

MARIA CALLAS

Soprano Assoluta

A chronology of operatic scenes and arias sung live from the concert stage during the great years, 1949—1959.

NORMA (Bellini): *Casta diva... Ah! bello a me ritorna*
[RAI recording, 1949]

MACBETH (Verdi): *Vieni! t'affretta!... Or tutti sorgete*
LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR (Donizetti): *Mad Scene*
NABUCCO (Verdi): *Ben io t'invenni, o fatal scritto!...*
Anch'io dischiuso un giorno

LAKMÉ (Delibes): *Bell Song* (In Italian)
[RAI concert, Rome, February 18, 1952]

DIE ENTFÜHRUNG AUS DEM SERAIL (Mozart):
Martern aller arten (In Italian)

LOUISE (Charpentier): *Depuis le jour*

ARMIDA (Rossini): *D'amore al dolce impero*

DINORAH (Meyerbeer): *Shadow Song* (In Italian)
[San Remo concert, December 27, 1954]

LA VESTALE (Spontini): *Tu che invoco con onore*

SEMIRAMIDE (Rossini): *Bel raggio lusinghier*

HAMLET (Thomas): *Mad Scene* (In Italian)

I PURITANI (Bellini): *Vieni al tempio*
[RAI concert, Milan, September 27, 1956]

LA FORZA DEL DESTINO (Verdi): *Pace, pace, mio Dio!*

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE (Wagner): *Liebestod* (In Italian)
[Athens outdoor concert, August 5, 1957]

IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA (Rossini): *Una voce poco fà*
[Concert at Paris Opéra, December 19, 1958]

LA BOHÈME (Puccini): *Sì, mi chiamano Mimì*

MEFISTOFELE (Boito): *L'altra notte in fondo al mare*
[Television broadcast, London, October 3, 1959]

I PURITANI (Bellini): *Mad Scene*
[Dallas rehearsal, November 20, 1957]

IL PIRATA (Bellini): *Mad Scene*
[Concert of complete opera, New York,
January 27, 1959]

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MARIA CALLAS

Soprano Assoluta

Essay and Album Program Notes
by BRUCE J. SAXON

These three records of concert performances by Maria Callas might well be considered one of the most spectacular and important vocal collections ever produced. A sweeping statement, surely, but one borne out by incomparable singing throughout a wide range of material and interpretations which convey the soprano's remarkable contribution to the art of opera in the 20th Century. Selections contained herein span the soprano's greatest years, the decade 1949-1959, from her early days as leading prima donna in Italy, to her reign as international artist of first magnitude.

In the age of recording, there have been few recognized titans, those whose impact carried from Buenos Aires to Tokyo, Milwaukee to Moscow, their names familiar even to the non-musical. Toscanini, Chaliapin and Caruso are foremost examples of that rare few, who by force of unique talent and personality changed the course of musical history in our time. Callas stands among them. Whether through some evolutionary need in music, or, if you will, some design of the gods, Maria Callas presides over a musical elite whose legends will prevail as long as recording technology exists to document their achievements.

NOTE: To retain the best possible sonic properties, years have been spent tracing these performances to their original recorded sources. Several of the earliest selections featured in this collection, however, were originally recorded on 78 rpm acetate transcribing discs rather than tape, which accounts for a high ratio of surface noise. Every possible technical effort has been made to eliminate clicks and minimize imperfections typical of early acetate transcriptions.

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That Rarest of Musical Species, the Soprano Assoluta

This album is entitled “Soprano Assoluta,” an Italian sobriquet rivalled only by the terms *bel canto* and “coloratura” in misuse and misinterpretation. Moreover, the Italian word *soprano* is masculine in origin and the adjective should properly read *assoluto*; but possibly due to association with the more common term, *prima donna assoluta* and the popular usage of *soprano assoluta* in Spanish-speaking countries, the feminine linguistic permutation *soprano assoluta* now prevails internationally. Any soprano worthy of selling a good number of records may likely be advertised as *soprano assoluta* by the public relations machines of the music industry, while in fact there is no such creature today.

One encyclopedia of music lists Callas as a “coloratura and dramatic soprano.” Forty years ago, before the advent of Callas, this equation would have seemed an impossibility, an odd and glaring editorial blunder. Yet it became fact. The venerated conductor Tullio Serafin once said of Callas, “That woman can sing anything written for the female voice.” Operatically speaking, that is just what a *soprano assoluta* is and can do.

The breed was always rare, and to aid in definition I offer Beaumarchais’ barber, Figaro (also Rossini’s and Mozart’s) as example, who in his day was required by trade to perform anything from haircuts to surgery, matchmaking to midwifery. Ours is an age of specialization, and in some ways we are the better for it. Yet when a number of unlikely skills meet within one human package, the results can be truly wondrous. Such is the nature of the *soprano assoluta*.

The term was born in the early 19th Century to describe those sopranos capable of adapting their voices to the range (or *tessitura*), coloristic and technical requirements of any variety of roles and musical styles. There were no such distinctions then as high soprano (or “coloratura”), lyric soprano, *lirico spinto*, dramatic or mezzo-soprano. Once early romantic Italian opera evolved, a soprano considered well-schooled and possessing ample vocal equipment was assumed prepared when called upon to undertake any lead role—whether it be Adalgisa or Norma in Bellini’s opera, Anne Boleyn or Jane Seymour in Donizetti’s tragic romance, Elizabeth or Eboli in Verdi’s *Don Carlos*.

It should be noted, on the other hand, that the familiar divisions of tenor, baritone and bass already prevailed once the domination of the *castrato* in opera had past. As with soprano voices, these categories were to become further refined into distinct types. The *soprano assoluta* (also referred to at times as *soprano sfogato* or *soprano drammatico d’agilità*) marked the equivalent of spanning every territory of the female voice as we know it today.

During this era, soprano voices expanded compass to tones up to the high C and beyond, all the while retaining the rich and dependably solid lower-registers now the domain of mezzo-sopranos. This superhuman extension of range was developed through well-guarded “secrets” of coaching, and complimented by full mastery of the intricacies of ornamentation. The new possibilities of this voice challenged and delighted operatic composers, who continued writing for this special instrument throughout a 50-year period. (Within this collection, Mozart, Rossini, Spontini and Bellini exemplify composition for the true *soprano assoluta*.)

But human beings are far from perfect, and these sopranos were prone to betraying deficiencies within the scheme of superhuman demands placed upon them. The singing of the most notable and revered 19th Century “absolute sopranos”—Maria Malibran, Pauline Viardot, Giuditta Pasta, Cornélie Falcon—was variable in quality, and each occasionally met collapse in one or another vocal register. Contemporary reports are rife with the disasters and inconsistencies of voice which were to plague these sopranos.



Angus Mc Bean

As the middle of the century approached, operatic composers began creating music with a specific vocal range or sound in mind (Wagner, Delibes, Thomas and Puccini, all represented on these discs, may be considered examples of those who wrote for vocal types). Thus, a variety of female vocal categories evolved, each voice specializing in music thought best suited to particular tonal and technical characteristics.

In the 20th Century, the *soprano assoluta* was reborn in the Greek-American Maria Callas. Closest claimant to the title may have been her predecessor, Rosa Ponselle, who, however, lacked the highest notes required and the ability to sustain the lofty *tessitura* typical of operas such as *Lucia di Lammermoor* or *I Puritani*.

