

# Warfield on Tour, Uplifts Audiences with Classical Art: 'Live It, Baby!'

by Harley Schlanger

In his autobiography, *My Music and My Life*, world-renowned baritone William Warfield writes that, as a young man, he concluded that he “wanted to teach music, to bring a new generation the lessons of my life in art. I wanted to play a role in world culture.”

For those privileged to spend some time with him during his visit to Los Angeles the weekend of April 28-30, it is clear that he has not only achieved this dream, but, at 80 years of age, he is still pursuing it, with a zest and enthusiasm that belie his years. With a joy that is contagious, he is a rare example of what Friedrich Schiller envisioned when he wrote of the “beautiful soul.”

Born into a family of sharecroppers in Arkansas on Jan. 20, 1920, William Warfield grew up with a love of music. From singing as a boy soprano in a junior choir, to his first piano lessons at the age of nine, he knew his would be a life in music. After his voice changed, he rejoined his high school chorus in Rochester, New York, discovering that he had developed a beautiful baritone voice.

In the career that followed, he did a little bit of everything in music, from Broadway to Grand Opera, but his real love was the tradition of the German Classical lieder, and its American counterpart, the African-American Spiritual. From his first New York City recital at Town Hall in March 1950, to the present day, he has sung and taught this music around the world. His efforts have earned him the honorary title, “America’s Musical Ambassador.”

Maestro Warfield’s visit to Los Angeles was part of his ongoing collaboration with the Schiller Institute. While the visit was centered around a concert in Arcadia on April 29, he engaged in a dialogue with Schiller Institute members on art and beauty upon his arrival on April 28, and conducted a master class on April 30. What characterized all three events was his generous spirit, combined with the rigor which he insists is essential in presenting a piece of Classical art.

At the discussion on April 28, a young person asked how one knew whether art was art, or just garbage. Warfield responded by elaborating on the *substance* of art. All kinds of expressions come and go, said Warfield, but true art stands the test of time. Art without substance, he said, is like a tinkling cymbal. Another question followed, “Then how do you reach people who can’t define substance?” Warfield responded, “You must *be* it, you must live it, and someone else will find

it. Live it baby!”—and sang the Spiritual “This Little Light of Mine.”

## Dialogue on Classical Method

At both the seminar and the master class, Warfield demonstrated what he means when he says, “You must live it,” to communicate the profound ideas of the great artists. Art is not something for “special occasions,” but is part of one’s ongoing process of self-discovery. His journey in life, he said, has been one of discovery of the human soul. It is through music, the performance of great music, that we come closer to God. The performance is an extension of the Creator in man.

When asked if this is true of all music, he responded that true art stands the test of time. Classical music always deals with the question of man in the image of God, the oneness of soul and body, while “lower art” disconnects God from man. This is why, he said, in answer to a question about whether



Baritone William Warfield in Washington, D.C., 1994.



*Dr. Warfield with Lyndon LaRouche, at a National Music Conference for a Marian Anderson National Conservatory of Music Movement, Washington, D.C., May 1994.*

music can counter the present mass culture of violence, great music provides sustenance, the strength and inspiration needed, to win the long, hard battle over evil.

What about Spirituals, he was asked. Are they always depressing, or are they hopeful?

During the time of slavery, he said, the Negro Spiritual not only enriched and cultivated the soul of the individual, freeing his or her mind, but the lyrics often served as codes, for directions for escape routes and times of departure for runaway slaves, making possible the attainment of actual, physical freedom. Imagine the slovenly, self-defiled slave-master, watching his slaves singing Spirituals, saying to himself, "Eh, dem niggers jes' be singin' agin," as the slaves were actually paving their road to freedom!

### **Art as Ideas**

How does art work? This was the unspoken question which was the topic of the master class, in which Maestro Warfield offered criticisms and comments to Schiller Institute members and collaborators who presented songs and poems. Warfield concentrated in his criticism, on making the song or poem intelligible, so that the performer was able to convey the *idea* of the composer to the audience.

As Lyndon LaRouche has emphasized, the art of poetic recitation has been almost lost today, especially among Baby Boomers, for whom the idea of the poet is of secondary importance to the ego elation the Boomer experiences from his performance.

