

Terrence McNally

MASTER CLASS



Teacher's Reader
The English Theatre Frankfurt
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Lea Dunbar, Dr. Karl Guttzeit, Michael Gonszar, Rebecca Reaney

1. The Author



Born in 1939, Terrence McNally would have his first play produced in 1964 at the age of 25. Although several early comedies such as *Next* (1969) and *The Ritz* (1975) won McNally quite a bit of praise, it was not until later in his career that he would become truly successful with works such as *Frankie and Johnny at the Claire de Lune* (1987) for which he wrote the screen adaptation which starred Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer.

In 1990, McNally won an Emmy Award for Best Writing in a Miniseries or Special for *Andre's Mother*. A year later, he returned to the stage with *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991), a study of the irrational fears that many people harbor towards homosexuals and victims of AIDS. In the play, two married couples spend the Fourth of July weekend at a summer house on Fire Island. The house has been willed to Sally Truman by her brother who has just died of AIDS, and it soon becomes evident that both couples are afraid to get in the pool, afraid that they will somehow contract AIDS by swimming in the same pool that Sally's brother used to swim in.

With *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1992), McNally turned his attentions to the musical stage, collaborating with John Kander (composer) and Fred Ebb (lyricist) on a script which explores the complex relationship between two men caged together in a Latin American prison. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* won the 1993 Tony Award for "Best Book of a Musical." McNally also collaborated with Kander and Ebb on *The Rink*. He collaborated with Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens on *Ragtime* (1997), a musical adaptation of the novel by E.L. Doctorow, which tells the story of Coalhouse Walker Jr., a fiery black piano man who demands retribution when his Model T is destroyed by a mob of white troublemakers. The play also features such historical figures as Harry Houdini, Booker T. Washington, J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford.

McNally's other plays include *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994) which examines the relationships of eight gay men and *Master Class* (1995), a character study of legendary opera soprano Maria Callas which won the 1996 Tony Award for "Best Play." McNally also dealt with Callas in *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989).

In 1997, McNally stirred up a storm of controversy with *Corpus Christi* (1997), a modern day retelling of the story of Jesus' birth, ministry, and death in which both he and his disciples are homosexuals. In fact, the play was initially cancelled because of death threats against the board members of the Manhattan Theatre Club which was to produce the play.

However, several other playwrights such as Tony Kushner threatened to withdraw their plays if "Corpus Christi" was not produced, and the board finally relented. When the play opened, the Theatre was besieged by almost 2000 protesters, furious at what they considered blasphemy. When *Corpus Christi* opened in London, a British Muslim group called the Defenders of the Messenger Jesus even went so far as to issue a Fatwa or death sentence on McNally.

In addition to four Tony Awards, McNally has received two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Rockefeller Grant, the Lucille Lortel Award, the Hull-Warriner Award, and a citation from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has been a member of the Dramatists Guild Council since 1970 and has served as vice-president since 1981. He is considered one of the leading American dramatists still writing today.

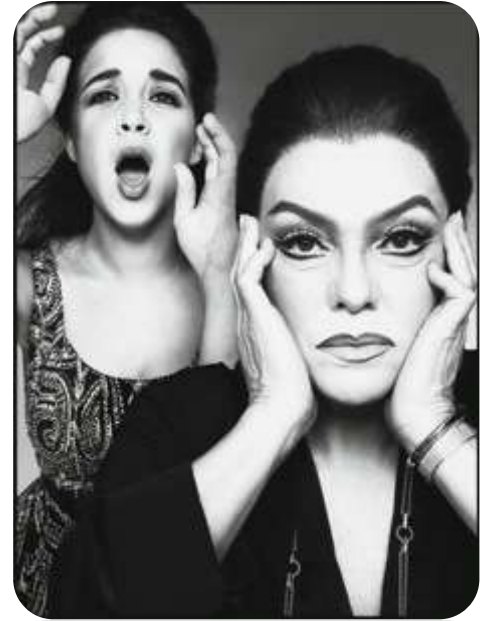
2. The Play

Alexandra Silber and Tyne Daly, as student and diva, in Terrence McNally's 1995 play. Photograph by R. Afanador.

In a black suit, Callas enters the stage, where her accompanist, Emmanuel Weinstock waits, smiling. (He is her anchor throughout the play.) The theatre itself is the classroom. Speaking directly to the audience, Callas asks if the room is too bright. Can the lights be turned down, please? Where's the cushion she asked for, for her seat? Where's the footstool she needs in order to sit properly? Ah, you. The pianist. Who are you? You don't look familiar. Speak up! No one can hear you. "Yesterday morning, we worked on 'Don Carlos' together." "Was that you?" Callas doesn't remember Manny, as she now calls him—she says each character's name as if she had invented it—because he doesn't have a distinctive look. As a matter of fact, you there, sitting in the first or third row, you don't have a look, either. Those lights are turned down now, much better. Bravo.

Callas' first "victim" is Sophie, a ridiculous, overly-perky soprano, dressed all in pink. Sophie chooses to sing one of the most difficult arias, the sleepwalking scene from -an aria that Callas made famous. Before the girl sings a note, Callas stops her-she clearly can't stand hearing music massacred. And now what has started out as a class has become a platform for Callas. She glories in her own career, dabbles in opera dish and flat-out seduces the audience. Callas gets on her knees and acts the entire aria in dumb show, eventually reducing the poor singer to tears. But with that there are plenty of laughs going on, especially between Callas and the audience. Callas pulls back and gives Sophie a chance to use what she's learned. As soon as Sophie starts singing, though, Callas mentally leaves the room and goes into a sprawling interior monologue about her own performance of that aria and the thunderous applause she received at La Scala. Callas wakes up and sends Sophie off with a pat. The next two sessions repeat the same dynamic, only the middle session is with a tenor who moves Callas to tears. She again enters her memories, and we learn about Callas' affair with Aristotle Onassis; an abortion she was forced to have; her first elderly husband whom she left; her early days as an ugly duckling; the fierce hatred of her rivals; and the unforgiving press that savaged her at first. Finally, we meet Sharon, another soprano, who arrives in a full ball gown. With Sharon singing, Callas is genuinely moved, for the young singer has talent, but Callas tells her to stick to flimsy roles. Sharon is devastated and spits back every nasty thing you've ever heard about Callas: She's old, washed up; she ruined her voice too early in her career; she only wants people to worship her, etc. Sharon rushes out of the hall, and Callas brings the class to a close with a beautiful speech about the sacrifices we must make in the name of art.

Terrence McNally's *Master Class* was first produced by the Philadelphia Theatre Company in March 1995; it opened at the Golden Theatre in New York City in November of the same year. The play is based on a series of master classes given by the renowned opera singer Maria Callas at the Juilliard School of Music in New York in 1971 and 1972. Callas (1923–77), was the greatest dramatic soprano of her generation and also a controversial figure. Her restless and tempestuous personality often led her into disputes with opera managements and feuds with rival singers. However, she was adored by her fans and was the subject of constant media attention, including gossip about her jet-set life with the wealthy Greek shipowner Aristotle Onassis.



Although *Master Class* does delve into the triumphs and tragedies of Callas's life, its primary focus is the art of dramatic singing. She also reveals her own contradictory personality—proud and egotistical yet also vulnerable and self-pitying. In spite of all the flaws of its main character, however, *Master Class*, written by a man who has been a Callas fan since he was a teenager in high school, is a tribute to the dedication of a great singer and actress to her chosen art.

3. Swan Song. Maria Callas and Billie Holiday

by Hilton Als July 25, 2011

The titanic American-born Greek soprano (1923-77) had a terrible face. Or thought she did. Her nose was as long as an anteater's, and her wide mouth as jarring to the eye as a raw red scar on her olive skin. Had you met her, you might have been afraid to look her in the eye, for fear of recrimination:



the world had failed her early on. Her parents, George and Evangelina Kalogeropoulos, had three children: a beautiful girl named Jackie, a boy who died of typhoid fever as a toddler, and then Maria. (The family emigrated from Athens to Queens five months before Callas's birth.) Evangelina's disappointment that her third child wasn't a boy was so great that, for several days, she refused even to look at Maria. Things went downhill from there.

Naomi O'Connell as Sharon Graham and Tyne Daly as Maria Callas in *Master Class* at the Vaudeville Theatre, London.