Interestingly, singers of today regularly embrace repertoires far wider in style and chronology than that attempted by Callas during her career. Beverly Sills, for example, has sung operas from the baroque to the 12-tone era of composition, and a number of others—male and female—do likewise. There are even a few sopranos today that command vocal ranges as wide as that of Callas in her prime, and at least two command florid techniques which equal and at times surpass hers: Joan Sutherland and Beverly Sills. All the notes are there, but the theoretical casting of Sills as Gioconda or Brünnhilde, Sutherland as Kundry or Carmen would be inappropriate, if not preposterous. Nor would Montserrat Caballé or Leontyne Price succeed on equal ground with Callas within the breadth of her repertoire. In these cases, vocal color, technical agility and approach would prove disappointing or unsuitable. Callas stands apart in that she was capable of actually changing the *timbre* of her voice from role to role, register to register, and make this peculiar vocal alchemy succeed (it's a long, long way from the requisites of *Medea* to those of *La Sonnambula*).

Callas' voice-type is no more, and as such she was an anachronism. True, toward the end of her career she lost grip of this chameleon-like facility, her range and volume steadily decreasing, but it stands on record (in both meanings of the word) that as the only *soprano assoluta* of the 20th Century, this ideal indeed had been attained.

The Advent of the "Monster Concerts"

At the crest of the popularity of "rock" in the 1960's, the media coined "monster concert" to describe an all-out event calculated to provoke audience delirium. From the earliest days of her career, Callas' appearances in concert were the operatic equivalent.

By custom, an operatic soprano of the late 1800's and early 1900's would perhaps sing two songs and an aria in concert, the remainder of the evening fleshed out by chamber ensemble or orchestral entertainment. (Adelina Patti is reported to have warned a colleague, "My dear, never sing more than three high C's a week!") Others arranged programs consisting of non-operatic material, lied, folk or international songs—artistically and vocally demanding, to be sure, but worlds apart from the stamina, range and power required by the operatic stage. Moreover, many so-called "greats" of the day refused to rehearse, *ever*, claiming it too strenuous!

During one concert (in 1952) featured on these records, Callas opens with an aria from *Macbeth*, follows it with the *Lucia* Mad Scene, and concludes with excerpts from *Nabucco* and *Lakmé*. Vocal suicide, one may rightly claim. But Callas, as an opera singer, could not perceive the concert stage in any other way. The public had come, after all, to hear Callas the operatic diva, and she felt a responsibility to them to recreate, scene by scene, the atmosphere and character of the operatic theater.



Callas' repertoire ranged over nearly a century-and-a-quarter of operatic composition, and within this staggering recorded collection she draws upon the most familiar and beloved of arias to the obscure. Several of these selections represent the heyday of the *soprano assoluta*, others were written for the specialized voices we know today. Callas embraces them all—indeed, she felt it was the obligation of a complete musician to do so—and with results that are not only esthetically and emotionally satisfying, but unequalled by any living singer.

Thanks to the wonderful availability of tape equipment in recent years, recordings of Callas' live performances have been made available to the opera collector in increasing numbers and have offered the opportunity of comparing Callas onstage with performances obtained in the studio. Most all agree that her commercial recordings by comparison seem generally more restrained and formally produced, both vocally and dramatically. She frequently seemed inhibited when singing high notes in recording, sometimes producing disappointing results. Surely, the presence of an audience gave impetus to her vocal and expressive powers, particularly spurring her on to exploit the spectacular possibilities of her upper register. In live performance one feels Callas had greater freedom and confidence throughout her range, and she colored her tones with an extra dimension of daring. Comparison between arias in this collection and their equivalents as captured in the studio will uphold this contention.

This album affords the listener a special opportunity to hear Callas in excerpts from operas she never performed on stage: *Semiramide*, *Dinorah*, *Lakmé*, *La Bohème* and *Louise*. The soprano is also featured in several "mad scenes" (customary habitat of the *soprano assoluta*). Since Shakespeare, the device was popular in romantic drama and became a fulcrum of early 19th Century romantic opera. It may seem a facile theatrical ploy to portray a character losing his or her mind in full view of an audience, but it is effective nevertheless (to which this album's performances of scenes from *Il Pirata*, *I Puritani*, *Lucia*, *Dinorah*, *Hamlet* and *Mefistofele* will attest).

"You Must Make Love to It . . ."

Attempting to explain the Callas phenomenon is somewhat akin to filling a request for a completely new interpretation of ramifications in *Hamlet*. At best, one can only attempt to re-clarify Callas' importance to music, the operatic stage, and the public.

Admittedly, Callas was not greatly skilled or revelatory when asked to explain her "secrets," the means by which she created her greatest effects, or her gift for imparting such an astonishing variety of emotional shadings to a characterization. When called upon to do so, she was likely to make statements that were either self-effacing or tartly defensive. Often she would skirt the issue entirely by offering remarks on music history, technical competence and the importance of composers' contributions. After all, the sum of what she was and what she did could not be taught. Callas' art was ineffable, and largely instinctive.

But now and again she could eloquently crystallize rules for performance and interpretation that linger in the mind. When asked what she felt was the most important single facet of performing music, she thought a moment and answered with a caressing gesture, "You must make love to it." At another time, discussing an artist's responsibilities, she admitted, "Music is all I think of. You have to *live* music." The simplicity of these comments is deceptive, I believe, for they contain quintessential features of Callas' art. Surely, lovemaking can be heard in the art of any musician worthy of the appellation "great."



Ted Kill

Callas' Restoration of Florid Singing

Callas brought new meaning and dignity to that obstinate and inaccurate anglicism, "coloratura." One of the soprano's most important contributions to the art was her singlehanded restoration of florid singing, which had been in decline for decades. Whenever I find myself attempting to describe Callas' skill in florid passagework, I repeatedly resort to "articulate" as key adjective. And that was it above all—articulate. She was capable of executing the most complex roulades, trills and staccato ornaments as a matter of course. Her descending scales were famous and faultless, and were likened (first by critic Claudia Cassidy, I believe) to "pearls sliding off a string."

Callas staunchly believed that these technical accomplishments constituted necessary basic equipment for any singer worthy of the title "musician." During Juilliard master classes in 1972, a student soprano neglected a series of trills while singing a Verdi aria, and was stopped by Callas at once. "Where are those trills?" she asked, peering over her score desk. "Do I have to do them?" pleaded the already overtaxed young girl. In mock astonishment (or was it real?) Callas asked rhetorically, "Could you imagine a violinist or pianist—even a beginner in this conservatory—refusing or unable to perform those written ornaments? He would be thrown out. Considered incompetent. With singers, it is no different—whatever they might think."

It was Callas' credo that excellence in *bel canto* technique was the very foundation for singing opera—any opera—and that these technical principles of style and agility could and should be at the core of performing later musical styles. Wagner and Puccini are examples ("You can scream your head off singing them, or you can sing them musically," Callas was to say).

It was Callas who paved the way toward appreciation of the superlative florid skills of Sills and Sutherland. Each soprano of this famed triumvirate is unique on her own terms, but it is worth noting that they stand alone among modern-day sopranos of international reputation by virtue of possessing a true and dependable trill in every register of the voice.