In working with people on their songs and poems, what

Warfield emphasized over and over again is that the performance must be primarily concerned with presenting the thought of the composer. In several of the poetic recitations, this came up as a kind of paradox between the meter and rhythm of the poetic line, and the idea presented by the poet.

In poetic recitation, Warfield stressed, you cannot just go along with the rhythm. "See where the sentence is going, to the complete thought," he said. The recitation must put that thought ahead of the meter. Too often, poetic recitation is dominated by a rhythm which is not justified by the thought in the poem. This produces the sing-song manner of recitation which obscures the real meaning.

Similarly, he addressed the problem of phrasing within a line, that pauses must never be arbitrary, but must enhance the meaning. When the performers responded to his suggestions, they and the audience were delighted to discover that bringing out the idea as he was suggesting actually enhanced the musicality of the line.

His criticisms were sometimes sharp, at other times were gentle nudges and offerings of encouragement. Underneath it all was a good humor which relaxed the performers, allowing them to be more natural, another prerequisite emphasized by the Maestro.

One example was his response to an older couple who sang a song about "True Love." Warfield asked how you know when you are getting old. "You know you're getting old," he answered, "when you confide in your best friend that you are having an affair, and he says, 'That's wonderful. Who's catering it?'"



*Dr. Warfield coaches a young singer at a day of music in commemoration of Marian Anderson, at Turners Memorial AME Church, Washington, D.C. The accompanist is Sylvia Olden Lee.*

## The Concert

All of the experiences gained from his lifetime of “living it” made the concert on April 29 a delight. The program included, in addition to Warfield, three Chinese musicians, who presented Classical Chinese songs played on traditional instruments. Also performing was Alfredo Mendoza, the Director of the famous Schola Cantorum children’s chorus of Mexico City, who sang a Spanish folk song, and several German lieder, with a transparently powerful tenor voice; and three members of the National Association of Negro Musicians (an organization headed by Warfield from 1985 to 1990), who sang arias from Verdi and Puccini, as well as several American folk songs and Spirituals.

Warfield’s performance was the highlight of the afternoon. He presented four sets of two songs each, through which he demonstrated the principle of artistic beauty in both German lieder and the African-American Spiritual. In each case, there was both a “story” presented and a “mood” which he captured, which captivated the audience.

He opened with two pieces by Robert Schumann, “Du Bist eine Blume,” and a rousing “Die beiden Grenadiere.” These were followed by the profoundly moving Spiritual, “Li’l Boy, How Old Are You?” in which the same question is repeated, over and over, but never the same way, and “Chil-lun Did You Hear When Jesus Rose?” These were written by Roland Hayes, who had been one of the inspirations for Warfield when he was beginning his career.

After the intermission, he sang two pieces by Schubert,

“Wanderers Nachtlied” and “Der Erlkönig.” The latter was particularly haunting, as he demonstrated the poetic principle of presenting different voices within a single piece, as there are four distinct voices which tell the harrowing tale of a fatal ride through a deep, dark forest.

He concluded the concert with two Spirituals that he sings without a break, “Take My Mother Home,” which was arranged by Hall Johnson, and “Ain’t Got Time To Die,” written by Johnson. To present these together properly requires all the artistry of Warfield’s 80 years, as they express the sublime *agapē* of Jesus, dying on the cross, and the overwhelming joy one experiences from “serving my master.” The audience was moved to tears by the first, in which Jesus, while dying a slow, agonizing death, asks that his mother be taken home, to be spared the pain of seeing him die. By combining this with the uplifting message of the second, that the singer is so busy doing good that he “ain’t got time to die,” the tears from the first are transformed to tears of joy.

As an encore, Warfield sang the Paul Robeson version of “Old Man River,” with its message that, like that river, we must roll on, so as to “keep on fightin’.”

In his autobiography, Warfield writes that there is a continuity in great art, that “it’s passed on directly, from elderly master to an eager young novice, from hand to hand, voice to voice, heart to heart.” This is what he is doing with his life today, at 80 years young, to bring light to a civilization plunging headlong into a Dark Age.

This is what he means when he says, “Live it, baby.”