Betty Allen
President, Harlem School of the Arts

‘Children have the right to Classical education’

Betty Allen, mezzo-soprano, was born in Campbell, Ohio in 1930. She studied at Wilberforce University of Ohio, the Hartford Conservatory, and privately with Sarah Peck More, Zinka Milanov, and Carolina Segrera. Her opera debut took place in 1964 at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, in 1973 at the New York City Opera, and in 1974 at the Metropolitan Opera. Since 1979 she has been Executive Director and now President of the Harlem School of the Arts (H.S.A.) in New York, and teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and Curtis Institute. This interview was conducted by Kathy Wolfe on March 15, 1993.

Fidelio: What’s your view of the Schiller Institute campaign to return musical tuning to C = 256 Hz, the lower “Verdi A”?

Allen: I’m very curious about it, my mind is open, I’m interested to know more about what the project will entail. I would never say “I don’t want to know.”

For example, one pianist, an accompanist at H.S.A. said, when I posed the idea of returning to the old lower pitch, “Do you know how much trouble this is going to cause? I don’t even want to hear this! I don’t want to read
everyone had to adjust, because this was the Boston Symphony, and they'd announced, "This is our pitch, and therefore you'll do it or die."

**Fidelio:** How did you end up at Tanglewood?
**Allen:** I had five years of Latin in high school and two years of German, and when I got to Wilberforce my German was so good that the professor made me his assistant and I got a scholarship. I started out in pre-med, doing invertebrate zoology. I thought I was going to be a doctor like my grandfather.

I started singing accidently. When they asked me as a freshman, "What can you do?" I said, well I can sing a little song; I'd sung in church choir and in high school chorus. I got to liking singing more and more, and the more I sang the more they asked me. Finally, they asked me to join their touring group, the Wilberforce Singers. The alto was Leontyne Price! And I was the soprano. At the end of the second year I decided I wanted to go to music school.

I used to work summers in Hartford, Connecticut. One of my friends told me about this wonderful lady who came up to Hartford one day a week to teach private voice lessons, Sarah Peck More. She wouldn't have anything to do with the schools, she was very particular about that. I sang for

---

'When Dorothy Maynor started the Harlem School for the Arts, she was teacher, administrator, and janitor. She posted notices in local schools saying children could register if accompanied by a parent, and there was a stampede. She didn't want them to feel they were charity cases, so she set fees, but at 50¢ or even 10¢, so anyone could afford it.'

---

Above: Dorothy Maynor. Below: Outside the Harlem School of the Arts.
By the late 1960's she had 500 students.

Fidelio: Did you study or perform with Miss Maynor?
Allen: No, she began to call me when she was looking for a successor to run the school, many years later. I did sing one concert for her, a benefit to raise money for H.S.A., at the Cosmopolitan Club, where both she and I were members; and she spoke there about the school. I have no idea how she saw me exactly; she had her own ways of finding things out. I think our ideas did coincide, philosophically, about children, about the arts, about the need for the arts in the community, the need for the arts as a civilizing factor in peoples' lives, and all those things I articulated in public every now and then. She insisted upon the family unit as a strong core, in which I also believed.

She came to me because I was a singer, she wanted another singer to take over when she left, but I had no experience. I asked her whether she'd rather not have an administrator, and she looked very disdainful and said, "Nobody would follow anyone like that! I want someone to inspire children, to make them think that the arts are wonderful, make them look for something exciting and uplifting in the arts, and an administrator would not be someone who'd necessarily inspire children!"

I said, "But I've had no business administration courses, not even any education courses." And she said "Well, you run your own home, don't you? Then you can run the school—if you just imagine that this is your home and you treat it lovingly and carefully and kindly, as though it were your home, and take care of it and see it is never mistreated." I kept saying, "I don't know if I could," but she just refuted everything I said, and answered, "Yes, I think you can." This was at our first meeting.

I began during the summer of 1979 to come in as an adjunct to her, coming in to work along with her for a while. She was a very hard act to follow, those were very big shoes to fill. The school at the time was somewhat insular and didn't have a great many performing units. It was a well-kept secret at the time, because Miss Maynor never intended the children to have to become performers. I, on the other hand, think that no child can practice and work without having a venue to show what they've learned; to practice an hour a day and never have the opportunity to show the results. At that time the school was relatively small, the number of children was one-third of today, as was the budget, which at the time was $500,000 (it's $1.8 million now). There were 300 children. Now there are 1,500, so there's been quite a growth.

Fidelio: Please tell us about the H.S.A.'s programs today.
Allen: One very important thing which Miss Maynor began just before she left was "Arts in Education," or "Opportunities for Learning in the Arts," O.L.A. as we call it now. You know that the public school systems in New York and elsewhere in the U.S. have dropped music and other arts programs because of the budget crisis in the cities. Up through 1975, 1976, there were music and arts teachers in every school in the New York system, but in 1976, these programs were all simply stopped, the city funding stopped. By 1977 when we began our program here, there were no music or arts teachers left in the elementary schools in New York.

Fidelio: What do you think about the fact that the creditors of New York City, the bankers, did that?
Allen: I think the whole thing shows a remarkable lack of insight into what true education is. What this did in an area like Harlem was particularly devastating. Not only did the children lose out on the arts programs, but they lost the chance to gain in self-esteem, to be individuals, to think things through, to do things better, the incentive to solve problems, to doing that with the thought processes, to feel you could improve, to have a role model to show you how to improve—all of these things which come through the arts, were taken away. A more be-
'I have the right to the broadest possible education, and I want all the children I know to have it. I don't want only one tool—I want twenty tools! I don't want one language, I want twenty languages. I can speak five languages, and I think it helps me a great deal!'"