
II. Sylvia Olden Lee

Who Is Sylvia?

by Dennis Speed

July 5—Lyndon LaRouche’s “Manhattan Project” to restore Hamilton’s Presidency to the United States by removing the “presidential pretense” that is the Obama Administration from power, is on a daily basis actively deliberating upon the following problem with thousands of people in the metropolitan area: “Is it possible, in a time of crisis such as this one, to avoid our impending national suicide?” The capacity of nations and empires for indifferent, sometimes sudden, and even festive self-destruction seems boundless, as it does in the trans-Atlantic sector today, an apparently uncontrollable societal compulsion.

Far more civilizations have failed than have succeeded in human history. Is that about to become our fate as well? Does the principle of self-government through human creativity, the shadow of which is cast

in the Preamble of the United States Constitution and the first sections of the Declaration of Independence, provide a sufficient basis for some set of Americans, who are simultaneously United States patriots as well as world-citizens, to change the fate about to be thrust upon us by the scythe of history? Could that fate not be avoided by America in the same way that Edgar Poe’s protagonist avoided his, in Poe’s famous story, “The Pit and the Pendulum”—by thinking creatively?

How might we out-think our assumptions, our “virtual reality” axioms, and survive by rejecting the sad inevitability of our present Obama-delivered course to thermonuclear extinction? *Götterdämmerung* —“the twilight of the gods”—is not “ordained” or “predestined” to occur. That is an anti-human notion: only Wagnerians need be condemned to that fate. Cultural



EIRNS/Robert Baker

The Schiller Institute Chorus conducted by Diane Sare, with tenor soloist Everett Suttle singing the spiritual “Great Day.”



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

William Warfield, Sylvia Olden Lee, and George Shirley (left to right), at the May 28, 1999 National Music Conference “For a Marian Anderson National Conservatory of Music Movement” at Rankin Chapel, Howard University.

suicide has, throughout most history, merely been “ordained” by cultures that have, often decades before, and often willfully so, lost their moral fitness to survive.

Especially viewing, at this stage, the prospects that presently surround the U. S. Trump/Clinton-dominated Presidential electoral process, the only recourse available now is, as one New York City radio preacher’s punch-line puts it: “It’s time to pray.” There is a caveat. In the words of the Psalmist of the Old Testament: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Axioms must fall for a truly human solution to arise in the mind. “Obama cannot be immediately and lawfully removed from control of the Presidency” is such an axiom.

On Sunday June 26, the New York Schiller Institute Community Chorus participated in a memorial tribute to the extraordinary vocal coach, pianist, and pedagogue, Sylvia Olden Lee, the first African-American contracted at the Metropolitan Opera of New York (1954), and a former member of the Schiller Institute Advisory Board. Lee, who died in 2004, worked with the Schiller Institute from 1993 until her death. She would have been 99 years old this June 29. (The Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture, which has in the past three years championed the principle of restoring “proper tuning”—not higher or lower, but scientific tuning which preserves and strengthens human vocal production through Italian bel canto training and performance—co-sponsored the event. Foundation board member and conduc-

tor Tony Morss also gave a presentation there.) The combination symposium and musical program, particularly its concluding half, was a successful attempt to pose a resolution to the dilemma posed in Psalm 137:4. The “strange land” of arbitrary and irrational demands placed on singers by artificially high tunings has been an area of interest and combat for three decades now, and is central to every other problem of education of our time.

Drama as Music

The audience was placed in a dramatic setting that began with Sylvia addressing it directly—through a videotaped extemporaneous presentation she had given in February of 1994 to a confer-

ence of the Schiller Institute, at the time that Lyndon LaRouche had just days earlier been released from prison. (LaRouche had been unjustly incarcerated for five years, from January 1989 until January 1994.)

Following the video, Elvira Green, recently retired artist-in-residence at North Carolina Central College, and Diane Sare, founder and director of the New York Schiller Institute Community chorus, evoked the spirit and person of Sylvia Lee in short reminiscences about her character and her work.