Callas' Contribution to the Repertoire

In the strictest sense, Callas was not a musical scholar, nor possessed of an academic mind. Many "Callas revivals" were predicated solely upon her willingness and ability to sing them rather than due to her insistence as musical zealot or missionary. Although Callas' understanding of her art was profound, and dedication to work peerless, her sensibilities were not the product of the library or archives, but were based soundly on instinct, taste and good judgment.

Yet possibly her greatest contribution to the art of opera was to expand the existing repertoire and fully restore works of the *bel canto* epoch—many of them unqualified masterpieces—to opera houses throughout the world. Works for so long in limbo found an ideal interpreter in Callas. Conductors and impresarios alike delighted in the realization that personal but long-neglected favorites might once again see the light—or footlights, more precisely. And, most important of all, they could succeed!

Whenever, wherever, or whatever Callas sang, the public bought tickets. No other soprano of the 1940's or 1950's could hope to "sell" a *Medea* or *Anna Bolena*, whether in the commercial or artistic sense of the word. Callas—so often called a "one-woman opera company"—literally created audiences for *bel canto* operas in our time, setting the stage for the talents of Sills, Horne, Verrett, Caballé, Sutherland and others whose repertoires would center about this idiom.





Now, in the late 1970's, operatic audiences (and record collectors) are actually hungry for this new/old music, and revivals of the previously untried, unknown and unheard of stir interest and impart a sense of anticipation and discovery. True, once resurrected, many of these chestnuts prove feeble potboilers, and many a "dead" opera fully deserves its demise. Yet, how exciting to be brought within a range of choice well beyond the usual *Bohèmes*, *Traviatas*, *Carmens* and *Meistersingers*—both onstage and in a world of recording.

We owe a great deal to Callas for this unprecedented richness of repertoire, for she proved that chances *could* be taken. And, when given a respectful production of quality, audiences would respond. Through the force of her reason, abilities and renown, she actually broadened the tastes of the opera-going public and record listener, and warrants humble obeisance for her efforts. In 1969, I wrote that Callas was finally receiving "full and reverential credit" for her contribution to repertoire. Happily, recognition of this accomplishment is even stronger today.

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The Callas Voice: Beauty or Blasphemy?

Callas devotees relish asking one another their impressions upon hearing the soprano for the first time. ("What did you think at first? What did you make of her sound? What did you *feel* when you first heard her?) Initial responses can vary widely, and these impressions were often complex. After all, there was no *single* answer.

I remember being impressed with the immaculate musical line she controlled, the interesting but often peculiar colorations the voice commanded, the excitement she would routinely trigger when building a musical climax. But there were reservations. I was disturbed by the edginess or downright shrillness that could creep into certain tones, the way a particular *piano* or high note would not sound quite right. In retrospect, it was not that Callas' voice or singing were not "quite right." There simply was no precedent. She sounded like no one else, and that was that.

There is always comfort in being able to relate to the familiar, but in Callas' case this was impossible, the voice demanding a meeting on its own terms. It was unique—and as such demanded as much objectivity and open-mindedness as possible. Once the necessary adjustments had been made—if, indeed, they could be made—Callas' voice, so alien at first, became a source of infinite color and shading, beauty and intensity. Perhaps her voice might properly be called an "acquired taste." Certainly, it was no tame "dinner music" soprano, easily tuned out.

Callas emerged at a point in operatic tradition when an even tone was considered the ideal. By this standard, Callas was a blasphemy. She believed—and fought hard for the principle—that a voice should no more attempt uniformity of color from top to bottom than should an orchestra or solo instrument. There must be, on the contrary, as *wide* a variety of color as possible, albeit discriminately used, to express the musical line, the word and dramatic situation. Contained within her voice were high soprano brightness and contralto darkness, with many shades in between, the capacity for blazing power and delicate whispers of tone.

During the years of Callas' ascendancy, one critic would complain she had three voices, while another would refer to a full ten! Some carped about a prevalent "reediness" in her singing, while others praised the same quality. Many flatly labeled the voice ugly. To my mind, this is similar to judging a face beautiful only when it contains fine and regular features, however lacking in character or expressivity. It is the equivalent of damning an entire literary paragraph at the offense of a single word.

Callas' mid-range was characterized by a covered or "hooded" quality which puzzled or annoyed listeners. Vocal buffs in post-war years were accustomed to a clear bright ("Italian") tone in the middle register, and this "veil" in Callas' equip-

ment prompted one critic to observe that it sometimes sounded as if the voice were produced from inside a bottle. Another would mention “. . . the curious inward sound of the singing—as if to herself.”

Others, myself among them, found this tone mysteriously beautiful and phosphorescent. Callas would use this special quality (often imitated today) to produce unforgettable dramatic and musical strokes. By means of those strange disembodied sounds, “ghost tones” as I call them, she could convey a state of mind or spiritual affliction. This coloration pervaded Callas’ conception of Lucia, particularly in the heroine’s most troubled or private moments; it also made the floating *morendo* effects in Violetta’s death scene particularly poignant, adding to the total atmosphere the soprano meant to achieve.

Through all history, be it in the arts, politics, or sciences, uniqueness spells automatic and often bitter controversy. Callas was not to be spared. Because her voice could not be tagged, could not be comfortably and conveniently compared to a known quotient, Callas suffered heavy criticism—even ridicule—while still in her magnificent prime. (“It’s not *how* you sing, it’s *that* you sing!” she once snapped in self-defense.) This extraordinary gifted and fully-equipped musician, who sang with unrivalled flexibility of voice and dramatic genius, was destined to be called “voiceless” by dissentors and dismissed as an operatic charlatan, commanding attention only by means of “personality.”

Now that time has eased this controversy, and Callas’ art has been allowed to settle into realistic perspective, she is acclaimed as a model for operatic performance, both vocally and within the philosophy of opera as total theater. This is not to say that Callas, incredible as her vocal achievements were, was faultless in the face of such rude cavilling. Her equipment *would* let her down time and time again. A human voice is not a machine—even the best break down—and a perfectly sung *legato* phrase might suddenly end in an appalling wobble. A high C could capsize, or take on such a heavy beat it sounded as if the soprano were pounding the note.

MariaCallasMuseum.org

The Callas Image: Temper or Temperament?

The controversy surrounding Callas—enshrouding might be the better word—was not based purely on vocal or artistic considerations. She was not only unique as a singer, but as a public personality. Subsequent to the commotion she had caused in Italy, Germany and Great Britain, Callas reentered her native United States, riding waves of acclaim. Instantly, this “exotic” American became “hot copy” for journalists, and the Callas charisma was ever debated in the popular press. She had triumphed as artist and musician in critical circles, surely, but newspapers and magazines were far more interested in her “temperment” and unprecedented glamour. Within the same month, Callas might adorn the covers of both a dignified literary review and sleazy scandal magazine.

In true journalistic fashion, when Callas had done nothing particularly explosive for a time, an “incident” would be created for the benefit of readers. Reporters and photographers customarily baited and taunted the soprano in restaurants and airport lobbies in efforts to ignite her famous “temper.” One major publication dubbed Callas “Queen of the Cult of Arrogance” (In truth, she *was* prone to making such public statements as, “I have the voice of an angel,” “rivals I have not,” or, “I’m the only one who has the nerve to do things right.”)

