is passed in Italy, they are indirectly trying to shut down most of the Italian opera theaters.

Q: This is clearly the danger these days.

Raimondi: I do not think this is the danger, I think it is already a reality. Because what theaters in Italy can survive such a privatization?

Q: La Scala, maybe the San Carlo in Naples and the Rome Opera theater, maybe not even they. . . .

Raimondi: That's right. It is a very ambiguous law. One should rather revise the Italian tax law, as was done in the United States, where the sponsors who give money to opera theaters can deduct this money from their taxes. If this is not done, it equals shutting down opera.

Q: The state is abdicating its responsibility toward culture. What is the situation in the Rome Opera Theater, from this standpoint?

Raimondi: I am not quite sure, I sang here last four years ago, and today I am coming back for Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*.

Q: *Simon Boccanegra* is a particularly important opera for Italy these days, I believe, because the high point of the opera is Boccanegra's call to the Italians to stop fighting each other and rather discover their mission, which is that of conquering the seas (at the time of the war between Venice and Genoa this was the content of Petrarch's letter to the Italian leaders, quoted in Verdi's opera as "io vo gridando pace, io vo gridando amor"). There are two aspects to this I wanted to ask you about: One is this idea of the mission Italy has toward other countries, which can help it overcome domestic conflicts; and the other, is that both Petrarch and Verdi are very important to the Italian nation and culture, and their call can also be seen today as in opposition to the separatist tendencies of [Umberto] Bossi's Lombard League.

Raimondi: I just hope that there will be no modern reading of *Simon Boccanegra*, transposing the plot to today, because I cannot stand any *Regietheater* tendency in opera. As to Italy today, it is true that we had such a hard time unifying it, and even if there are a lot of problems, it is up to the government to solve them, and it will have to solve them once and for all, because Italy otherwise will not be able to continue like that forever. I find the idea of splitting Italy an uninteresting idea. One can eventually make regions more independent from one another, but not divide the country.

Q: I read in the Italian press that La Scala conductor Riccardo Muti, upon receiving an honorary citizenship from Milan's Mayor Formentini (himself a member of the Lombard League), stated that "Italy shall not be divided, and it should be more proud of its culture." Do you think Italians have forgotten their culture, including Verdi?

Raimondi: The year 1861 brought the unity of Italy. We are relatively young in respect to other nations. The Italian is generally a slanderer of himself. But, after all, Italy taught the world a lot of things; maybe we should really be a bit prouder of ourselves, even as we did when Italy was not yet formed, at the time of the Renaissance, when we were still a number of duchies.

Q: Some years ago I interviewed you for *Ibykus* on Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, which you were singing in Munich. . . . Could one see a parallel between Don Giovanni and Casanova? We found out that Casanova went to Prague for the first performance of *Don Giovanni*, conducted by Mozart himself, and tried to convince Mozart to change the libretto.

Raimondi: Who did these researches?

Q: Some of us in the Schiller Institute in France and Italy, who read some biographies and articles about Don Giovanni which mentioned this fact, and also an article in an American magazine which quoted the discussion between Casanova and Mozart about changing the libretto. . . .

Raimondi: I believe Don Giovanni is a character who does

not really exist; he exists in the mind of other people. He is a hymn to liberty in a time in which everything was compressed, any form of life was linked to what other people thought. I think Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is actually very simple. Besides, who could make such aspects clear on stage?

Q: It is certainly not easy. Maybe the "Don Giovanni" movie which you did with Losey, staged in a Venetian villa and with clear Venetian dresses and background, hinted at this.

Raimondi: The movie was very beautiful and interesting because of Joseph Losey. Also because it was staged in a villa of Palladio, and, third, because of Mozart's music, which is the most important. Mozart and Palladio created a fusion and clashing of expressions at the same time, beyond time, which created a legend, so much so that after this movie on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, no other movie was done. I say this not because I was singing the role of Don Giovanni in that movie, but because of the special staging.

Q: I had the impression your Don Giovanni was definitively a Venetian oligarch—if not Casanova, any other, maybe unconsciously.

Raimondi: Maybe so.

Q: On June 9, the Schiller Institute will present in Rome its volume *Canto e diapason*. . . . What do you think about the book and about the worldwide campaign to lower tuning to Verdi's A=432 (equal to C=256 Hz)?

