

## Interview: Carlo Bergonzi



# 'There is only one scientific tuning fork, A = 432'

Carlo Bergonzi is one of the great tenors of our era, renowned for his performances of the Italian operatic repertoire of the 19th century; he participated with Renata Tebaldi from the early 1950s onward in reviving many important works of the Golden Age of "bel canto" opera, the era of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi. Now 64 years of age, he is still a star at the Metropolitan Opera and many European opera houses, and continues to add to his long list of recordings. In addition, he teaches master classes on singing in Europe and the United States, including one in Busseto, Italy, the home town of composer Giuseppe Verdi.

The interview published here was conducted in Boston, Massachusetts by Jeanne Percesepe Bell on Nov. 15, 1988, following a master class given by Maestro Bergonzi in that city, and shortly after his appearance at the Metropolitan Opera in *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti. The legislation referred to, is a bill introduced in the Italian Senate by Senators Boggio and Mezzapesa, which would mandate the tuning fork of Giuseppe Verdi, A = 432 (C = 256). The proposed law grew out of a Schiller Institute conference in Milan in April 1988, in which soprano Renata Tebaldi and baritone Piero Cappuccilli participated.

Note that in the discussion on vowels, it is the Italian pure vowels that are referred to, not the American ones. Maestro Bergonzi's demonstration of the correct pronunciation of these vowels in singing cannot, unfortunately, be reproduced in print. The interview, conducted in Italian, has been translated by EIR.

**Q:** You supported in Italy the petition for going back to Verdi's tuning of A = 432. What difference would it make if Verdi's tuning fork were adopted?

**Bergonzi:** You know that there is the scientific tuning fork, and then there are all the other tuning forks which are worthless; we have to always speak about the scientific tuning fork, 432, the ideal one for voices, for human nature, insofar as the registral passage is not moved around. You know that the passage starts from E-F-F-sharp to G. These are the four notes of the *passaggio*. If the tuning fork is raised higher, the *passaggio* is moved.

I have just arrived from Vienna, where I sang in *Lucia* before coming here to the Metropolitan, and in Vienna we got up to 448-450, which means we're half a tone higher. This means we have to move all the vocal categories one half-tone higher. The bass, the baritone, the mezzosoprano are all shifted up a half-step. Those who get ruined the worst are two categories: sopranos and tenors. Because if there is a D-natural, the light soprano has to sing an E-flat, and if there's an E-flat she has to sing an E-natural.

I already told Mrs. Celani [of the Schiller Institute in Italy] for the conference that will be held on Nov. 24 in Rome and then in Paris, to bring this out very clearly: If we are going to safeguard the world's singing heritage, we must absolutely return down to A = 432. I don't believe that there still is that big problem I discussed with Mrs. Celani a year ago in Busseto, because for the violin I don't think it's so hard to slacken the strings a little. If there is a small problem it is in the brasses and the woodwinds (clarinet, bassoons, horns, and trumpets) but I don't know if it's a real problem. If I'm not mistaken you told me that in New Jersey they put on *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* with an orchestra tuned to A = 435; so they did manage to tune down the orchestra.

**Q:** Now they're looking for older instruments in order to be able to perform *Adriana Lecouvreur*. . . .

**Bergonzi:** Good. That's a problem that has to be solved. The oboe for example has fewer problems because you can change the reed.

**Q:** With the lower tuning the oboe harmonizes better with voices, one could say it "sings."

**Bergonzi:** We have to bring the discussions to a conclusion at this point. Also in the [Italian] House and the Senate, because if we want to save the vocal heritage, in which Italy is still in the first rank, we must adhere to the normal tuning, which is 432. We have always been exporters of voices and, even though all the other nations are in difficulty like us, we are still the fatherland of bel canto and I think that it's also in the government's interest to safeguard this heritage.

To preserve it, the discussions should come to an end.

They have to make a decision, not a drastic one, because that would be too harsh a word, but they have to decide to set this tuning fork at 432. Then, given that they already have the instruments ready for symphonic playing, for the symphony concerts they can keep whatever tuning fork they want, but for opera they've got to go back to the Verdi tuning.

Otherwise we will go on not having any more contraltos, mezzosopranos, we will only have light baritones instead of the dark Verdi baritones. With [Piero] Cappuccilli, the era of the Verdi baritone has come to an end. I repeat what I've said for years: If we went back to Verdi's tuning in the course of five years we'd be back to the old days with voices. It's certain.