Worldwide, Callas’ dealings with theater managers made front page news—most unusual in opera—and there were unforgettable blowups in San Francisco, New

York, Rome, Chicago and Milan. The passage of time supports Callas’ claims that many of these rows had basis in valid artistic principle, but negotiations were doubtless complicated by the soprano’s marked lack of diplomacy, and quick impatience while settling differences. Whether personal or artistic, the so-called “Callas scandals” soon became fixed in the public mind and the press revelled in latest law suits against the “tigress.” Even the stately and scholarly Columbia Encyclopedia contains in its entry on Callas, “Her contracts have been severed with many leading opera houses due to temperamental and artistic disputes.”

In the late Fifties, a publicity analysis found that Maria Callas, Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando had been the year’s most written-about personalities, their coverage exceeding that of the President of the United States and all other heads of state. But please note: Callas was the only one without the services of press agency.

Certainly, the Callas craze was exciting, and it did boost interest in opera that had not been equalled in many a year, bringing people to opera houses that had never before heard “serious” music. But during those years, sometimes most unfortunately, layman and connoisseur alike found it difficult to separate the virago of public imagination from the artist.



Callas as Actress: "A Customary Miracle"

Callas' amazing acting abilities were almost never disputed, however, and a large faction attributed her success to that talent, and that talent alone. She was indeed a consummate actress, but in no usual sense. Today, we have a number of fine operatic performers who equal Callas' mastery of stagecraft and physical movement, dramatic comprehension and theatrical timing.

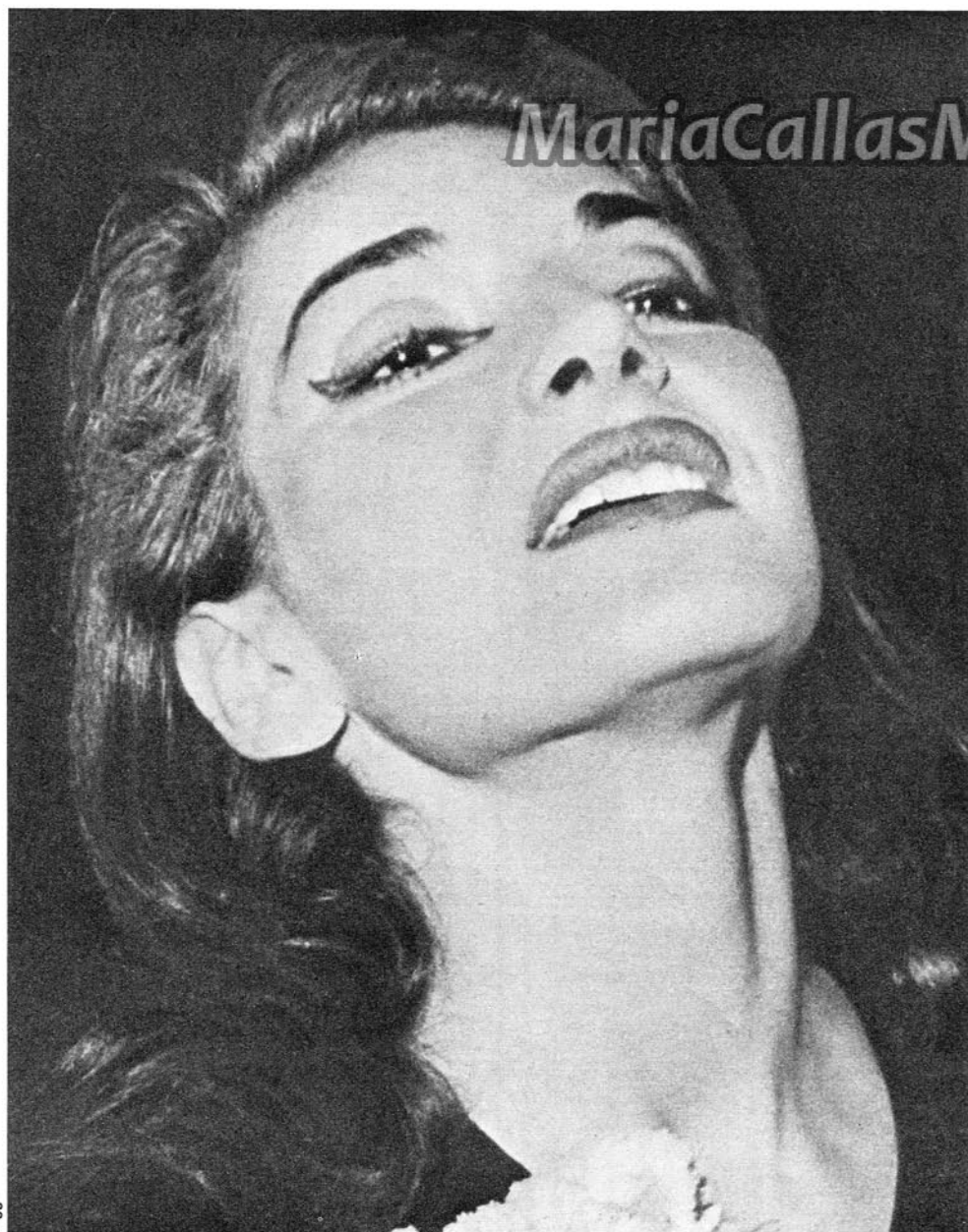
In some operas, including those which rank as among her most dramatically memorable (*Lucia* and *Norma* come to mind), Callas barely moved at all. She would stand motionless, simply allowing face and hands alone to reflect her thoughts, producing a grand or simple gesture to punctuate a given moment. The greatness of her acting as such came through the singing itself, rather than the strict physicalization of a part.

Bellini once stipulated "weeping in sound" as the ideal for performances of his tragic romances, and it was in this plangent vocalism that Callas excelled. She never sought absolute tonal smoothness or conventional beauty of sound—there is far

more to operatic interpretation than that. She could produce a guilty tone, an anxious one, an imperious or humble tonal quality. By some incredible sorcery, a single note could sound loving or wounded, mocking or mirthful. All shades of emotion, whether forceful or subtle, were routinely expressed through her voice. Callas need not flail about a stage to impress by her "acting." Always, it was the voice that painted the character and told dramatic truths.

Opera is music-drama, an art form the essence of which lies within human passion and conflict as expressed through sound. Uncannily and unerringly, Callas would strike to the kernel of that passion, the core of that dramatic conflict, and with unrivalled skill.

In achieving this "customary miracle," as the late musicologist Herbert Weinstock put it, Callas never distorted the music nor superimposed an "effect" upon a vocal line for the sake of theatricality, never sought to over-extend the composer's intentions. Above all, she dependably and painstakingly recreated a score through microscopic fidelity to the printed note and the author's dynamic markings. In addition, she was gifted with a rhythmic sense as remarkable as that commanded by the finest conductors. It enabled her to dominate ensembles with unflagging musical security, and gave extra bite to vocal attacks. Most often, her singing seemed more instrumental than vocal, the phrases comparable to those of a master violinist.



Oggi

"I Feel I've Accomplished a Great Deal . . ."

It was not only the intensity and reality of her singing and acting that set her apart, but the way in which she forced audiences—yes, forced them—to realize that there was far more to opera than *The Lovely Duet* or *The Great Aria*, solitary pieces for vocal display. With extraordinary sense of purpose, she communicated the fact that indeed the musical tissue between these moments might very well be the crux of a composer's greatness. A composer of music-drama, to her, should not be demeaned to the status of simple song-writer.