Photograph: Nigel Norrington for the Guardian

Evangelina favored the musically inclined Jackie, but when it was discovered that the four-year-old Maria had a voice she was put to work. In 1937, Evangelina left George and took her daughters back to Athens, where Maria, overweight, myopic, clumsy, and impoverished, was finally taken on by a knowledgeable instructor, who proclaimed her a dramatic soprano. Other teachers followed, all of whom marvelled at the young girl's tenacity, her bel-canto singing, and her peerless acting ability. (Before Callas, most bel-canto singers just stood at center stage and sang pretty.) Perhaps Callas learned to act in order to entertain the Italian and Greek soldiers her mother forced her to go out with in exchange for food and other wartime scarcities. If that was the case, she extracted herself from her mother's controlling cruelty by expertly developing what *she* could control: her voice and her revolutionary approach to a role. As she told one interviewer, she relied on the music to tell her how to play a part; it was all there in the score, if you listened and used your brain a little—but not enough to make you self-conscious.

In this, Callas resembled another singer who changed the rules: Billie Holiday. Like Holiday, Callas used music as a way of expressing her indomitable, wounded self. While she managed to make opera democratic—by 1956, she had appeared on the cover of *Time*, and people who had never attended an opera were familiar with her exploits: the broken contracts, the dismissed managers, and so on—there was nothing middle class or comforting about her; she treated opera as a high art that she could fill with base feelings. And, again like Holiday, she was drawn to the wrong men, to men she considered more dangerous and powerful than herself: greatness is isolating. Callas met the Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis in 1957, while she was married to an Italian industrialist, Giovanni Meneghini, whose money and management had propelled her career forward. Two years later, she left her husband, and she spent the rest of her life in love with Onassis, who eventually dumped her for Jacqueline Kennedy (whom he married in 1968). Callas's sadness over this lost love distanced her more and more from the world in which she had made her name. Perhaps owing to her dramatic

weight loss in the fifties, her voice became strained, and from 1965 onward her appearances were infrequent. In the fall of 1971, Callas agreed to teach a series of voice classes in New York, and that is where “Master Class” begins.

From: http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2011/07/25/110725crth_theatre_als#ixzz2LupTytav



4. Maria Callas (Biography)

Maria Callas was born in New York City on December 3, 1923. She made her professional debut with the Royal Opera of Athens in *Boccaccio*, and took her first major role in *Tosca*. Her Italian opera debut took place at the Verona Arena in 1947. In 1954, Callas made her American debut in *Norma*. During the 1960s, the quality and frequency of her performances waned. On September 16, 1977, Callas died in Paris.

EARLY LIFE

American opera singer Maria Callas was born Cecilia Sophia Anna Maria Kalogeropoulus in New York City on December 3, 1923. Her parents, George and Evangelina, were Greek immigrants who shortened their last name to Callas once Maria started primary school.

When Maria was 7 years old, she started taking classical piano lessons but soon realized she loved singing the music—with dramatic flair—even more than playing it. In 1937, when Maria was a teen, her parents separated and she and her mother and sister moved back to Greece. In Athens, Maria, whose last name had been changed back to Kalogeropoulos, studied voice under Elvira de Hidalgo at the Royal Academy of Music. The school normally required that students be at least 16 years old, but the young Callas showed such great promise that they made a special exception.

As a student, Maria made her stage debut in a school production of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. For her dazzling performance in the role of Santuzza, Maria was awarded the Academy’s prize.

OPERA CAREER

When Maria was 16 years old, she made her professional debut with the Royal Opera of Athens in a modest role in *Suppé's Boccaccio*. In her early 20s, she took her first major role in *Tosca*.

During WWII, Maria struggled to find roles. She moved back to New York to spend time with her father and look for work, but the Metropolitan Opera turned her down. After the war, at the urging of her teacher, Maria changed her last name back to Callas and moved to Italy in pursuit of work. In Verona, she quickly met and married rich industrialist Giovanni Meneghini.

Callas’s Italian opera debut took place at the Verona Arena in August of 1947, with a performance of *La Gioconda*. Over the next few years, under the management of her husband, Callas continued to perform in Florence and Verona to critical acclaim. Although her voice captivated audiences, as her

When music fails to agree to the ear, to soothe the ear and the heart and the senses, then it has missed the point.

Maria Callas

fame increased, Callas developed a reputation as a demanding diva. Fiercely resilient, Callas said of audience members’ jeers, “Hissing from the gallery is part of the scene. It is a hazard of the battlefield. Opera is a battlefield and it must be accepted.”

In 1954, Callas made her American debut in *Norma*, at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. The performance was a triumph. In 1956, she at last had the

opportunity to sing with the Metropolitan Opera in her home city of New York. Within three years of the performance, her health began to rapidly decline, as did her marriage. In 1960, Callas and Meneghini divorced because she was having an affair with shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis.

LATER YEARS AND DEATH

During the 1960s, Callas's formerly stellar singing voice was discernibly faltering. Her performances grew fewer and farther in between as a result of her frequent cancellations. Although she formally retired from the stage in the early 1960s, she made a brief return to performing with the Metropolitan Opera from January of 1964 through July of 1965. Her final operatic performance was in Tosca at Covent Garden on July 5, 1965.

In the early 1970s, Callas tried her hand at teaching. In 1971 and 1972, she conducted master classes at Julliard in New York. Despite her failing health, Callas accompanied a friend on an international recital tour in 1973 to help him raise money for his ailing daughter. Following the tour and news of Onassis's remarriage to Jacqueline Kennedy, Callas moved to Paris and became a recluse. On September 16, 1977, at the age of 55, Maria Callas collapsed and died suddenly and mysteriously in her Paris home.

I am not an angel and do not pretend to be. That is not one of my roles. But I am not the devil either. I am a woman and a serious artist, and I would like so to be judged.

Maria Callas

Maria Callas. (2013). *The Biography Channel website*. Retrieved 04:08, Feb 25, 2013, from <http://www.biography.com/people/maria-callas-9235435>.

5. Die ewige Flamme

Zum 30. Todestag der Diva Maria Callas / Von

Jürgen Kesting

(Kesting ist Autor von Standardwerken wie "Die großen Sänger" und "Maria Callas")

Sie verlangen nichts Unmögliches, die Liebhaber von Opern, sie erwarten ein Wunder. Sie erwarten eine Göttin, die sie lieben, hassen und manchmal auch töten können, um sie post mortem zu verklären. "Diva aller Divas, Kaiserin, Königin, Göttin, Zauberin, hart arbeitende Magierin, mit einem Wort: göttlich." Alle Hymnen in einer Hymne auf Maria Callas (1923 bis 1977) - dargebracht von Yves Saint-Laurent. Dargebracht aus anderer, aus weiblicher Perspektive von Ingeborg Bachmann: "Sie war immer die Kunst, ach, die Kunst, und sie war immer ein Mensch, immer die Ärmste, die Heimgesuchteste, die Traviata."

Gibt es jemanden, der dies heute schreiben könnte? Zu schreiben wagte? Gibt es jemanden, der in einem Zustand irrationaler Verzückung eine Sängerin, bevor sie auch nur einen Ton gesungen hat, mit dem Ruf "Mariiia ... Diviina" begrüßen würde wie Maria Callas bei ihrer letzten "Norma"-Aufführung 1965 in Paris? Aber über wen oder für wen ließe sich dies schreiben? 30 Jahre ist es her, dass ihre Stimme endgültig verstummte. Die Rolle der Diva ist seither mit Stars wie Renée Fleming oder Anna Netrebko besetzt, die - wie talentiert und schön auch immer - marktkonforme Surrogate der Diva sind, so wie Luciano Pavarotti den Mythos des Tenors zum Massenphänomen hergerichtet und entstellt hat.

Die Damen machen einen Job. Sind hochqualifizierte Opernangestellte. Ziehen wie Renée Fleming die Kostüme im Stile von Rosa Ponselle an und imitieren die alten Diven, oder sie imitieren, wie Anna Netrebko, die Pop-Posen von Madonna. Nein, die Callas bleibt von einer anderen Aura, der einer Kunstheiligen, umgeben. Sie lässt den, der hören kann, der hören will, nicht los. Sie lässt mich nicht los. Wann immer ich ihre Stimme höre, höre ich sie, als wär's das erste Mal. Sie lässt mich spüren,

dass die Erfindung einer großen Melodie zu den "Mysterien der Menschheit" gehört (Claude Lévi-Strauss); dass alle großen Melodien unbezwinglich traurig sind.

Die eminente Begabung wurde offenbar, als ihre Mutter die 13-Jährige in Athen der Gesangslehrerin Maria Trivella vorstellte, die sofort willens war, das Kind kostenlos zu unterrichten. "Der Ton der Stimme", so die Erinnerung der Lehrerin, "war warm, lyrisch, intensiv; sie flackerte und leuchtete wie eine Flamme und füllte die Luft mit den melodischen Schwingungen einer Glocke." Und mit dieser Stimme stürmt sie los, ins Leben, in die Kunst, auf den Olymp. Die Stelle im Chor der Oper von Athen, die sie mit 17 erhielt, war ihr nicht genug. Schon rasch bekam sie die Hauptrollen, Tosca, Marta in "Tiefland", Santuzza in "Cavalleria rusticana", und sogleich bekam sie zu spüren, was sie immer erleben sollte: den Neid und den Hass derer, die sie in den Schatten stellte.