We should bring in experts, also to the House, the Senate, the government, and give them examples of what the 432 tuning means, because, with all due respect a politician can be a great politician, he can talk about everything, but he can be negative when it comes to music. For him 432 hertz is algebra, he will wonder what 432 vibrations per second means. So we have to explain it to him, so he knows that 432 is the tuning pitch we absolutely have to reach.

Tebaldi said it, Pavarotti agrees, Cappuccilli agrees, we all agree. I have seen in your publications that you've interviewed all these artists and they all agree. Things might be controversial among orchestra conductors, who like high-pitched sounds. But this is madness, because Mozart wrote his operas in the days when there was the right tuning fork. But the voices were what they were, and the human voice has remained the same. We're the ones who are falsifying it, who are bringing in unnatural alterations into the voices. Even those who have special vocal qualities feel strained, and that's not right.

**Q:** Masters like Mozart wrote their instrumental compositions with the voice in mind, too.

**Bergonzi:** Sure, in this sense we're going against what they wrote. We are saying the composers are wrong. We're the ones who are making the mistake. Look at Donizetti, in the 19th century. Donizetti and Bellini who wrote all these very high vocal ornaments. Today the Finale of the duet in *Lucia* is not done any more, because the tenor sings a note higher than the soprano's. I made a recording with Beverly Sills, in which I sing Donizetti's original cadenza, but we had to repeat it so many times, because it's outside what is natural. At one time I did it regularly, because it was within the natural tuning.

**Q:** It's interesting the conductor Richard Bonyngé has now signed our petition.

**Bergonzi:** Good. I am now going to record with Bonyngé *Adriana Lecouvreur* at the beginning of December. We'll talk about it.

**Q:** All the great singers of the world have backed the peti-

tion, Joan Sutherland, Renata Tebaldi, Caballé, Domingo. Some singing teachers in New York have supported it. But I must say that in Boston, one teacher told me he likes the higher 440 tuning fork better.

**Bergonzi:** But this is a singing teacher?

**Q:** Yes.

**Bergonzi:** I don't even want to know the name, because I don't want to talk about singing teachers. If there is a singing teacher in Boston who talks that way, I think he knows very little about voices. He is not even qualified to teach singing.

**Q:** Last night you spoke at the master class of the importance of good diction to sing correctly. I noticed that some of last night's singers sang with very open vowels. This is not really bel canto technique, right?

**Bergonzi:** It's not right. I gave an example, the "e" should never be open, nor the "a," either. They should be supported on the diaphragm and brought forward. Never let out air before the voice is emitted. You have to immediately attack the supported sound, or otherwise the diaphragm won't work.

This is why, getting back to singing teachers, they don't know this rule, and for them 444-448-450 is like playing the lottery. Do they play the lottery here in Boston? Somebody who sings, on the other hand, knows what the tuning fork means. If the note is supported on the diaphragm, the sound is elevated and one sings forward, the sound is projected forward; if you sing without diaphragmatic support, the sound goes backward, and you have to sing with physical force. But you should not use physical force. I don't even use it, and I am 64 years old, and at my age it would be allowed. But a young person, whatever quality of voice has been given to him or her by nature, needs good technique. There is only one vocal technique. It's the most elementary thing there is. We are the ones who going looking for what's difficult.

I was lucky, because I met a great doctor, Professor Frugoni, who was [the celebrated mezzosoprano Giulietta] Simoniato's husband. We were very good friends. One day we spoke about the diaphragm and he told me, "Everybody's wrong. The teachers don't know what the diaphragm means. When we are born, we breathe with the diaphragm. It's a natural breathing." But then when we go to school they start telling you, "breathe low, breathe high, raise your shoulders, stick out your chest," and the diaphragm gets blocked and it stops working. Or there are even people who use weights, as in wrestling. They sing then with the physical side, the voice gets forced, voices get false, and it's unpleasant for the singer too, who can't find the right technique.

I hope our effort succeeds, and we will be able to say: We've helped some young people. We have saved a heritage, we have saved opera, we have saved bel canto. Let's hope that the next time we meet, the tuning fork will be already at the right pitch, and we will be able to talk about how voices are growing. Thank you.