As a result, what had previously been tolerated as "dull" recitative revealed itself as all-important dramatic thread, capable of the most psychologically pungent shadings of character. Opera-goers who fidgeted until the next high B-flat came along, were disconcerted by this "total theater" concept and Callas' insistence that each word and phrase be heard as part of a larger musical tapestry brought new awareness to the public. (This is not to say that Callas was alone in these objectives or artistic philosophy, she was simply the first in our day to bring them across so successfully and universally.)

Callas' legacy to audiences, young singers and those of the future has been enormous, inestimable, and inescapable. Recently, I discussed inroads of music criticism with the gifted and versatile American soprano, Clamma Dale, citing the offhand cynicism typical of many reviewers. "When I was growing up," she marveled, "they constantly attacked Maria, saying 'Oh, she can't sing, she can't this, she can't that . . .' Now, years later, whenever opera is discussed, all you hear is Maria Callas, Maria Callas, Maria Callas."

Callas herself has said, "Opera is the most noble and beautiful way of speaking, and I fought vigorously for my approach. At first I did not know whether I was right or wrong. At the beginning of my career, few could understand what I was doing. It was so new to them. Sometimes I felt they resented my way of performing. Though many of them failed to understand what I was doing, they kept coming back, not knowing why, but not content anymore with the other so-called 'tradition.' Now, after all these years, I feel I've accomplished a great deal. It was my way of serving art."

Introducing Maria Callas during a London gala benefit concert in 1962, the late David Webster, then General Manager of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, said, "About Maria Callas I am honestly, practically devoid of words—and

that must be the case when one comes up against some phenomenon that one simply can't explain. She is, I think, without any doubt at all (and I don't mind what letters come to me tomorrow) the greatest theatrical, musical artist of our time. What does that mean? Well, it's difficult to define. The whole business of singing an opera, the whole business of using music and words, is to intensify a feeling. She has an enormous feeling for music. She has an enormous feeling for words. She has an enormous feeling for the dramatic. She can convey all of those things to an audience in a way that practically no other artist alive today can do. Maria Callas!—Maria Callas the Great!"

*New York City, August, 1977
Lovingly dedicated to Betty Wolin*



Bellini: NORMA (1831) *Casta diva . . . Ah! bello a me ritorna* (Act 1)

SIDE ONE, band 1 — RAI recording, November 1949
Conductor: Arturo Basile

*In the second scene of the opera, the Druid high priestess, Norma, makes her entrance into a clearing within the sacred forest and announces to her people intentions of defending Gaul against the occupying Romans. Leading them in a somber religious rite, she sings *Casta Diva*, an aria rich in feeling and one of the most exacting of bel canto masterpieces. In it, she calls upon the goddess of the moon to bring temperance and peace to her people. At the prayer's end, she is distracted by thoughts of desertion by her Roman lover for whom she has broken her religious vows. "I can punish him," she muses, "but my heart won't permit it." In the scene's spectacular finale, Norma vows that should he return to her she would defend him against the world itself through the force of her love.*

Norma's introductory and legendary aria, *Casta diva*, is the first performance in the chronology of this collection (1949), and the only selection recorded in a studio rather than before an actual concert audience. Originally issued on a single 78 rpm disc in Italy (Callas' debut on commercial recording), this early rendition typifies the prayerful and subtly melancholy color Callas imparted to this most taxing vocal classic. The silken *glissandi* in the aria's middle section, incomparably sung, were soon to become a Callas trademark. In the ensuing *cabaletta*, the singer's unique ability to execute descending chromatic scales and *appoggiature* with alternating delicacy and power remains wondrous and unsurpassed.

It has been three decades since Callas first undertook the role of Bellini's wronged and passionate priestess, yet no other soprano has diminished the legend of her portrayal, and none has managed so deeply and indelibly to move audiences by Norma's tragedy.

Verdi: MACBETH (1847) *Vieni! t'affretta!... Or tutti sorgete, ministri infernali* (Act 1)

SIDE ONE, band 2 — RAI concert, Rome,
February 18, 1952
Conductor: Oliviero de Fabritiis

Upon receiving a letter from Macbeth relaying the prophecy of his rise to power, Lady Macbeth wonders if her husband is capable of the cunning and cruelty beyond ambition needed to reach the throne. "I will give you courage!" she exclaims, and plots the murder of the visiting Duncan for that very night, summoning the powers of evil to aid her.

Vieni! t'affretta! introduces Lady Macbeth to the audience, and whether in the opera or concert recital, this is a hellish "warm-up aria." Callas personifies the aggressive and implacable nature of the woman at once. Sweeping through the expansive and difficult Verdian line with almost manic pride and power, Callas' *Lady* was indeed a force to reckon with. The soprano delineates both her apprehensions and exhilaration over Macbeth's likely rise to kingship, and in the *cabaletta* she contrasts snarling chest tones with steel and fire at the top—Verdi's requisite "voice of a devil."



Donizetti: LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR (1835)
***Mad Scene — Il dolce suono . . . Ardon gli incensi* (Act 3)**

SIDE ONE, band 3 — RAI concert, Rome
February 18, 1952
Conductor: Oliviero de Fabritiis

Lucia's cause for madness is so familiar it scarce needs retelling. Forced into a marriage of (financial) convenience by her ruthless brother, the girl goes mad on the wedding night and fatally stabs her unwanted husband. Appearing before a shocked wedding breakfast gathering in the great hall of the estate, Lucia seeks her lover, Edgardo. Against all odds they had planned to marry, and she now envisions a minister leading them to the altar. She promises her beloved they will soon be safe from their enemies, and reminisces on moments together. Overwrought and weakened by strain, Lucia collapses, and soon after dies.

This is Callas' public debut in Lucia's Mad Scene, as she had not appeared in a staged production of the work (first realized in Mexico City during the summer of 1952). This particular opera was to become one of the most popular and controversial of Callas' vehicles. The listener now familiar with her vocal and artistic objectives will recognize that the deeply-felt phrasing, virtuosic control and strikingly individualistic qualities of coloration were already well-formed from a musico-dramatic point of view—a basis for Lucias to come. As such, this concert version marks an important moment in the singer's career and a most special addition to her ever-growing repertoire.

In *Lucia*, Callas proved to modern audiences that florid singing could indeed be a viable means of expression, convincingly dramatic and moving. (According to commentaries of the day, 19th Century opera-goers routinely wept during the opera's first act duet and the Mad Scene.) Callas' handling of *fiorature* and writing above the staff are of a spectacular nature here, rarely approached or broached by others vying for the role. (An unfortunate bit of "tradition" to which Callas conforms: Until very recently, Lucia's scene was ended prior to *Spargi d'amaro pianto* when performed in concert.)