Der Belcanto, als anachronistische "Kanarienvogelmusik" in Verruf, wurde mit ihr quasi wiederentdeckt. Die Titelpartie in Gioachino Rossinis "Armida" studierte sie 1952 in fünf Tagen ein. Der Mitschnitt zeigt, dass sie in der Arie "D'amore al dolce impero" die Triller, Sprünge und Läufe - etwa eine aufsteigende und abfallende chromatische Skala von zwei Oktaven Umfang - zu einer Apotheose des dramatischen Singens machte und höchste Töne nicht zaghaft ansetzte, sondern gleichsam abfackelte.

Ihre Stimme war aus unterschiedlichen Klängen legiert. Die drei Register - eine herb-getönte, dramatische Bruststimme, eine opak-verhangene Mittellage und eine brillante Höhe bis zum vollstimmig attackierten dreigestrichenen Es, selbst zum dreigestrichenen E - waren zwar angeglichen, aber nicht restlos ausgeglichen. Sie erzeugte eine irritierende und oftmals schockierende Vielfalt von Klängen, die in sich schon Echo innerer Dramen waren.

Den Weg in die internationale Karriere fand sie auf dem Umweg über Mexico City. Nach der Generalprobe von "Aida" hatte der Intendant gesagt: "Madame Callas, wenn Sie das Es morgen singen, werden die Mexikaner verrückt werden."

Sie lehnte zunächst ab. Doch am Abend des 30. Mai 1950 verärgerte der Tenor Kurt Baum, der Sänger des Radames, das Ensemble mit seinen hohen Tönen, die er so endlos hielt, dass man nur das Weiße in seinen Augen sehen konnte. Callas holte sich das Einverständnis ihrer Kollegen und sang den Angeber in Grund und Boden. Sie sang am Ende des zweiten Aktes ein Es, das den Himmel über Mexico City glutrot färbte. Der Ton durchschneidet das Fortissimo von Chor und Orchester - er gleicht einem Blitz im Wüten einer tobenden Gewitternacht. Pandämonium.

Mit der Wahnsinnszene der Lucia di Lammermoor, die sie 1952 in Mexiko erstmals sang, löste sie im Publikum eine Wahnsinnszene aus - 15-minütige Bravo-Rufe, bis sie die Arie noch einmal sang. Nach den zwei geplanten Aufführungen musste eine dritte angesetzt werden, bei der sie nach alter Belcanto-Manier neue Verzierungen improvisierte. Später sollte sie sagen, dass die "Lucia"-Premiere "der glücklichste Abend meiner Karriere war".

Am 7. Dezember 1952 wurde sie mit ihrer zweiten Saison-Prima als Lady Macbeth unter Leitung Victor de Sabatas zur Königin der Mailänder Scala und erfüllte Verdis paradoxe Forderung, dass die Lady mit einer hässlichen, verschatteten Stimme und doch grandioso singen müsse. Die Saison 1953/54 eröffnete sie als Medea unter Leitung von Leonard Bernstein, der sie später als "die größte Sängerin der Welt" bezeichnete und zwei Jahre später für sie irrwitzige Stakkato-Koloraturen im



Finale von Bellinis "La Sonnambula" ("Die Nachtwandlerin") schrieb, die er mir bei einem Interview in seliger Erinnerung mit heiserer Stimme aufs Band sang.

Die Begegnung mit Aristoteles Onassis wurde zur Peripetie ihrer Laufbahn. Doch wäre die Feststellung, dass aus der Darstellerin liebender und leidender Heroinnen eine liebende und leidende Frau wurde, banal. Da sie der Regel, bei Aufführungen nur die Zinsen des vokalen Kapitals auszugeben, nicht gefolgt war, waren ihre Energien einfach erschöpft. Sie wurde angreifbar.

Wie medial geschürte Vorurteile zum Hass gebündelt werden, erlebte sie, als sie im April 1958 die Scala für eine Aufführung von "Anna Bolena" nur unter Polizeischutz betreten konnte. Dass der Beifall gezielt nur ihrem Partner gezollt wurde, weckte noch einmal ihren Kämpferinstinkt. In der Szene, in der König Heinrich VIII. seine fälschlich der Untreue bezichtigte Frau den Richtern übergibt, ruft Anna den Schergen entgegen: "Giudici?! Ad Anna?!" ("Richter?! Gegen Anna?!"). Callas ging an die Rampe und schleuderte die Worte ins Auditorium. Das Publikum jubelte ihr zu, offenbar ohne zu erkennen, dass es die eigene Jämmerlichkeit bejubelte.

Als sie endlich durch die zur "Affaire" banalisierten Begegnung mit Onassis zur wohl berühmtesten Frau der Welt geworden war und, nach einer Allensbach-Umfrage, in Deutschland zur meistgehassten, verfügte sie nicht mehr über die Qualitäten, mit denen sie den Ruhm einer Primadonna assoluta erkämpfte.

Die Launen des Publikums sind so unbeständig wie das Wetter. Die Diva furiosa wurde nach ihrer letzten Bühnenaufführung in London am 5. Juni 1965 zur Diva dolorosa verklärt. Der erste Abend der Abschiedstournee, die am 25. Oktober 1973 in Hamburg begann, gehört zu meinen traurigsten Erfahrungen. Sie war desolat. Sie hätte nicht auftreten dürfen. Mit den Resten ihrer Stimme hatte sie sich durch ein gar nicht einmal so schwieriges Programm gequält - ein Desaster.

Was ist ihr Vermächtnis? Sie hat den Anstoß für die Renaissance der Belcanto-Oper gegeben, der bis heute fortwirkt. Wie Enrico Caruso, der den Belcanto vollendete, und wie der Russe Fjodor Schaljapin gehört sie zu den drei wirkungsmächtigsten Sängern des vergangenen Jahrhunderts.

Doch damit ist noch nichts über die seelische Wirkung gesagt, die Maria Callas mit ihren Darstellungen der romantischen Heroinnen auslöste. Diese erklärt sich daraus, dass sie den von ihr dargestellten Figuren eine Stimme unserer Zeit gegeben hat. Das meinte Ingeborg Bachmann, als sie sagte, dass sie uns durchhören ließ durch die Jahrhunderte.

Die Rolle, mit der sie die stärkste Wirkung ausgelöst hat, war Donizettis Lucia di Lammermoor, die, von ihrem Bruder politisch verschachert, in der Hochzeitsnacht ihren Gatten erdolcht und, koloratur-delirierend an den Geliebten denkend, in den Wahnsinn driftet.

Die Wahnsinnsarie der Lucia ist etwas anderes als das Gebet einer ahnungslosen Jungfrau oder eine Kür der Koloraturen. Sie ist eine erotische Phantasmagorie: Lucias sehrender Seufzer "Alfin son tua, alfin sei mio" ("Endlich bin ich dein, endlich bist du mein") ist Ausdruck der Sehnsucht nach Vereinigung. Maria Callas zeigte, dass aus der im Wahnsinn Delirierenden die Stimme der Auflehnung gegen die Unterwerfung der Frau klingt. Welche Rolle diese Opernfigur in der Mentalitätsgeschichte spielt, zeigt sich weiter daran, dass Anna Karenina im Roman von Leo Tolstoi vor ihrem Ehebruch eine Aufführung von "Lucia" - mit Adelina Patti, der größten Primadonna in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts - hört und sich danach vor die Räder eines Zuges wirft.

Maria Callas gab Lucia und ihren unterdrückten Schwestern, die um ihre Selbstbestimmung und die freie Partnerwahl kämpfen, die Stimme des weiblichen Widerstands. Ihr Singen war Fanal.

"Sie hat nicht Rollen gesungen, niemals, sondern auf der Rasierklinge gelebt", schrieb Ingeborg Bachmann. "Die Callas - ja, wann hat sie gelebt, wann wird sie sterben?" Sie ist nie gestorben. Sie ist die ewige Flamme.

Ich bin ein Geschöpf des Schicksals. Es hat mich auserwählt, es wollte, dass ich wurde, was ich bin. Ich stehe außerhalb meiner selbst und verfolge mein Leben von außen. Nur wenn ich sang, wurde ich geliebt.



6. The Performance Practice of Maria Callas - Interpretation and Instinct

by Dr. Robert E. Seletsky

Robert E. Seletsky is an independent scholar and professional musician with published work appearing in *New Grove II* (2000), *Early Music*, *The Opera Quarterly*, *Recent Researches in the Music of the Classical Era*, *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, and elsewhere. This article is revised and lengthened from a version initially appearing in *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Autumn 2004), p. 587-602.

