

Carlo Bergonzi sings farewell in New York

by Jerry Pyenson

Lovers of Classical singing witnessed a truly extraordinary presentation of Italian song and opera selections at the farewell recital of Italian tenor Carlo Bergonzi, held on April 17 in New York's Carnegie Hall. The hall was filled to capacity, with about 50 people seated on the stage, and the audience's response was unlike anything this listener has experienced. It was not just that the audience loved this singer and his ability to shape the musical line; but as was clear from discussions overheard, many of them knew all too well that the qualities which Bergonzi displays are becoming increasingly rare. Even before Bergonzi, who dominated the Metropolitan Opera for many years, began to sing, he was greeted with not one, but two standing ovations.

The quality of his singing belied the nearly 70 years that Bergonzi has reached. One heard musical phrase after phrase dominated by the conscious intent to communicate the overarching idea associated with each song. The high notes were there, the *forte* notes were there; but, more impressively, so were the swelled notes, the *messa di voce*, the floated octave jumps into a "piano" head voice—all of which revealed a secure *bel canto* technique on which Bergonzi leaned throughout the evening. His pronunciation of the text was absolutely clear, while his voice remained elevated, never guttural. One had the sense that Bergonzi sang without expelling breath—an effect which is associated with the Italian phrase, *inhalare la voce*. One can go to concerts or operas for three months and not hear such high quality vocalism. But there was more.

Singing from the mind

Bergonzi's singing can be characterized by a beautiful voice guided by intelligence and a special kind of "courage." Many singers have mastered their voices up to the point of producing a consistently beautiful tone on every vowel; but in simply producing one beautiful sound after another, they soon become boring. Bergonzi is clearly of a different mind. What one remembers of the evening is not this or that particular note, nor even particular passages, but the intelligent care that each song and aria received, being guided and directed by a conception of the composition as a whole, so that the idea of the song be better communicated.

His concert opened with three songs composed by Giuseppe Verdi, the second of which, "Non t'accostare all'urna," puts demands on both the singer and the audience. Here was displayed the courage and intelligence with which Bergonzi approached the song. The singer represents the thought of one who, after he is dead and interred, addresses those who mourn his death:

"I detest your anguish, I decline your hyacinths; what value to the dead are two tears or two flowers? Cruel one! You should have tendered help to me when life led me to anguish and sighs. Why should your fruitless weeping deafen the forest?" Verdi, through the singer, leads the audience to reflect on the unique importance of the individual, and so Bergonzi's honest rendering of the musical conception matched and amplified the poetical idea.

Two short songs of Vincenzo Bellini followed, in which the beauty of the musical line was matched through very subtle gradations of intensity to communicate the ideas. The second song, "Ma rendi pur contento," was sung twice, the repeat in a quiet half-voice. The words: "Great happiness, O love, to my beloved's heart, and I shall pardon you, if my own heart grieves. I fear her anguish more than my own, for I exist more in her than in myself." Rossini's song "La danza (Tarantella napoletana)," Donizetti's song "Me voglio fa 'na casa," and a song by Franz Schubert, sung in Italian as "Mille cherubini in coro," were each exceptional.

Three arias from three Verdi operas rounded out the Classical section of the evening. Here again, the thoughtful listener is led to develop an idea of the aria, not through excessive emotional outbursts, but through the careful coloring of the voice to create the idea of the piece as a whole. That Bergonzi is not merely singing "naturally" with no scientific knowledge of what he is doing, was clear from the fact that in the Verdi selections, he adopted a darker, more "covered" sound, in contrast with with the earlier Bellini and Schubert pieces. As he sang the arias, one heard him place his voice increasingly in a covered position, especially as he ascended into his head voice. As Bergonzi put it in an interview in the April 16 issue of *Opera News*, explaining why he never sang the role of Othello in Verdi's so-named opera, "For Othello I would have had to prepare for at least two years, singing nothing else. The voice you need is like no other. It must be a covered, dark tone."

Just over one year ago, on April 8, 1993, Carlo Bergonzi courageously took up his vocal principles for the campaign of Lyndon LaRouche and the Schiller Institute to lower the official tuning to the scientifically based C=256 Hz. He insisted that not only is this necessary to protect and develop young people's voices for Classical singing, but that the departure from that natural standard is responsible for increasing rareness of truly "Verdian" voices—especially tenors. At that time, he claimed that when he had started there were 200 first-class tenors in the world. Now, he said, there are two and a half. On April 17, we heard one of them.

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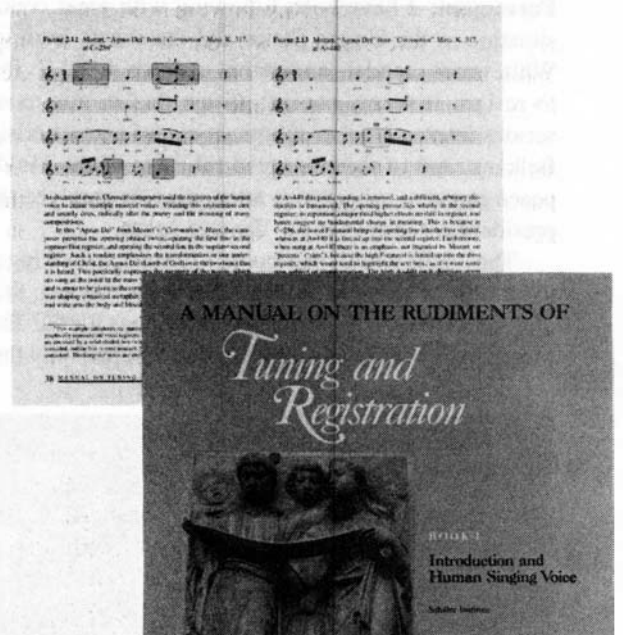
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—Carlo Bergonzi



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