Verdi: NABUCCO (1842) *Ben io t'invenni, o fatal scritto! . . . Anch'io dischiuso un giorno* (Act 2)

SIDE TWO, band 1—RAI concert, Rome,
February 18, 1952
Conductor: Oliviero de Fabritiis

*Not unlike Lady Macbeth, Abigail is a power-seeking Verdian cobra. A document falls into her hands in which she is astonished to read that she is not the daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar as she supposed, but instead born a slave. She swears vengeance on the king, who has separated her from her lover, and his rightful daughter and regent, Fenena, vowing they will know her fury. In the aria *Anch'io dischiuso*, her thoughts turn to her love for the Jewish prince Ishmael, and nostalgia for their first days together.*

Moving on from the *Lucia* Mad Scene to Abigail's aria is, in itself, another form of madness. Demanding a dramatic soprano of great range and flexibility, *Nabucco* has often been credited with ruining the voice of Giuseppina Strepponi (later, Verdi's wife) after but a few seasons in the role. In our own time, careers have ended forever with *Nabucco* and certain brave women associated with the opera have soon after sought periods of recovery, for vocal reasons, nervous disorders, or both. (Asked by Rudolph Bing to sing *Nabucco* at the Met one season, Leontyne Price's reply was immediate: "Man, do you think I'm crazy?")

Ever-fascinated by the superhuman in vocal writing, the young Callas was challenged by the role, doubtless reasoning that no other contemporary could possibly do justice to Abigail. In the violent and stormy recitative section, Callas hurtles through the phrases with venom, raising her chest voice dangerously upward into the mid-range of the voice. The freakish, two-octave leap from high to low C is clean, forceful, and astonishing. The soprano must then "switch gears," vocally and emotionally, to sing an introspective aria containing long, arched phrases, climaxed by a top C in the cadenza.



Delibes: LAKMÉ (1883) *Où va la jeune hindoue* [sung in Italian] (Act 2)

SIDE TWO, band 2 — RAI concert, Rome,
February 18, 1952
Conductor: Oliviero de Fabritiis

Lakmé, daughter of the Brahmin priest, Nilakantha, has forsaken her religious vows by falling in love with Gerald, an occupying British officer. In a teeming Indian marketplace, Lakmé's father forces her to sing the legend of an outcast Hindu girl who once protected a sleeping stranger from beasts of the jungle by playing magical bells. The stranger was the god Vishnu, who carried her to the heavens in gratitude, the sound of the bells being heard in the forest ever since.

Lakmé was written after the era of the *soprano assoluta*, and at a time when female voices became standardized and categorized to better cope with specific ranges and colorations. One of the highest written arias in the soprano literature, the Bell Song boasts such tricks and rarities as a long-held, soft high B, and four attacks upon E-natural. It has long been a favorite of the *soprano leggero* (or so-called “coloratura” soprano) that light, brightish sound capable of easily sustained tones above the staff, but limited in color and volume, particularly in the mid and lower registers. As example, Lily Pons featured this aria as her “signature tune” in concerts, although she imparted little meaning to the words and rarely managed the scale and staccato sections quite in tune. This performance far excels Callas’ rather cautious commercial recording, which was blemished by uncommonly sluggish conducting. The sound she produces here, especially in the sultry, mysterious “oriental” verses, is dark, expressive, and Wagnerian in size. The tintinnabulatory *staccati* and scale passages are supremely articulate, and the final high E blazes magnificently.



Mozart: DIE ENTFÜHRUNG AUS DEM SERAIL (1782) Martern aller arten [sung in Italian] (Act 2)

**SIDE TWO, band 3—San Remo concert,
December 27, 1954
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

Within a never-never-land Turkish setting (so popular in Mozart’s time), the beautiful foreigner, Constanze, has been captured by Pasha Selim and imprisoned in his seraglio. He hopes she will join his harem and has imposed a deadline for their first sexual union. In a most formidable florid aria, Constanze boldly faces the potentate, declaring she would endure “tortures of any sort” rather than his embraces. After complications worthy of the Marx Brothers, Constanze is ultimately rescued by her fiancé, Belmonte.

The Abduction from the Seraglio was the single staged production of a Mozart opera to gain Callas’ participation, performed at La Scala during the 1952 season. Constanze’s three arias represent the only serious moments in an otherwise frothy and farcical *singspiel*. The most elaborate of them, the aria represented here, is more a veritable concerto for the human voice than a conven-

tional aria. After an extended 60-bar introduction, the soprano unleashes her wrath and dares the Pasha to use force, her tirade accompanied by a quartet of solo instruments (flute, oboe, violin and cello) playing a *concertante* throughout. In this electric *bravura* piece, the soprano’s defiance is expressed through dazzling *fiorature*, including a leap of a full twelfth and scales which hurtle the voice from top D to the lowermost tones. (Whether out of despair or technical modesty, most singers simplify this formidable ornamentation.) After a somewhat steely sustained high C at the climax, Callas plummets to a trill possessed of the force of a hurricane, and her singing of the final rapid-scale passages, in perfect unison with the orchestra, has never been surpassed.



Charpentier: LOUISE (1900) Depuis le jour (Act 3)

**SIDE TWO, band 4—San Remo concert,
December 27, 1954
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

Over the protests of her parents, young Louise has run off with her love, the student painter Julien, to share a life in Paris. In this famous reverie, the girl recalls the first day of Julien’s embrace, expressing her feelings of intoxication with the joy of love.

More than any other selection on these discs, *Depuis le jour* displays vocal faults which were to occasionally mar her singing and fan the Callas controversy. On the debit side, the tone is ill-focused in *piano* singing and there is a pronounced “beat” in the upper register. Yet, the expression of awakened sensual love Callas brings to this jewel-like aria is so intimate and poignant that the interpretation stands comparison with that of any Louise.



Rossini: ARMIDA (1817) D’amore al dolce impero (Act 2)

**SIDE THREE, band 1—San Remo concert,
December 27, 1954
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

Seducing the crusader Rinaldo, the sorceress Armida has magically transformed a forest into a fantasy-world palace, and the two are entertained by dancing nymphs, genies and cupids. From her glittering throne, Armida sings this song to the praises of love, philosophizing that “the time of youth flees and beauty is but a flash; both one and the other rebel against decaying time. Therefore, lovers, enjoy your happy moments now that the flower of youth smiles in your faces.”

This soprano showpiece is *non pareil* as an example of Rossinian perversity. Musically trifling, if the truth be told, the aria seems meant to brutalize its singer by flame-thrower effects through florid scales spanning the contralto G to highest soprano tones. Unquestionably conceived for a *soprano assoluta* voice, no active contemporary could or would dare Armida’s music during Callas’ reign. Indeed, this opera had not been performed since Rossini’s day until the spectacular Callas revival in 1952 at the Florence May Festival.

Callas was challenged by and enthusiastic over the near-impossible difficulties of the part, its opportunities to display her technical armament and the unusually wide range of her voice. In her singing of this grotesque virtuoso exercise—in which the soprano must run wildly up and down the scale in search of music—Callas audaciously embellishes upon Rossini even further, as though to surpass the composer’s delight in taxing the human voice to the fullest.



Meyerbeer: DINORAH (1859) Ombre légère [sung in Italian] (Act 2)

**SIDE THREE, band 2—San Remo concert,
December 27, 1954
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

For the curious, Dinorah concerns a country girl who seeks her missing lover through treacherous mountain passes, accompanied by her loyal pet goat. Both goat and heroine are nearly drowned in a surging river before their timely rescue by the rustic lover—no doubt a scenic challenge for any stage director. In Act Two, while wandering aimlessly through the woods at night, Dinorah has gone mad in the belief she has been deserted by her lover. Catching sight of her shadow in the moonlight, she sings to it of ancient forest legends and implores it to join her in dancing a waltz.