Maria Callas holds an assured place in the pantheon of great artists, but details concerning the components of her greatness are often mired in platitudes that conflate biography, public persona, and myth with her actual approach to opera. Moreover, Callas worked in a milieu that itself has always been difficult to evaluate.

Performance Practices

What were the parameters of Callas's performances with regard to stylistic matters? Curiously, in the cold light of scholarly reality, Callas's external attitude toward opera was often frustratingly unadventurous and ill-informed. Not only was she content to observe so-called "traditional cuts" in standard operas—even in studio recordings, mechanically defending their necessity in order to "keep the action moving," but her 1950s mentors, especially Tullio Serafin to whom she was most devoted, introduced *further* cuts—to which Callas never objected.

"An opera begins long before the curtain goes up and ends long after it has come down. It starts in my imagination, it becomes my life, and it stays part of my life long after I've left the opera house."

"I don't know what happens to me on stage. Something else seems to take over."

Maria Callas

Unusual, unnecessary internal cuts even appear in Callas's performances and recordings of veristic works like *Tosca*, *Butterfly*, and *Pagliacci*. As for the revivals of dormant (or, as indicated, not so dormant) operas, most editions made for Callas were eviscerated, rearranged, and even re-composed to a point that the hand of the composer was sometimes scarcely perceptible.

The cuts never really move the action forward as purported, but radically compromise the composers' styles and forms. Yet inexplicably, long and dreary sections of music, like the ballets in *Armida* and *Macbeth*, were retained in Callas performances largely untouched. That Callas could proclaim herself a champion of *bel canto* composers ("great geniuses who often died in poverty"), and yet defend the unrecognizably mutilated editions prepared by her conductors, is an enormous contradiction. Indeed, in the few cases where "traditionally" deleted passages were restored by Callas's conductors, notably Karajan in the 1954 Scala and 1955 Berlin *Lucias*, and the 1956 EMI *Trovatore*, Callas never insisted that the restored music remain for future use: in later performances and her second studio recording of *Lucia*, the cuts are back; and in retrospect, one must wonder whether Karajan would have expanded *Trovatore* for an August 1956 EMI recording had not Tebaldi and her ensemble opened the same cuts, in addition to twelve more measures at the coda of Act I, for a Decca *Trovatore* one month earlier.

At the same time, Callas would not part with 20th-century performance mannerisms unknown to the composers of the older music she claimed to adore: e.g., until her upper register shredded entirely after 1959, Callas interpolated every high dominant or tonic note that the music would bear, frequently substituting them for more expressive or harmonically interesting written notes. Conversely, again to cite Tetrzzini's 1912 recording of "Vien diletto," although that singer had the easiest and most plentiful high notes, she refrains from capping her inventively ornamented second verse with an interpolated dominant high E-flat. In every performance of "Vien diletto," Callas cuts the second verse and coda altogether, jumping to an interpolated E-flat, which then becomes the focal point, actually distorting the structure of the cabaletta and extinguishing any sense of Bellini's real compositional style in favor of self-indulgent, anachronistic vocal-pyrotechnic fashion.

Authenticity

Detractors often label Callas a "singing actress." Such a characterization misses the point of her art. On stage, she acted very minimally, moving far less than most other singers. Her apologists say that her acting was in her singing. They too are mistaken. There is no "acting" in Callas's work at its best. Rather, she used her infinitely layered approach to music, with an inimitable subtlety of note-length and stress, flexible *rubato* controlled over an unerringly resilient *tactus*, expressively realized dynamics, and complex phrase shapes to create living musico-textual entities. In the rare films of her performances, either staged or in concert, even when she is not singing, one is struck by her active *listening*, the silences enveloped into her overarching concept. Her results are greater than the sum of their parts: not simply musical or dramatic, they are stylized musical poetry. Whatever she sang feels inevitable even when the listener is fully aware of problems with performance practice and editorial mishandling. Callas does not need to be seen; her insights were entirely based on elements in the music so she is equally riveting in recordings. Callas's musical insights are authentic in the most profound sense, her art a transcendent probing of the music and an evocation of its inherent humanity. We are moved by her authenticity because, solely through music, she taps into the most genuine and significant of our shared experiences. Opera, the most stylized and artificial of forms, ironically becomes the medium for the revelation of artistic truth, mirrored in Callas's performances as the most immediate expression of our own identification with the Self.

Legend

The foregoing examples are the proverbial "tip of the iceberg," not even moments that are generally discussed by Callas lovers. That the scrutiny of every musical utterance produced by this artist seems to reveal a similar wealth of detail is breath-taking and nearly unimaginable. It is frustrating that many grumble about the longevity of Callas's renown, thinking it is generated only by exploitative

tabloid journalists and by the endless crass marketing to which her recorded legacy continues to be subjected especially by EMI nearly three decades after her death. Sensationalistic, often unfounded, gossip posing as biography, a focus on the early decay of her great instrument, and her posthumous treatment as a commodity all diffuse the reality of Callas's irreplaceable artistry. As stated earlier, she was not equipped with the necessary stylistic vocabulary for entirely accurate representations of all the music she chose to sing, but what she did bring to music was self-evidently far more important. I have often mused that had Callas been transported to a rehearsal of an opera led by a composer like Rossini, Donizetti, or Bellini, any of them would have praised her interpretation as the pinnacle of their intentions, while adding "but you might like to think about adding cadential trills in measure *x*, *appoggiature* in recitative *y*, and embellishments for cabaletta *z*, as we are going to observe the repeat." The priorities are clear: considerations of performance practice are important but do not outweigh a sublime elevation of music to the level of the human spirit achieved by Maria Callas.

7. Prima Donna

From Italian words meaning "first woman" or "first lady", depending on your preference, the prima donna is the leading lady in a performance, and especially in opera. Can also be called a diva.

*Don't talk to me about rules, dear.
Wherever I stay I make the goddam
rules.*

Maria Callas

The word DIVA is now often used to describe someone arrogant, vain, or just plain bitchy. Diva and prima donna have become synonymous with a show-off or a bitch, regardless of whether or not the person in question is male or female.

Maria Callas was one of the great dive (DEE-vay) of the twentieth century. A coloratura-spinto soprano, she was determined to be the best of the best on the stage, often singing outside of her natural singing range, which eventually ruined her voice and led to her downfall. This Greek diva was known to give tantrums offstage. Still, her strong, metallic, if not angelic, singing and good sense of high drama enabled her to become a stellar actress and singer. Fans claim that she was feuding with fellow soprano, the Italian spinto-lyric soprano, Renata Tebaldi, despite the strong friendship between the two singers.

Did you see that?! Charlotte pushed me off the stage and grabbed the spotlight for herself! What a prima donna!

8. An American Primadonna: Beverly Sills (1929-2007)

Beverly Sills, the acclaimed Brooklyn-born coloratura soprano who was more popular with the American public than any opera singer since Enrico Caruso, even among people who never set foot in



an opera house, died on July 2 at her home in Manhattan. The cause was inoperable lung cancer, said her personal manager, Edgar Vincent. She was 78.

Ms. Sills was America's idea of a prima donna. Her plain-spoken manner and telegenic vitality made her a genuine celebrity and an invaluable advocate for the fine arts. Her life embodied an archetypal American story of humble origins, years of struggle, family tragedy and artistic triumph.

AP Photo/ Wyatt Counts

At a time when American opera singers routinely went overseas for training and professional opportunities, Ms. Sills was a product of her native country and did not even perform in Europe until she was 36. At a time when opera singers regularly appeared as guests on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson," Ms. Sills was the only opera star who was invited to be guest host. She made frequent television appearances with Carol Burnett, Danny Kaye and even the Muppets.

by Anthony Tommasini NYT

9. What is Narcissism? By Psychologist & former pro musician, Dr. Mike Jolkovski. He spends his days helping musicians and other bizness entrepreneurs successfully navigate group dynamics, avoid self-destruction & thrive.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is defined as "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and a lack of empathy."

The stereotypic acts associated with the trait include self-flaunting body posturing, expansive arm gestures, bowing, instinctive self-adornment, and a natural attraction to the limelight of personal recognition. Individuals having only this trait (of the three) are competitive but non-aggressive in their strivings for recognition. The trait corresponds to a striving for glory in one's environment, hence it is the second main component of human ambition. In a pejorative connotation, the unbridled trait of narcissism may reveal itself in the context of conceit, exhibitionism, vanity or messianism. An associated facial expression includes the radiant gingival smile (broadly exposing gums and teeth). The facial complexion tends toward blood-red or ruddy. Hallmarks of the trait include blushing, flushing, and a second type of mass discharge of the autonomic (parasympathetic) nervous system: the narcissistic rage of defence and withdrawal. During expression of this rage the normally sanguine complexion becomes even more florid."