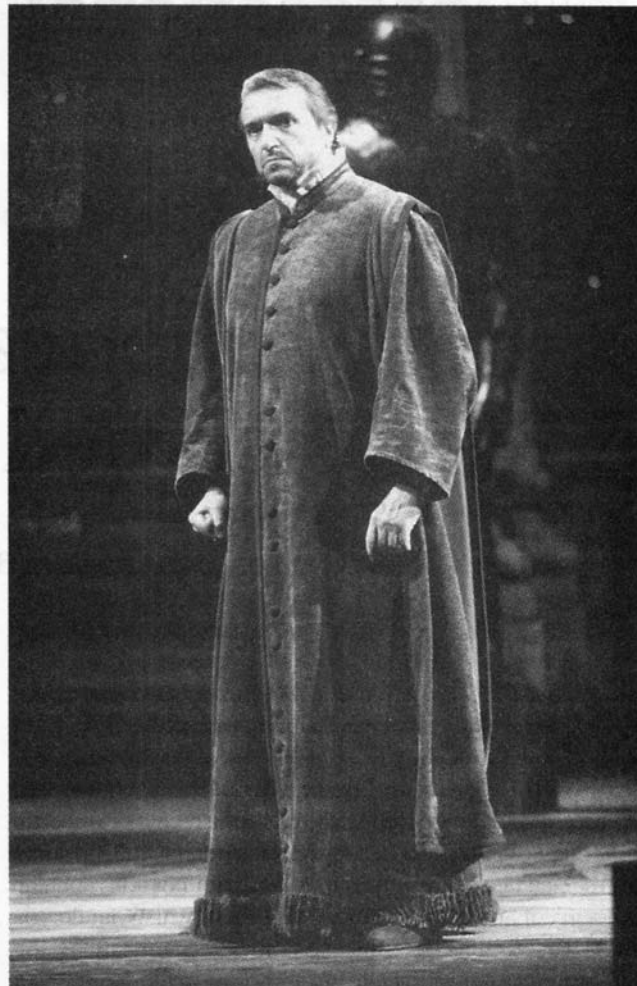
Raimondi: It is a beautiful initiative if, as you say, it goes back to Verdi. But, as in the case of most beautiful initiatives, which is the reality? There are too many interests involved. Singers will never be able to get together and say, "From now on we sing only at A=432." Conductors are not interested in the sound an orchestra can give with such a low A, because when the conductor plays symphonic music he wants a more brilliant sound in order to get certain sonorities.

Q: Placido Domingo emphasized another problem, which is that the A changes from theater to theater.

Raimondi: Yes, of course. If you go to the United States, it is a quarter-tone lower; if you sing in Vienna, it is a half-tone higher, and this provokes a total misplacing in the way of singing, in the position of sounds which a singer obviously feels moving from one opera theater to the next, from one nation to another.

Q: This was exactly one of the reasons why Verdi promoted, in 1884, a law to "unify the A as A=432 Hz," not only in Italy but "in the whole music world," because, as he wrote, "music is a universal language, why should an A in Milan or Paris become a B-flat in Rome?"

Raimondi: This has been discussed for centuries, but it has not yet been realized, because the initiative has to come from conductors.



Ruggero Raimondi performs the role of Fiesco in Verdi's opera *Simon Boccanegra*.

Q: Do you think the lack of good singers, and of certain voices in particular, is also due to this problem?

Raimondi: For sure. If you lower tuning, the register shift moves a half-tone, the E-natural becomes an E-flat, the F an E. Today there is a hybrid of voices which, in my opinion, is also due to this fact. You no longer have true dramatic bassos, dramatic baritones, everything is a mixture. This happens because there is no balance in the sound, and because the register shift is misplaced. When you use the E-flat in order to give the voice a particular color, it is actually a D. When you sing an E, it is in reality an E-flat—the note should be much broader and supported. The E-flat requires another position than the E-natural.

Q: Yes, the singer is forced to shift register too early, and this is exactly what *Canto e diapason* demonstrates for all voices. It is therefore useful to emphasize this fact.

Raimondi: It is useful, yes, but our problem is that everybody is deaf. Everybody has his own interests.