Dinorah is a mediocre and totally fatuous piece. And, somewhat akin to judicially described obscene material, it claims nothing in the way of “socially redeeming value.” Yet, for many years, the “Shadow Song” was a tenacious concert favorite for all comers, and a must for “coloratura” sopranos. In terms of Maria Callas, this performance is unusual in that the soprano purely appears to be having fun with the shallow showiness of the music. Usually so intense—even while singing music not fully worthy of that intensity of purpose—Callas can be felt to enjoy her mastery of the rhythmic shifts and dizzy decorations.

One always suspected that her commercial recording of Dinorah’s song might employ clever engineering to achieve those marvelous *chiaroscuro* effects in the “duet” passages; yet before an audience sometime later, this *mezza voce* agility proves even more incredible. Her banter with the flute in *cadenza* is precise and likewise brilliant.

Spontini: LA VESTALE (1807) Tu che invoco con onore (Act 2)

**SIDE THREE, band 3—RAI concert, Milan,
September 27, 1956
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

In ancient Rome, Giulia, a vestal virgin, is in love with Licinius, an heroic Roman officer. In the temple, Giulia's ritual task is to tend the sacred eternal flame, which she carelessly allows to die once distracted by her lover's attentions. But by the opera's end she is saved from a death sentence when, during a storm, a bolt of lightning miraculously reignites the eternal flame which is interpreted by the Romans to signify the goddess Vesta's pardon. In this aria, Giulia prays to Vesta for help in her sorrow. Fully realizing her blasphemy in love, she nevertheless decides to meet her lover that night in the vicinity of the temple.

Citing the vocal music of Gluck, Cherubini and Beethoven, Callas has said, "You must build the phrases like monuments." The musical roots of *La Vestale* lie well in neoclassical tradition and offered opera-goers of Spontini's day an opportunity to hear an overlay of newly impassioned romanticism grafted upon earlier operatic styles. After a long absence from the stage, the opera was revived for Callas to open the 1954-55 season at La Scala.

This excerpt exemplifies the "lyric sculpture" that Callas suggests, and the music is rendered through beautifully molded and proportioned phrases. More than any other Callas interpretation, *Tu che invoco* recalls the singing of Rosa Ponselle, a soprano Callas greatly admired and one who also triumphed as Giulia. In the scene's tricky and turbulent closing section, *Sospendete qualche istante la vendetta*, Callas' voice rides the waves easily and thrillingly, and she caps the aria with an interpolated high C.

Rossini: SEMIRAMIDE (1822) Bel raggio lusinghier (Act I)

**SIDE FOUR, band 1—RAI concert, Milan,
September 27, 1956
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

Semiramide, widow of King Ninus, is seen relaxing with her handmaidens in—of all places—the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. She muses on the imminent return of the young Assyrian captain, Arsace, whom she loves, and in this aria the thought of his return further excites her passions. Later, however, Semiramide will learn that Arsace in no way shares her affections.

Semiramide, which provided an important showcase for the duo of Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne in the 1960's, would also have been an outstanding vehicle for Callas in earlier years, had anyone the intention or determination to mount this antique *opera seria*. In *Bel raggio lusinghier*, Callas displays perfect Rossinian style and excels in intricate scale passages taken at dizzying speed. The soprano's own ornamentation catapults her voice well above the aria's written limits, adding high soprano brilliance to this showpiece.

Thomas: HAMLET (1868) Mad Scene—À vos jeux, mes amis [sung in Italian] (Act 4)

**SIDE FOUR, band 2—RAI concert, Milan,
September 27, 1956
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

In a scene adapted well beyond Shakespeare's conception, the deranged Ophelia pleads to join in the courtiers' games, confiding that she is Hamlet's wife and that the two are joined by sacred vows. The girl distributes flowers to each of the maidens and is then haunted by the refrain of a folk song. Growing increasingly apprehensive and anxious, she cries out her passion for Hamlet, finally exclaiming, "I love you—It is for you that I die!"

In Ophelia's florid mad scene, Callas most typically characterizes her approach to French operatic music by performing the piece as a dramatic tone poem. By means of exquisite coloring and impressive dynamic variety, she convinces us that Ophelia's plight and passion are quite more moving and substantial than other artists have suggested. The runs, trills and *appoggiature* are fabulous in the true sense of the word, and Ophelia's desperate avowal of love for Hamlet ends the scene in a particularly gripping fashion, rare in concert performance. Good luck to you if you can find Callas' equal in this music.

Bellini: I PURITANI (1835) Vieni al tempio (Act I)

**SIDE FOUR, band 3—RAI concert, Milan,
September 27, 1956
Conductor: Alfredo Simonetto**

Within a Puritan fortress near Plymouth, the maiden Elvira has been promised in marriage to Lord Arthur Talbot, a political rebel who has disappeared in a hasty attempt to rescue the imprisoned Queen of France. Believing herself deserted by her betrothed, Elvira vacillates between illusion and reality, and calls upon her "faithful one" to return, swearing love unto death.

In this ensemble near the close of the first act, the pathetic Elvira dominates an expansive *cantilena* melody characteristic of the composer. *Vieni al tempio* incorporates one of the highest-lying passages in the operatic repertoire, featuring repeated attacks on high C and D-natural in the course of a sustained and soaring line. Bellini did not write this music for Elvira, however; by tradition, this line has been "borrowed" from the bass and baritone and sung two octaves higher to crown the ensemble. Sopranos who fret over Turandot's stratospheric *tessitura* might well consider this feat. Moreover, in any tally of Olympian vocal accomplishment, it is astonishing to recall that Callas once alternated performances of *Die Walküre* and *I Puritani* within one week.

Verdi: LA FORZA DEL DESTINO (1862) Pace, pace mio Dio! (Act 4)

**SIDE FIVE, band 1—Athens outdoor concert,
August 5, 1957
Conductor: Antonino Votto**

The penitent Leonora, whose love for Alvaro inadvertently caused her father's death, has sought refuge in shame and silence in a mountain cave, where she is cared for by local monks. In this concert favorite of dramatic sopranos, Leonora begs God for peace. She has loved Alvaro for his beauty and virtue, true, but she will never see him again and hopes for release through death. Leonora's prayer turns to bitter agitation as someone approaches in the distance, and she curses the stranger for intruding upon her sorrow and solitude.

Maria Callas performed this Verdi heroine for but a few seasons in Italy, and the role is one not generally associated with her. For some, her voice does not contain the proper "spin" or floating quality commonly associated with Leonora, but Callas' 1954 recording of the complete opera has since garnered increased attention and become the preferred favorite of many. As enacted by Callas, Leonora is plagued by a confused sense of loyalty and a burden of truly epic guilt, well-suggested in this performance.

Wagner: TRISTAN UND ISOLDE (1865) Mild und leise wie er lächelt [sung in Italian] (Act 3)

**SIDE FIVE, band 2—Athens outdoor concert,
August 5, 1957
Conductor: Antonino Votto**

Lying mortally wounded on the coast of Brittany, Tristan feverishly awaits the ship carrying his beloved Isolde. He is certain her love has the power to restore him but the princess arrives only in time to see him die. Isolde cradles Tristan's corpse in her arms to sing the Liebestod, in which she feels herself transfigured by love into oneness with

Tristan. At the final shimmering chords of the scene, she herself sinks into death.