I was always too mature for my age - and not very happy. I had no young friends. I wish I could go back to those days. If I could only live it all again, how I would play and enjoy other girls. What a fool I was.

Maria Callas

In plain English the last part means that there will be some tantrums and sparks when this person is not noticed or treated as someone special, but they will usually retreat after becoming enraged. This

description gives us a clear picture of the stereotypical 'prima donna' or 'star' and these qualities above are not unhealthy, quiet the opposite narcissism is a basic instinct in most humans.

However the popular meaning of the word Narcissism is quiet different to this description above. This is because the popular meaning now describes Narcissistic Personality Disorder and not narcissism. Most people talking about narcissism or a narcissist are actually describing someone with Narcissistic Personality Disorder or NPD. The narcissist is described as turning inward for gratification rather than depending on others and as being excessively preoccupied with issues of personal adequacy, power and prestige. Narcissistic Personality Disorder is closely linked to self-centredness."

10. How to Work With a Prima Donna By Michael Jolkovski, PhD

"Prima Donna" (Italian for Leading lady) and Diva are terms originally used to describe the temperamental and demanding tendencies of Opera stars, the rock stars of the 18th through the early 20th centuries. The music may have changed but these demanding tendencies flourish in every medium and genre. In my practice, I spend a lot of time with my musician clients discussing the problems of working with Prima Donnas — as well as trying to moderate their own career-killing Prima Donna tendencies. I help Prima Donnas create a trusted bond with their closest working partners where the diva act is not needed, even if they have to put it back on when they go outside.

WHY ARE SO MANY Prima Donnas in music?

Musicians aren't the only insecure people in the world and up to a point, narcissism can be an asset. It can be the source of charisma and that elusive star quality that helps to fill a big stage. After all, it takes a lot of confidence to expect people to listen to you play and sing night after night. A rock-n-roll attitude can help you to armor yourself against the slings & arrows of the audience. Taking a superior attitude is one way to protect yourself. If it works for you, fine. When it keeps musicians from really working together or forming relationships that sustain them — then it's a problem.

THE SYNDROME

"You walked into the party like you were walking onto a yacht" Carly Simon lamented on her hit "You're so vain". The song, rumored to be about Mick Jagger (among other divas) illustrates how a Prima Donna's sense of uniqueness and entitlement is evident just by the way they walk. Musicians often carry themselves with attitude, but a Prima Donna goes beyond having swagger and confidence. A true Prima Donna believes in their own specialness and treats others with entitlement, and will make the lives of others a living hell by throwing tantrums to insist that their special demands are met.

A classic Prima Donna is arrogant, vain, high-maintenance, demanding, petulant, and entitled. The entitlement can help them rationalize exploiting and manipulating others. This is especially destructive in bands. A prima donna is by definition not a team player, and will often unrealistically expect to live a lifestyle that hasn't yet been earned. Alcohol and drugs tend to make all of this this much worse. We're talking about a high degree of narcissism, which is the psychoanalytic word for vanity. Everybody has some narcissism: it's what makes for healthy self-esteem. Like blood pressure or sex drive, there is such a thing as too little or too much. A highly narcissistic person can be like a blimp: inflated, impractical, expensive, thin-skinned, fragile, and in need of a large crew to keep them going. The tabloid press or VH1's Behind the Music are good places to see Hindenburg-type crashes if you like to see that kind of thing.

One practical thing you should know about narcissism in its various unpleasant manifestations is that it ebbs and flows. When someone is feeling dissed, belittled, insulted and humiliated, they tend to react badly. This applies to everyone, even if those of use who are more on the narcissistic side tend to react more badly, with more arrogance, etc. When this happens, you can realize this person is reacting like a cornered animal. Poking them with a stick won't get the results you want. You want them to calm down, and the way to attain this is to help them feel appreciated and admired. This is why the stereotyped Hollywood agent or band manager is always doling out flattery — to try to get their Prima Donna stars into a mood where they are all happy and purring so something can get done.

"Can you remember an inspired moment in your life? Can you remember your feeling at that point and can you draw from that experience?"

James Levine

And face it, if you're working with a band for any length of time, everyone will get a chance to make an ass of themselves. This includes you. So letting people save face by giving them a little time and support to recover when they're will help you sooner or later. If your Prima Donna, in the right mood, can sincerely apologize, laugh at

himself or herself, admit flaws, and have genuine concern for others, there's hope they're not a hard-core pathological narcissist. If not, you're in for a rough ride.

WHY PUT UP WITH A Prima Donna?

Just because you're paranoid, the joke goes, doesn't mean they're not really after you. By the same token — just because you're a narcissistic Prima Donna doesn't mean you're not special. Some people are so remarkably gifted they are worth working with even despite these obnoxious personal characteristics. If you are in a band with someone so outrageously talented and charismatic that they truly are the next Prince, Dylan, Bowie, Patti Smith, Hendrix, and Cobain rolled into one, you might be willing to put up with some extra irritation for the privilege. But it won't do you any good to work with someone like this if the band — or you — don't survive. It can amount to making a deal with them, either implied or spelled out. For example, if they are a visionary and you can help them deal with the nitty-gritty reality, it can work out for everybody. So long as you don't kill them and they don't discard you like a burrito wrapper when they grow weary of your company. Difficult as they can be, I have sympathy and respect for these people who are often gifted and who create art that enriches us all. The industry and the weird conditions of fame tend to push people into becoming prima donnas to keep themselves intact.

Famous people sometimes need to grow a hard crust because of all of the hands reaching out to grab a piece of them. I respect anybody who can make a life for themselves under those conditions.

TIPS FOR DIVA WRANGLING

Lucky you. You are working with a Prima Donna. Here are some pointers. Know when you've had enough. Decide how far you're willing to go to accommodate the Prima Donna, and don't go beyond it. Just like the grizzly bear, a dangerous Prima Donna in attack mode is probably just frightened. Monitor your own reactions. Rage is a good sign you're at your limit. If the Prima



Donna takes an attitude of lofty superiority and treats others as scum, be sure you have extremely thick skin.

Be cool, honey bunny. Don't retaliate, don't react. If they are expecting you to be their servant, just point out the reality that you have your own stuff to look after, and they are free to hire a personal assistant if they want to spend their money that way. Don't argue with their tantrums. Just shrug and let 'em know it won't work on you.

Feed the beast: Just like the van needs gas, your Prima Donna bandmate requires a certain amount of admiration and praise. This is part of the Prima Donna high-maintenance plan. It costs nothing to supply if you can stand it. It helps if you believe they deserve it. Set limits on deadly behavior: The sense of entitlement can grow like a tumor if unchecked. If the lead singer thinks he's too special to help with loadout, it can split the band. If the singer wants to negotiate for the privilege (for example sharing publishing revenues more generously) that's another matter.

You're on their side: "I'd love you to have this, but we're not in a position to afford it yet". Let them know that the insufficiently fluffy latte they're throwing a fit about is not a personal affront, it's just business.

Step out of the reality distortion field once in a while. Your Prima Donna friend might think he's going to take the world by storm, but half the Baristas in L.A. used to think the same thing — and the other half still think so. Do your own thinking and get some outside opinions.

Build a firewall: You have to protect yourself if you're dealing with someone who can be exploitative. It is a narcissistic / Prima Donna trait to feel entitled to grab all of the credit and revenue and to deny that anyone else made any contribution. A written band agreement developed by a competent attorney can be your friend. That way, the money isn't split up based on anyone's feelings — it's just spelled out. You may have to cut them loose. Sometimes life is too short.

AND WHAT IF YOU'RE THE PRIMA DONNA?

It's a fantastic relief to be able to let go of that superior business — the world is a lot less lonely that way. Some perspective can help, as can a sense of humor about yourself. Maturity is not a bad thing. A competent psychoanalyst can help.

11. How to teach singing

There are only really three methods of teaching or learning singing. **The first method is to learn by ear without a coach or instruction.**

Simply to sing along to other singers. This is a very bad way to learn to sing because as a singer you have to instinctively figure out the right attack. Unless you already instinctively do the right attack, the attack of the mask, then you will be impersonating good technique with bad technique and harming your voice. Usually when singers do this they struggle for pitch and volume and use more air. Trying to learn in this way you may find that some days the voice comes out good when you sing along, but you don't know a real attack so the next day you struggle again.

The other way to learn to sing is using trigger phrases coupled with variations on tone value and singing by ear to another singer.