Sylvia often said that the initials of her name, the same as that of her mother, stood for “Save Young Lyric Voices In Advance.” Her “Project SYLVIA” converged on work that the Schiller Institute had pioneered in the mid-1980s, at the instigation of Lyndon LaRouche, on returning the Classical music world to the proper tuning at C=256 cycles per second. This was the “human tuning” used by Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Verdi, Dvorak, et al., as opposed to the raising of the pitch by the likes of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels during the late 1930s.

The crime committed against musicians, particularly vocalists, of arbitrary tuning “for artistic brilliance” goes largely unreported, and even largely unnoticed; that is exactly how, and why, “young lyric voices” find themselves battered, destroyed, and discarded. Maestro Anthony Morss, recently retired from a career of orchestral conducting since 1959, provided



EIRNS/Robert Baker

Some of the participants in the musical portion of the program (right to left): Elvira Green, Everett Suttle, Frank Mathis, and accompanist Robert Wilson.

a most in-depth, needed “backgrounder” to the concert audience on the battle to restore principle to Classical music. In fact, it is exactly the inability to stand up for principle in this matter, as the Schiller Institute did in 1988 with the release of its *Manual on Tuning and Registration*, that accounts for the horrendous decline in familiarity with Classical music among youth today in the United States and Europe.

The “musical” portion of the program then commenced. Without the “pre-musical” sections, however, the intent of the whole tribute to Sylvia would have been inaccessible to the audience. The use of a choral, multi-voiced prologue, including Sylvia’s own voice, conveyed the intent, and appeared to have accomplished the effect desired.

Elvira Green provided the “invocation,” performing the Spiritual “City Called Heaven” unaccompanied. Three Spirituals, “Go Down, Moses” (arranged by Sylvia Lee), “Come Out De Wilderness” (traditional), and “My Lord, What A Morning” (arranged by Harry T. Burleigh) were then performed by the Schiller Institute New York Community Chorus, conducted by Diane Sare.

Several individual musical selections, all of which Lee had coached singers in through the decades, were performed: “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted” (tenor John Sigerson), “Ritorna vincitor” (soprano Indira Mahajan), “Mon coeur s’ouvre a ta voix” and “O Rest in the Lord” (mezzo-soprano Mary Phillips), “Lensky’s Aria” (tenor Everett Suttle), “The Lark” (baritone Frank

Mathis), “Dio, che nell’alma infondere” (Suttle/Mathis), “Du bist die Ruh” (soprano Michelle Fuchs), “Adelaide” (Sigerson), “Plegaria (Los tres amores),” (Suttle), “Que te importa que no venga” and “Anch’io dischiuso un giorno” (soprano Rosa D’Imperio). The chorus and soloists then sang Verdi’s “Va, pensiero” from the opera *Nabucco* to conclude.

Tragedy and Discovery

Now the audience was prepared to listen to the “discovery” they were about to be caused to make: *The Life of Christ*, a song cycle composed, with narration, by Roland Hayes, one of the greatest artists ever produced by the United States. A twenty-minute intermission gave the audience time to prepare themselves, and also allowed those not prepared to “journey to the upper room” to leave. *The Life of Christ* consists of ten songs, with Roland Hayes-authored narration preceding each selection. The singer—or in this case, singers—have the option to add other pieces, as Hayes himself did, where appropriate. In this case, two were added by Everett Suttle and Frank Mathis, who generally alternated. Hayes’ narrative continuity was performed by Elvira Green. Green had personally worked with Roland Hayes on several of these very Spirituals, as had Sylvia Lee. Since Hayes had himself learned how these Spirituals were to be performed from his mother, who had grown up as a slave on a Georgia plantation (which plantation Hayes, once he had made a career, later purchased as a

home for his mother), the tradition of Spirituals singing that was being presented to that audience was directly taken from their original mode of performance.