Isolde was one of the few Wagnerian roles in Callas' repertoire, along with Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* and Kundry in *Parsifal*, all sung in the earliest days of her international career. Opera buffs can only speculate on her conception of Isolde, as it was never recorded, and stage performances have not yet surfaced on tape.

In a rare decision, Callas chose to perform the *Liebestod* in this outdoor concert, but in Italian, as was her knowledge of the role. In contrast to the Germanic (read lofty and cool) fashion of singing Isolde's transfiguration through love, Callas' approach is purely Italianate. She emphasizes the long lyric line in harmony with the orchestra, and the interpretation is passionate and longing, both inspired and inspiring.



Rossini: IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA (1816)
Una voce poco fa (Act 1)

**SIDE FIVE, band 3—Concert at Paris Opéra,
December 19, 1958
Conductor: Georges Sebastian**

Rosina, a young and wealthy ward kept under strict surveillance by her guardian, the crusty Dr. Bartolo, is fascinated by the attentions of a young man who regularly serenades her. She knows him only as "Lindoro," and in this aria (which introduces the heroine) Rosina reveals that she can be sweet, gentle, and compliant by nature; but should someone cross her, she knows every trick of the viper!

Yet another example of a Callas "monster concert" took place at the Paris Opéra at the close of 1958. The soprano, assisted by soloists, chorus and stage settings—in short, the full resources of the opera house—sang a program including scenes from *Norma* and *Il Trovatore*, this excerpt, and the entire second act of *Tosca* (opposite Tito Gobbi's inimitable Scarpia). Reviewing the event, Paris Match headlined, CALLAS SACRÉE TRIOMPHALEMENT LA "MALIBRAN" DU XX^e SIÈCLE (Callas Triumphantly Consecrated as the Malibran of the 20th Century) and with earthy American bluntness, Life Magazine blared, CONQUEST BY CALLAS—DIVA WINS PARIS.

Within what emerged as quite an evening of operatic theatre, this performance of Rosina's *cavatina* (sung in the original mezzo key with Callas' own variations spiraling to the high soprano range) typifies the soprano's forcefulness of personality when portraying Rossini heroines, her gamey and extroverted conception of Rosina, and the resultant enthusiasm of the Parisian public. (An interesting footnote: The soprano to essay Rosina at the Paris Opéra subsequently, during the famous tour of the Metropolitan Opera there, was received with repeated chants of "We want Callas!" The panache and brio of this concert excerpt suggest why.)

Puccini: LA BOHÈME (1896) Sì, mi chiamano Mimi (Act 1)

**SIDE FIVE, band 4—Television broadcast, London
October 3, 1959
Conductor: Malcolm Sargent**

During her first meeting with Rodolfo, Mimi reveals her name, the simple routine of life alone, and her occupation of making artificial flowers. This discourse leads her to express a love of poetic things and the joy she feels when the first warming rays of spring sunlight kiss the Parisian rooftops. Summing up, she apologizes for being an audacious neighbor, intruding upon the poet at an inopportune time.

Although Callas never sang *Bohème* on stage, her complete recording of the opera is cherished by many, and the singer brings a special spiritual and vulnerable quality to Mimi's first act aria. Coaching a student in the selection during master classes at Juilliard, Callas urged, "You must open it [the aria's climax] like a flower, petal by petal." This rendition is a moving object lesson in just how to open that flower.



Boito: MEFISTOFELE (1869) L'altra notte in fondo al mare (Act 3)

**SIDE FIVE, band 5—Television broadcast, London,
October 3, 1959
Conductor: Malcolm Sargent**

Margarita, having been betrayed by Faust and accused of murdering her illegitimate child, lies alone in a dank prison dungeon. She is hallucinating, and suffers visions of drowning her child in the sea and poisoning her mother. Desperately, she begs heaven to have mercy on her soul.

Callas performed Margarita in *Mefistofele* at the outdoor Arena at Verona during the 1954 season, and it is yet another Callas characterization of which there is no recorded documentation. In this London performance of Margarita's aria, her uncanny ability to create the total atmosphere of the operatic stage during a concert is in full evidence. Her singing of this unusual and powerful music is haunting with dark chest colors and ghostly tones that are both chilling and pathetic.



Bellini: I PURITANI (1835) Mad Scene—Qui la voce sua soave... Vien, diletto è in ciel la luna! (Act 2)

**SIDE SIX, band 1—Dallas rehearsal, November 20, 1957
Conductor: Nicola Rescigno**

Elvira, believing herself abandoned by the Cavalier Arturo, has gone insane. Wandering through the halls of the castle at night, she sings Qui la voce—one of the most long-spun and beautiful melodies ever written by Bellini, or anyone else. In this supreme test of bel canto singing, she pleads, "Restore my hope! Bring back my love or take my life." Her mood changing abruptly, Elvira ecstatically calls for Arturo's hasty return, her passion mounting to frenzy.

For Callas, *I Puritani* was a hallmark of the *bel canto* tradition, an ultimate proof of voice, technique, style and expression; she was ever dismayed by the opera's general lack of popularity and commercial success in our time. ("Don't we have any 'Puritani girls' here?" she would ask of students during her Juilliard master classes.) Elvira had been an important cornerstone in Callas' career and the opera's poignant mad scene was a very special favorite.

Here, in Dallas (the day before the actual concert), Callas rehearses the scene as part of a program which included arias from *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, *La Traviata*, *Macbeth* and the whole of *Anna Bolena's* finale, complete with chorus. Ostensibly an orchestral rehearsal with the soprano simply sitting in to help work out balances, Callas voluntarily committed herself to full-voiced singing in each aria, and with *Qui la voce* wrought a flawless piece of legato singing (conductor Rescigno is heard to murmur "perfect!" after the span of a particularly impressive phrase). In *Vien, diletto*, Callas tosses off a breathtaking series of gossamer descending scales and ends the piece on a truly volcanic high E-flat—inspiring the orchestra to spontaneous applause.



Bellini: IL PIRATA (1827) Mad Scene—O! s'io potessi... Col sorriso d'innocenza (Act 2)

**SIDE SIX, band 2—Concert of complete opera,
Carnegie Hall, New York,
January 27, 1959
Conductor: Nicola Rescigno**

Imogene has had a son by the infamous pirate, Gualtiero and in this final scene of Bellini's second opera, the heroine wanders in a daze, uncertain of her whereabouts or the time of day. Is she in her chambers or her tomb? Imagining her child to be at her side, she begs him to go to his father and plead forgiveness for her wrongdoings. Trumpets interrupt, announcing Gualtiero's condemnation to death. In horror, Imogene envisions the scaffold and the bloody axe which is to kill her adored pirate.

Il Pirata was another rarity revived for Callas and mounted successfully at La Scala prior to her sensational dismissal by that theater's management. In the United States she was only to be heard in a concert performance of the opera at Carnegie Hall, an emotion-charged evening that proved to be the soprano's last appearance for some years in her native country.

Illuminated by a single spotlight in the darkness, Callas began Imogene's Mad Scene with the frail and exhausted tones of a woman broken by life. In the New York World Telegram and Sun the next morning, critic Louis Bancioli reported, "Carnegie Hall... last night was black. It was something to be left in the dark with the voice of Maria Callas." The aria to her child is sung with great tenderness, pathos and magnificent style. In the fury of the final *cabaletta* (the second stanza embellished), Callas fulfilled audience expectations and produced delirium—not only on stage, but throughout that venerable hall.



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