You would do things such as sing, "mum," with a yawn like tone or sing, "nay," with a nasal tone just like a singer in an example did. This method can sometime work. However this method does not actually teach a direct attack. With this method you may do an exercise as instructed and your voice comes out nicely one day, the next day you try the same exercise and it does nothing. The reason is that the trigger phrases with variants of tone sometimes cause forward placement into the mask to happen as a happy accident. What further complicates this is that you would probably listen to the example singer and try to mimic the tone with a bad attack and further hurt your voice. When trying to sing using this method the singer feels as if they are wandering around tonally with their voice and hoping it just catches. This method of learning to sing is inferior as it doesn't teach a direct and specific attack. Consequently, only singers who already instinctively do the attack of the mask may hear any real change in their actual singing voice. Coaches who teach this method usually are proponents of, "singing from the diaphragm," or "The registration method," or , "Finding your middle voice." All these methods are unnatural and don't work very well.

The third and best way to learn how to sing is to directly learn the attack of the mask. This is what Vocal Release Teaches.

It lays it out in a very, "step by step, do this to make this happen, manner." I use some trigger phrases. But, I don't just tell you to sing, "mum," with a breathy or yawn tone. I tell you an exact attack. I will teach you specific things to manipulate in your body and how to approach singing so that your voice resonates forward into the mask and always has a pleasing tone. You can't trick your voice into resonant forward placement by singing, "nay," in a nasal tone or singing, "mum," with a yawn like tone.

There are very specific things you need to learn that will place it there in just a few days of practice. When you attack the voice from the mask all singing feels as easy as humming resonantly with your mouth open. There are no register or breaks to worry about. Registers don't exist. They are an invention taught by bad vocal coaches that don't know how to teach a singer how to attack the voice into the mask.

12. Psychological Hints for Teaching Singing



By David L. Jones

(1) Welcome the singer with a positive statement. "It's nice to see you.... or don't you look nice today", etc.

(2) Refresh the singer on the work that was done in the previous session. This creates a sense of continuation of the process.

(3) Invest in the process, **not the result**. It takes an investment of time to secure the singing process and both teacher and singer must learn patience.

(4) **NEVER USE THE WORD "NO"**. This only tightens the body because it has a negative connotation. Invite an uplifted psychological feeling by using words such as "joyful surprise" or "laughter".

(5) Invite the next step by using opening statements such as, "I think we need a little more of or", or "Can you add.....?" This invites the singer to respond to a request rather than a command. Remember, this is not dog training school. Singers are very sensitive people. That is why they choose

to sing in the first place. Another positive psychological statement is "I think you would just love it if you added a little more lift.....etc."

(6) Begin each lesson with a simple exercise with ONE concept in mind. Simplicity in the beginning of the session is important. Then you can branch into other concepts later.

(7) Try to have the singer think in coordination rather than bits and pieces. This may take some time, however, the result will be more lasting and complete. Example: have the singer speak the vowels with high palate, low larynx, cords closed, and feeling nasal resonance all at the same time. This is vital to good singing. If the coordination is never felt (feeling being the operative word), then the singer will have difficulty being consistent.

(8) Allow the singer as much input as possible without controlling the lesson. This makes the process a co-effort rather than a command/obey situation. It also starts the singer on the path of self-dialogue with their own instrument. *A professional singer must learn to accomplish this.* You are helping them pave the way to independent singing.



(9) End the session by reviewing what was accomplished and congratulate the singer on that accomplishment. Then give "constructive homework". I often end a session with a statement such as "This week, I would like you to work on..... and we will continue to build on that concept next session." ALWAYS END ON A POSITIVE NOTE PSYCHOLOGICALLY. If the singer does not get the concept you are working on, go to something they do well. This is critical to the singer's feeling positive about singing and wanting to work harder the next week. END WITH SUCCESS. As a teacher, you will feel more positive as well. Remember, patience is the teacher's responsibility as well as the singer's responsibility.

13. Extract from the Play: Callas Teaching.

MARIA.

Who's next? Lady Macbeth, Tosca, Lucia. I must say, what these students lack in voice and technique, they make up for in self-confidence. Don't laugh. That's important. Well, we shall see what we shall see. I wish them well. Next victim! That was a joke. My last one, I promise. *(To the Accompanist.)*

And what is that folderol on the piano there, please?

ACCOMPANIST. You mean the flowers? They're for you. You have an unknown admirer. Very operatic.

MARIA. Is this a classroom or a circus? *(Second Soprano is coming out onto the stage. She is in an evening gown.)*

That was very naughty of someone. I won't pretend I'm not flattered but I'm also not amused. Very, very naughty. *(To Second Soprano.)*

Avanti, avanti! Don't linger. If you're going to enter, enter. If you don't want to be out here, go away. I'll be right with you. Are you going somewhere after this?

SECOND SOPRANO. No.

MARIA. *(She reads the card on the bouquet.)* "Brava, La Divina. We love you." "La Divina." Don't make me laugh. And it's always "We love you," never "I love you." So. Now who have we here?

SECOND SOPRANO. Sharon Graham.

MARIA. Sharon Graham. Definitely not Greek.

SECOND SOPRANO. No.

MARIA. What's in a name, eh? I was Maria Meneghini Callas for a time. Of course, I was Signora Meneghini for a time as well. So. Sharon Graham. What are you going to sing for us?

SECOND SOPRANO. Lady Macbeth?

MARIA. Are you sure you want to do that, Sharon? SECOND SOPRANO. I also have *Queen of the Night*, "*Die Holle Rache*" and *Norma*, the "*Casta Diva*."

MARIA. I think we'll stay with Lady Macbeth. The Sleepwalking Scene, I suppose.

SECOND SOPRANO. No, '*Vieni! t'affretta*,' I thought.

MARIA. Ah, the Letter Scene! Well, that's something. They usually all want to start with the Sleepwalking Scene. You're humble, like me, that's good. So. This is her entrance aria, yes?

SECOND SOPRANO. Yes.

MARIA. So what are you doing out here? Go away. We don't want to see you yet.

SECOND SOPRANO. You want me to go off and come back out?

MARIA. No, I want you to enter. You're on a stage. Use it. Own it. This is opera, not a voice recital. Anyone can stand there and sing. An artist enters and *is*.

SECOND SOPRANO. I thought this was a classroom.

MARIA. It doesn't matter. Never miss an opportunity to theatricalize. Astonish us, Sharon.

SECOND SOPRANO. How do I do that?

MARIA. You can start by not entering as Sharon Graham. Enter as Lady Macbeth. Enter as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Enter as Verdi's Lady Macbeth.

SECOND SOPRANO. I'll do my best.

MARIA. And Sharon, may I say one more thing? That's a beautiful gown, obviously. We've all been admiring it. It's gorgeous. I wish I had one like it.

SECOND SOPRANO. Thank you.

MARIA. But don't ever wear anything like that before midnight at the earliest and certainly not to class. We're talking about what's appropriate. This is a master class, not some Cinderella's ball. Eh? Off you go now. And come back as her. Come back as Lady. (*Second Soprano exits.*)

Sometimes we just have to say these things, eh? am I right? I learned the hard way. I didn't have anyone to tell me these things. I auditioned for Edward Johnson at the old Met wearing a red and white polka-dot dress, white gloves, a blue hat with a veil and what I later learned were known as Joan Crawford "Catch me/your "F"-word-me" pumps. I'm sorry, but that's what they were called. I was overweight and looked like an American flag singing *Madama Butterfly*. No wonder I wasn't engaged. She'll thank me one day.

Are we ready? (*Accompanist nods.*)

I haven't heard this music in years. Even the thought of it makes the hairs on the back of my head stand out.

I guess I'm ready. Begin. (*Accompanist begins to play Lady Macbeth's entrance aria. Maria listens hard, making sounds along with it, rather than actually singing the notes.*)

Satanic music, don't you think? We know where this music is coming from, don't we? What part of her body? Verdi knew his Shakespeare. The curtain is flying up now. No Sharon yet. This is an interesting choice for an entrance. I was onstage at this point. (*The music stops. No sign of the Second Soprano.*)

Sharon? We're all waiting. Excuse me. (*She leaves the stage and comes back a moment later.*)

No Sharon. She's gone. If her skin is that thin, she's not suited for this career. It's not like I said anything about her voice. I didn't even let her open her mouth.

This will make the papers. They'll have a fine time with this. "CALLAS HURTS STUDENTS FEELINGS."

This is just what I was talking about: If you're going to stand up here, naked, and let people judge you, you can't afford to have feelings like Sharon's. A performance is a struggle. You have to win. The audience is the enemy. We have to bring you to your knees because we're right. If I'm worried about what you're thinking about me, I can't win. I beg, I cringe for your favor instead. "*Ho dato tutto a te.*" Eh? It doesn't work that way. You have to make them beg for yours.

Dominate them. "*Ho dato tutto a te.*" Eh? Art is domination. It's making people think that for that precise moment in time there is only one way, one voice. Yours. Eh? Anyone's feelings can be hurt. Only an artist can say "*Ho dato tutto a te*" center stage at La Scala and even Leonard Bernstein forgets he's Leonard Bernstein and listens to you. Next student, please. Is there water? I need water.

