

'Music is Hard Work!'

June 13—"I don't feel that my approach as a vocal coach of interpretation is unique. But I probably am unique in beating the devil out of singers to help them create an interpretation meant to be closest to the composer's intention for his opera, oratorio, *lied*, chanson, or song." Sylvia Olden Lee could demand and elicit a caliber of musical and intellectual excellence from singers that other teachers could not, because she demanded the same excellence from herself. Here is some of the advice she offered, as recorded by author Elizabeth Nash in her book, *The Memoirs of Sylvia Olden Lee, Premier African-American Classical Vocal Coach: Who is Sylvia*:

Try setting your alarm at 6:15. Don't get out of bed. Don't go to the bathroom. Reach for your score and open it. Don't make a sound. Read it as you would a novel and put yourself in the place of the character. Try to acquire most of your artistic knowledge in quietness. It is your duty as a singer to know everything on the page except the printer's mark at the bottom.

For an opera, singers should be familiar with the libretto and its source, whether it's Shakespeare or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It's not enough to know that Gounod wrote

Faust. Who wrote the original story? They don't have to be authorities on the composer's and dramatic or literary author's lives. But they should at least know the author's intention and what prompted the composer to set this text to music.

... For a song, singers should know who wrote the poem. It must be superb, since the composer decided it was worthy of being set to music. ... Initially, the singers should look up the poet's life and read one other of his works, so as to take on his mantle. Then they should sit and silently study their song's poem. Next, they should say it aloud to discover the rhythms and words to be accented. If you take the tune away, some singers can't do the song. That's why I insist: "learn the text first!" Mr. Rudolf stated: "Both Beethoven and Verdi, never having written literary texts in their lives, said on their death beds: Pay attention to the words." They really could have said: "Pay attention to the thoughts."

... Singers can hold their scores if they must, but there's got to be some interpretation there! When teaching German *lieder*, Gerhard Hüsich insisted that his students speak the lyrics as dramatic monologues before singing them. ...

... But no one can put the meaning in your head. You have to bring it out of yourself!