

# A RECOMMENDATION FOR THE CORRECTION OF PITCH INVOLVING PERFORMANCES OF SINGERS IN OPERA, ORATORIO, AND CHORAL MUSIC OF THE BAROQUE-CLASSIC PERIOD: 1620-1820

**I**N THIS 20th century there has been a revival of performances of the vocal music of Bach, Haydn, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Gluck, Lully, Rameau, Cimarosa and others.

Alexander Wood in *The Physics of Music* (London, Methuen, 1962, p. 48) states that "Praetorius (1571-1631) suggested a 'suitable pitch' of a' 424.2 in 1619. This pitch—sometimes called Mean Pitch—agrees with Handel's own fork (a' 422.5 in 1751). . . . This pitch prevailed for about two centuries—the period of Handel (1685-1759), Haydn (1732-1809), Mozart (1756-1791), and Beethoven (1770-1827). It is the pitch for which their compositions were written."

This means that singers of today with our pitch a' 440 to 443 are required to sing the music of this period almost a semitone higher (in layman's terms 70.3 percent of a half-step) than originally composed. This presents a problem for the successful performance of the vocal music of 1620-1820. There is no evidence that the physiology of the singer's vocal equipment has altered since 1820.

Referring to *On the Sensations of Tone* (Helmholtz and translator-editor, Ellis<sup>1</sup>, 1885, p. 512, art. 11, available in Dover reprint, 1954), Ellis states:

"As this was the period of the great musical masters, and as their music is still sung, and sung frequently, it is a great pity that the pitch should have been raised, and that Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Weber for example, should be sung at a pitch more than a Semitone higher than they intended. The high pitch strains the voices and hence deteriorates from the effect of the music, when applied to composi-

tions not intended for it." [It is almost a semitone higher, not more than a semitone higher.]

Ellis further states, p. 544:

"Instruments can be tuned or manufactured at almost any required pitch. The human voice is born, not manufactured . . . an instrument beyond human control. The usages of Europe have, however, made it the principal instrument, and when it is present, have reduced all others to an accompaniment. Hence it is necessary that these other instruments should have their compass and pitch regulated by that of the human voice. . . . it is evident that Handel's sustained a'' in the *Hallelujah* chorus had 845 vib., but would now be sung in 904 vib.; and that Mozart's f''' in the *Zauberflöte* would have meant 1349 vib., but would now have to be sung at 1455 vib. The strain that this would put upon voices is evident, and no composer who wished his music to be well represented would think of making such demands of his singers."

Alexander Wood in *The Physics of Music*, p. 47 states:

"For one thing, the musical effect of a performance depends on the pitch at which it is played. The human voice is particularly sensitive in this respect, and if the pitch demanded for a vocal piece is uncomfortably high, more effort is involved and the quality is less satisfactory . . . the effect designed by the composer is achieved only if the pitch of the instrument is that for which the music was written."

Much has been said by conductors, coaches and musicologists about authenticity of performance. Therefore it is astounding that such a fundamental aspect of musical performance has been so overlooked as that of original pitch of performance and the consequent harm done to voices trying to adjust to modern pitch.

It is not only a question of the pitch of vocal cord vibration. Recent advances in the knowledge of vowel res-

onances (formants) in relationship to pitch have shown that a singer of any category, male or female, sings naturally and freely and with maximum ease and quality when the vowel formant is harmonically related to sung pitch. Just as a vibrator of a certain pitch must find the correct length and width for maximum resonance, so must the singer find a correct vowel mold which will resonate and yet not be forced beyond its elastic capability. Otherwise there is a loss of quality and a possibility of vocal injury. In the light of vowel-pitch relationships of the voice and the relationship of vowel-pitch to registers, there seems to be more involved than voices singing music almost a half-step higher than originally written. There seems to be a "conspiracy" against the registers of the voice and the vowel-pitch relationships for which Bach, Handel, Haydn and Mozart wrote. We may deduce that many of the difficulties of singing such arias as "Bleed and break," "Il mio tesoro intanto," "Dies Bildniss," "Un aura amorosa," "The trumpet shall sound," and roles such as Florestan in "Fidelio" are due to the fact that they are now performed almost a half-step too high for the voice classification involved. If a voice can easily sing them, it is by nature about a half step higher in its vocal form and sung pitch possibilities than the voice for which the composer wrote.

We can also state that this is one of the reasons that it is difficult to keep basses and tenors in choirs singing Bach and Handel. They are frequently singing music which is too high for them.

We must emphasize that the great composers knew the voice as a musical instrument. Handel's association with  
[Please turn the page.]

<sup>1</sup>Ellis discusses "mean pitch" in *The History of Musical Pitch in Europe*, App. xx, Section H, pp. 495 and 496, indicating the variance between 432 and 428.7 vibrations.

such virtuosi as Caffarelli, Farinelli and Senesino is ample proof of his understanding the human voice. Mozart stated (*The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, Emily Anderson, 1966, Vol. I., p. 292) . . . "I like an aria to fit a singer as perfectly as a well-made suit of clothes." His tuning fork was 421.6. Imagine his returning and hearing singers performing his music almost a half-step higher than he wrote!

Does it matter with the instruments—not too much, they are inanimate. But human voices can be seriously injured by singing vowels and pitches about a half-step above their tessituras.

#### OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing recommends that in concert singers be allowed to perform in the pitch for which the music was written. We emphatically suggest that they transpose their arias down one half-step if it is to their musical-vocal advantage. We also recommend to conductors that operas and oratorios of the early composers be performed with instruments of the original pitch, even if it is a matter of securing different instruments. Where this is difficult, we urge conductors to have the scores transposed one half-step down. We recommend that Music Publishers re-issue music of this period in the original pitch. This procedure will cre-

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ate an authenticity of performance that will replace the false brittleness of many of the performances of music of that period.

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### SCANLAN . . . . .

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expressed by the text. The flute lines are frequently derived from the contours of the vocal part.

*Canto Cantabile* for soprano and concert band was commissioned for the Yale Band's Spring Tour of Belgium, Holland, and England in 1972. This piece is approximately eight minutes in length, lyric in nature, and composed on a text of the composer. At the present time the manuscript is under revision and it will soon be available from AMP.

Wyner is presently at work on two pieces for voice: *Song of Songs* for soprano, women's chorus (possibly SATB) and chamber ensemble and *Intermedia* for soprano and string orchestra (and possibly percussion).

In summary, Wyner writes with a good understanding of the voice. In songs with a wide range, the texture of the accompaniment does not obscure the vocal line, even on the lowest notes. Textually significant notes are often approached by leap and prolonged for added emphasis.

Except for several of the early songs, Wyner employs changing meters and shifted accents to accommodate irregular and assymetric textural patterns. Instead of adjusting the text to fit the music, he has developed a style that fits the music to the text. The result is a rhythmic organization that is both varied and flexible.

Overall, Wyner's harmonic vocabulary shows a strong propensity toward linear counterpoint. A chordal texture is employed to produce vertical tension when needed, or to provide a harmonic background for the moving vocal line. □ □



ROGER SCANLAN received his Master of Music degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1966 and taught at Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa, from 1966 until 1968. He was appointed to the staff of the Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University in 1968 and is currently an Assistant Professor of Voice. He is presently completing his doctoral studies at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.