14. LADY MACBETH

How does the character of Lady Macbeth develop throughout the play? Look at how quickly Lady Macbeth fades out of the action. It is only a matter of days between the point where she is driving Macbeth to kill Duncan, and the point when she loses touch with him completely.



Jane Lapotaire plays Macbeth in a 1983 production

THE EFFECT OF THE LETTER (ACT 1, SCENE 5)

Lady Macbeth's reaction when she reads her husband's letter is powerful and dramatic. As soon as she's finished reading, she has decided she will make sure Macbeth is king. It's as if she and her husband are thinking exactly the same thing. She does not hesitate for a moment. Lady Macbeth invites the spirits of evil to enter her. She knows she

has to steel herself, that the murder will need evil power, and evil is not naturally within her.

15. Vincenzo Salvatore Carmelo Francesco Bellini and La sonnambula

(3 November 1801 – 23 September 1835) was an Italian opera composer. A native of Catania in Sicily, his greatest works are *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi* (1830), *La sonnambula* (1831), *Norma* (1831), *Beatrice di Tenda* (1833), and *I puritani* (1835). Known for his long-flowing melodic lines, for which he was named "the Swan of Catania", Bellini was the quintessential composer of bel canto opera. He died in Puteaux, France at the age of 33, nine months after the premiere of his last opera, *I puritani*.



La sonnambula (The Sleepwalker) is an opera semiseria in two acts, with music in the bel canto tradition by Vincenzo Bellini to an Italian libretto by Felice Romani, based on a scenario for a ballet-pantomime by Eugène Scribe and Jean-Pierre Aumer called *La somnambule, ou L'arrivée d'un nouveau seigneur*.

The first performance took place at the Teatro Carcano, Milan on March 6, 1831. The role of Amina was originally written for the mezzo-soprano Giuditta Pasta, and during Bellini's lifetime, another mezzo-soprano, Maria Malibran, was a notable exponent of the role. The majority of twentieth-century recordings have been made with a soprano cast as Amina, most with "added top-notes and [other] substantial changes". The first mezzo-soprano to record the role was Cecilia Bartoli. The phrase "Ah! non credea mirarti / Si presto estinto, o fior" from the aria "Ah! non credea mirarti" of *La sonnambula* is inscribed on Bellini's tomb in the Cathedral of Catania, Sicily.

16 . Acting in Opera - Some Controversies Laid Bare

by Marc Taslit

Acting in opera has recently become an *au courant* topic throughout and beyond the operatic world. Many of the people writing and talking about operatic acting seem to feel that there is some kind of competition between opera as a *visual art* (acting, stage directing and the "production values"), and opera as an *aural art* (singing, playing and the music itself). Opinions run the gamut from terse dismissal of the subject ("After all, opera is a *musical art*"), to the term "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" ("complete art work"), which Richard Wagner used to describe his vision of opera as a unified art work that is created through the integrated combination of diverse art forms and technical media. Wagner implied that the audience can and should be stimulated emotionally, intellectually and spiritually by a variety of sources, not exclusively the musical ones.

If opera is, as some say, essentially about the music and how it is sung and interpreted, why bother to continue to present live, fully staged productions at all? Why not simply do concert versions of operas and make recordings? Stop being concerned with how to make opera work on film or video, and at the same time eliminate the issue of whether or not opera singers can *act*. Why not save all the money required for "production values," especially in view of the inordinately high costs of producing opera today, even on a modest scale? In short, simply consider opera an aural art. On the other hand, even so venerable a source as *The New Grove's Dictionary of Opera* has stated, "The dramatic demands of opera have to a great extent prevailed against the tastes and habits of more traditional performers and their supporters." Since the number of operas available on film and video has increased dramatically in recent years, it would appear that the opera- interested world has gone on record (no pun intended) as supporting and, indeed, encouraging the "much-more-than- just-the-music" point of view.

The challenges facing opera at the turn of this millennium are based on neither the technical adequacy of today's opera singers nor the difficulties encountered in securing the funds required to underwrite productions. Of much greater significance for opera today and in the foreseeable future are two questions which are rarely addressed: What, in fact, *is* acting? and How *must* operatic acting change? It is by now a commonplace to observe that the 20th century was the time in which post-industrial cultures around the globe became more pervasively visually oriented than ever before. Prior to this, radio was the most powerful means of mass communication, delivering voices and ambient sounds while leaving it up to the listeners to create the "pictures" in their individual imaginations. **The shift from aural to visual orientation was brought about by the fact that increasingly greater numbers of people were able to see both real and fictional events on screen.** This began with the earliest and simplest black-and-white projected films (the so-called "silent films," "moving pictures" or "movies" and later, newsreels), evolved to increasingly sophisticated "sound pictures" (the "talkies"), and finally to private, in-home entertainment (television and movies on video cassette). Each of these new developments brought technological advances such as improved picture quality, color film and increasingly sophisticated special effects. The motion picture camera has radically altered our ways of perceiving, thinking and, ultimately, behaving. **Projected film images have forever altered the brain's neurology by inundating our brain receptors in ways unheard of throughout all previous human history.**

The most important result of this has been to immeasurably enhance the power of pictures to "speak a thousand words." Consider the incalculable psychological and physiological effects of seeing, on screen, real events such as the Wright brothers' first flight, Charles

"There is no teacher and there is no student, only two minds that come together."

Luciano Pavarotti

Lindbergh's transatlantic flight and the euphoria of the subsequent "ticker-tape" parade, the Hindenburg dirigible disaster, the Kennedy and M. L. King assassinations, the Challenger missile tragedy or the Rodney King videotapes. Film, television and video have brought about irrevocable changes in our ways of seeing and responding because they reveal critical characteristics of our humanity and vulnerability. Inevitably, these changes have had a pervasive influence on how people now experience every aspect of both staged and filmed productions, and most particularly, how today's audiences perceive *acting*. Contemporary audiences want to see acting which looks like authentic people experiencing the dramatic context as though it were their real lives. They hope to see human beings whose behavior reveals the humanity of each "character" in a way that is believable on both the visual and emotional levels. *Viewers' emotions can no longer be aroused by simplistic, obvious play-acting because our increased visual discernment has greatly diminished our tolerance for such acting.* It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of the following realization for anyone who is currently involved in or is planning to become involved with the performance, production or educational aspects of the opera business.

Opera's musical expressiveness and vocal brilliance demand the powerful emotional impact of genuinely believable acting.

Acting is about human behavior; it is about responding in-the-moment and responding moment-by-moment to whatever is being said, sung or done. Contrary to the nearly universal misconception held by most actors, directors and acting teachers, *acting, in our time, is not about the story, the words or even the action*, any more than it is about the costumes, the sets or the lighting. For the actor, there are elements of stagecraft and "film-set savvy" to learn about, but these, too, are not acting.

It is crucial that the operatic world finally recognize the kind of acting today's audiences respond to.

Opera audiences are bored by watching actors who appear to be "characters in a story," actors who gesticulate with hands and body and do old-fashioned, outmoded and pre-practiced facial expressions. Actors and directors cannot expect today's audience to respond strongly to the acting when all they are seeing is a parade of actors busily "acting out characters" in an attempt to "appear real." (It is true, of course, that some productions are still intended to be highly "stylized," i.e., the director and the actors take a "play-acted" point of view from the outset. One might say that the directors of such productions wish to use the actors as movable stick-figures who are *acting out caricatures of human beings*, rather than attempting to be genuinely believable to the audience.)

The nature of the acting has enormous influence on the vitality of the audience's involvement and moment-to-moment response.

While there are many fine actors who have shown us what the words "real," "genuine," "authentic" and "believable" can mean as expressed through the actor's art, there are very few *operatic* actors about whom one can speak on this level. Many opera directors are not familiar with the capabilities of well-developed actors because they virtually never encounter any. As a result, these directors have always relied on play-acting and on moving "singing heads" around a stage, in the desperate hope that something resembling "aliveness" will happen and that the audience will be satisfactorily entertained by the play-acting.

Obviously, film and stage are two extremely different artistic media, each with its own specific technical characteristics and nature and manner of expression. Because of these differences they necessarily employ considerably different "languages." Yet the acting, both on stage and on screen, must have a palpable and pervasive sense of believability so that the audience will be emotionally engaged by the readily perceivable spontaneity of the actors' human response and behavior.