Selections seven, eight and nine—“The Last Supper,” “They Led My Lord Away,” and “He Never Said a Mumberlin’ Word,” were the turning point, not only in the song cycle, but in the entire day’s performance. Performers, narrator, and even audience became one, directly hearing, in the unaccompanied “He Never Said,” the scene of Christ’s crucifixion transposed onto the stage of their imagination. This is a moment rarely achieved in musical performance, and is the inner force of what usually goes by the name “prayer” for lack of a better term. Hayes prefaced this piece: “In respect both to its music and to its marvelous words, this song is a master work among all Aframerican religious folk songs. It definitely was the creation of an African who came to these shores already an accomplished bard. This particular version is a song sermon, emphatically a solo. He whom this poet-musician so poignantly reveres in this song *is the only being he would call master.*”

It was reaching this point, this discovery, simultaneously shared by one hundred other minds, of a previously unknown “continent of the spirit,” Percy Shelley’s “everlasting universe of things” that “flows through the mind,” the most profound type of human experience—“the land that speaks my language”—for the which all the other effort of the day had been made. The audience “instinctively” recognized that it had been brought to a new level, to higher ground, which was displayed in the sudden and deep silence of mental absorption that enveloped the performance. That had been achieved by using what *appeared* to be the most simple tool of the Classical musical repertoire—the unaccompanied, trained single human voice. All the greatest composers of history, known and unknown, Western and non-Western would, however, have known otherwise.

The artists used the conclusion of *The Life of Christ* to reinforce this moment of discovery, with an unaccompanied performance of the Spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” This was performed by Elvira Green, who interpolated a change in the text, unplanned by her: she changed the refrain “Were you there” in her last verse to “You *are* there”!

Asked about this the next day, she reported that as she sang, she discussed with Hayes and Sylvia whether this would be right to do, “and I got Roland’s permission.” So the idea “you are there,” at that moment, in that setting, was, as in all great uses of metaphor, a si-

multaneous reference to the text, to Hayes, to the audience, to Christ, and to Sylvia Lee. Green ended the program as she had begun it, simultaneously inside and outside of the concert program itself, acting as chorus for the event as a whole.

The “chorus proper,” the Schiller Institute Chorus, with Everett Suttle as the tenor soloist, then sang the Spiritual, “Great Day.” The exiting audience appeared to agree with the Spiritual’s outlook.

‘What’s This Got to Do with Reality?’

Americans claim to be powerless to use the Constitutional power of impeachment, yet still pretend to be free, even though the murderers that carried out the 9/11 attack, specifically their Saudi and British components, still operate with impunity. Is our population so terrorized by the “drone presidency” of Barack Obama, that it would rather escape *from* freedom rather than fight *for* it? It is only by developing the ability to experience true freedom through art, and the ability to convey that sense of true freedom through artistic performance—the task of the Schiller Institute as a chorus, and as an organization—that we are likely to provide the nation with the “ganas”—the desire—to win against tyranny.

In his essay, “On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy,” poet and historian Friedrich Schiller states: “True art . . . does not aim for a mere temporary play: it seriously intends not to transpose a person into a merely momentary dream of freedom, but to make him really and in fact free, and to accomplish this by awakening in him a force, exercising it and developing it, to thrust the sensuous world, which otherwise only presses upon us as crude material, bearing down upon us as a blind power, into an objective distance, to transpose it into a free work of our mind, and to achieve mastery over the material with ideas.”

The Schiller Institute is experimenting with this same principle of the employment of the chorus on our present national tragedy, in today’s Manhattan. Succeeding, as Aeschylus did through Greek drama and music, in teaching our present-day Athenians that “there are no gods living on Mount Olympus” is the first step in preparing Americans to defeat the British “empire of the mind” that holds them hostage, placing the shackles on themselves at night. Alexander Hamilton opposed slavery, used his mind, and built a national republic, with Manhattan as its capital. Can we demand anything less of ourselves, if we would keep it?