Throughout the 20th century, a vast number of non-musical works for the stage have been "translated" to film. To better understand the concept of "translation" in this context, consider this analogy: ever since the advent of the piano, music that had originally been written for the harpsichord and, to some extent, the organ, required a "translation" in order to be effectively performed on the piano, because the piano made new and vastly different aural and expressive experiences possible. It then became inevitable that there be a "retranslation" of that music whenever it was later played on the instrument for which it was originally written. *A retranslation is always permeated, subtly or overtly, with the new and different understanding that has been gained through the expanded scope of experience.*

The process of retranslating works for the stage to the medium of the screen and back to the stage has taught us that the actor on stage can have *genuine* feelings, can respond from his feelings, and can also avoid falling into "semaphoric," hyperbolic over-acting. The reason for this is that all acting, as we have said, whether on stage or film, is about *authentic inner response*. The power of acting is rooted in *presence*, in how readily available the actor is to feel his actual emotions in-the-moment and to freely express those emotions through behavior. The fact that there may be a microphone or a camera, a large stage or a small stage, does not alter the well-trained singing-actor's *ability to act*, any more than the wide variety of pianos played by a pianist, from consoles and uprights to full concert grands, alters the pianist's *ability to play*.

Very few singing actors now before the opera public, at any level of the profession, meet the standard necessary for even minimally believable emotional communication on stage, let alone the standard required for film or video. Critical to the future success of opera is a clear understanding of the distinction between acting as we have defined it and acting based on various forms of preplanning, because *this understanding has direct bearing on the point of view and approach of those teaching acting to opera singers*. We are now hearing the loud and persistent clarion call for the reassessment and revision of operatic acting training. ***The time has come for those who teach acting to let go of the old ways of training.*** Only when the teachers change their approach to training will the results change. It is time to offer opera singers the opportunity to become respectable actors by offering them the best, most time-efficient and effective acting training and preparation technologies available.

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17. Operatic Acting? Oxymoron No More



The soprano Natalie Dessay, left, works with the director Mary Zimmerman on the Metropolitan Opera production of "Lucia di Lammermoor."

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD
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The tenor lifts sausage arms skyward, ignoring the soprano as he ardently professes his love to the grand tier. She looks on with a distracted smile, the slight tension in her eyes suggesting not swelling emotion but determination to nail the top note a few bars away. Note secured, applause graciously

accepted, her fatal swoon has all the pliant delicacy of a redwood succumbing to a chain saw. Bad opera acting of cliché can certainly still be found in some outposts of the opera world, even betimes in New York. But most regular operagoers would probably agree that standards have been

rising impressively in recent years. In the world's major houses, first-rate singing is more often accompanied by nuanced, emotionally textured performances, bringing the art form closer to its ideal as a seamless blend of drama and music.

A confluence of various circumstances is helping to raise the bar across the opera world: an influx of dedicated directors, often drawn from the theater world; the audience's more direct engagement with narrative, brought about by the advent of titles; and the gifts of new generations of performers. The park-and-bark performing style of the bad old days, as it is mockingly referred to within the industry, may come to be a thing of the fabled past.

Peter Gelb, entering his second full season as general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, whose enthusiasm for promoting opera as a cohesive dramatic art form borders on the evangelical, insists that the raising of theatrical standards will be "the salvation of opera." Already he has taken several initiatives that put a new emphasis on opera as a rounded theatrical experience, as opposed to a strictly musical one. This season's opening night presentation, a new production of "Lucia di Lammermoor" starring Natalie Dessay, is entrusted to Mary Zimmerman, whose elegant glosses on classic literature have included the adaptation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" seen on Broadway. Like Mr. Gelb, Ms. Zimmerman shares the belief that eliciting expressive performances from singers is of high importance. She wants to bring the same emotional immediacy to opera that she strives for in her theatrical work.

"You still have to prioritize the voice," she said recently. "But for me the question is: Is the singer present in what he or she is saying? It's not possible to engage an audience if the performer is unengaged, no matter how much scenery you have around. The show will have a dead center. People deserve the total experience that opera has advertised itself as providing, a union of all the arts." Now the old arch style of playing the diva, which some performers still indulge in, is considered close to camp. Opera was born as a radical new form incorporating music and drama, but the partnership between the elements has been an uneasy and unequal one, with musical values having taken firm precedence through much of the art form's history. For impresarios and generally for audiences too, superlative singing has always been considered to be of paramount importance. As a result dramatic training for opera singers has had a haphazard history. There were singular singers in every era — from Maria Malibran to Maria Callas — naturally gifted with expressive ability and charismatic presence. But for the most part their talents were developed individually and informally: on-the-job training combined with a little instruction here and there, when an outside talent met a director who knew how to nurture it, as when Callas collaborated at La Scala with Luchino Visconti and Franco Zeffirelli. This ad hoc approach remained the norm until very recently, and to some degree it continues to hold sway. Many if not most of the finest singing actors today have never studied acting formally.

"When I was at Juilliard," René Fleming recalled, "there was a strict separation between the music and drama departments. You couldn't take classes in acting and movement. Fortunately during my undergraduate studies I could, and did." Patricia Racette, who sings Cio-Cio-San in "Madama Butterfly" and Ellen Orford in "Peter Grimes" at the Met this season, is considered one of the more dramatically gifted singers of her generation. She said that her greatest teacher has simply been instinct.

"From the very beginning," she said, "it was the marriage of music and drama that enticed me." But her training included no acting study, and her interest in developing her acting technique by studying it independently has actually been discouraged by people in the profession. "The argument was: If it works so well instinctively, that's fine," she said.

That kind of dismissive attitude would surely incense Stephen Wadsworth, an opera and theater director who has dedicated much of his time to training singers in the art of dramatic expression. "It is a singular tragedy and a source of shame that the conservatories and universities that offer serious actor training for singers you can count on one hand," he said, or rather, thundered. As a result, he

added, “even today 90 percent of the opera productions on view would make Verdi or Wagner or Handel spin in their graves because of the extent to which the music is curated responsibly and the drama irresponsibly.”

Mr. Wadsworth, a former actor and (briefly) opera singer himself, has fought against the tide of indifference by teaching acting to singers in various capacities for 25 years. In January he will become the first director of opera studies for the Juilliard Opera Center, a full-time position in which he will concentrate specifically and intensively on teaching acting to singers who have left the conservatory and are embarking on careers. (Since Ms. Fleming’s day, it should be noted, the Juilliard School has moved into the forefront of integrating acting study into singers’ musical educations.) But onstage is still where most aspiring singers learn to hone and develop such acting talent as they have.

Performers with initiative — and the luck to work with directors engaged in eliciting the maximum theatrical potential from opera — have the chance to mature as artists. Others may not.

“Many singers have said that their acting breakthroughs only came when they had the chance to work with great directors,” Mr. Gelb said. “Karita Mattila told me she had this extraordinary breakthrough as an actress the first time she worked with Luc Bondy.”

Ms. Dessay cites Robert Carsen and Andrei Serban as important influences. Ms. Racette says she was helped immeasurably by Francesca Zambello. Still, Ms. Fleming noted, “in my experience most directors in opera have simply accepted singers’ abilities — good or bad — rather than dig in and help them become better actors.”

“Opera has specific acting problems that don’t exist in theater,” Ms. Fleming said, and they make dedicated study that much more important. “I know great directors who don’t know what to do with Handel. In a Handel opera you are singing the same words over and over. How do you make them fresh every time you repeat the sentence, how do you make every moment expressive? It takes a lot of serious work.”

The stylized nature of operatic expression has, of course, been one fundamental reason naturalistic, or even natural, acting has never been considered an essential requirement for performers. Audience members recognize both the technical requirements necessary to sing this music well and the tremendous challenges of making sometimes preposterous plots credible. So we forgive a stilted love scene or a faintly ludicrous descent into madness.

But an increasing emphasis on truthful characterization and rounded productions is giving rise to higher expectations. Brian Zeger, artistic director of the vocal arts program at Juilliard, said: “I think opera singers have a more diverse set of skills than the average singers had 20 or 30 or 40 years ago. And they have to. I think it unlikely that a singer could make a major career today ignoring any of the facets of performing. All the skills have to be there.”

As standards evolve across the opera world, questions arise about the altered criteria by which performers are cast, raising the troublesome corollary issue of discrimination based on looks and size. Mr. Gelb did not deny that “the visual aspects of opera have been emphasized recently” but added that “it is an exaggeration to say that today singers have to be fashion models to be opera stars.”

“What it’s about is artistry,” he said, pointing to the example of Stephanie Blythe, an un-svelte singer who appears often at the Met, to regular acclaim for both her singing and her acting. “She will have a great future here,” he added.

Champions of opera who insist on sublime voices even at the expense of theatrical plausibility may wonder what would become of, say, a new Montserrat Caballé, were such a performer to emerge today. Ms. Caballé, a brilliantly gifted soprano, was not known for her tiny waistline or for the depth, expressiveness and physical daring of her performing style onstage. “She would be on the stage of the Met,” Mr. Gelb insisted with a laugh. “I’m not turning away Montserrat Caballé. Or Pavarotti. A voice like that is artistry itself.”

