Note: this article appeared on the occasion of the first commercial release of Callas's television appearances for home video

The Life and Deaths of Maria Callas (Nov. 1995, The New Yorker)

If only she hadn't gotten mixed up with Ari and Jackie, we would be less aware of Maria Callas's life after singing, and that would be better. Here was the most celebrated operatic soprano of the 20th century, unable to find peace or purpose in her 12 years of premature retirement and unable to rehabilitate herself as a performer, winding up an overmedicated recluse in Paris, a city that never knew her in her prime. By the time she died there in 1977, at 53, her career had long since ebbed into fitful and mostly unfulfilled comeback projects, and her fame -- the pure, resonant fame of noble achievement -- had long since been admixed with notoriety. The stormy, capricious diva who abandoned husband and stage for a seductive billionaire, only to be dumped in favor of a President's widow, attained to levels of name recognition that merely singing in opera could never have brought.

Callas is remembered as Puccini's Tosca, the role in which she was best photographed, and since Tosca herself is a celebrated opera singer who gets into desperate straits, a reciprocal identification has proved irresistible. In "Harvey Milk" at the New York City Opera, whenever opera fandom as a cultural rallying force for gays is mentioned, one hears the opening chords of "Tosca" and sees an enormous blow-up of Callas. When Camille Paglia makes the point that Judy Garland's self-immolation was "operatic," "Tosca" is cited, but "Callas" is meant. Callas is the central figure *in absentia* in Terrence McNally's play about opera fandom, "The Lisbon Traviata," and appears in person, in the guise of the self-destroyed star groping for an afterlife, in his latest, "Master Class."

Every known scrap of Callas's singing, in public or in the studio, has been published and re-published on compact disc; John Ardoin's book on the records, "The Callas Legacy," has just been reissued in a fourth updated edition. Sales figures are hard to compare in classical music, with its multiple formats, but it is generally agreed that Callas *still* outsells all living opera singers except Luciano Pavarotti, and all deceased ones by far.

By the time she died a simplifying myth was already well established. Its chief elements were her dominance of the operatic stage, the fatal attraction of high society that lured her from it, and the subsequent disintegration of both her singing and her relationship with Onassis. The gifted woman who is punished for personal self-realization is an old story; an easy corollary with Callas is the idea of extravagant self-destructiveness as a component, or

even a source, of artistic intensity. That's one of her false legacies to the art she meant to serve so well.

Within the opera house, twice this attention couldn't have magnified her standing, which was already one of primacy. Well before she fought headline battles with Rudolf Bing or bravely partied for the paparazzi on Jackie's wedding night, Callas mattered in a way no opera singer since Feodor Chaliapin had done and none yet has done after her. She was not just celebrated and dominant in her field, but permanently influential and artistically important in it. (Mr. Pavarotti, a similarly enormous presence in the marketplace, is to the music world simply a good specimen -- among many others in recent memory if rather few at the moment -- of the traditional Italian tenor.)

Callas did essentially four things: She achieved in her own singing a level of musicality, discipline, technical capacity and expressiveness that places her among the greatest musicians (in any genre) of the century; she acted her roles with a physical eloquence and skill that impressed audiences deeply and drew at times on a feeling for modern cinematic detail; she restored to circulation a major body of operatic literature that had lacked a commanding exponent for many years and has justified her advocacy by continuing to thrive in her absence; and finally she gave a stunning example -- unprecedented, at least in this century -- of a major singer going to pieces vocally in mid-career.

This last has added such tragic fascination to the human story of Callas as to make the disentangling of her art from her life difficult, and the conflation of them tempting. We learn something from the falls of the mighty; they have always been the basis of tragedy. But now, when instead of considering the fate of historical or fictional persons as interpreted through art and religion, we can simply watch our wealthier contemporaries live out their tawdry stories on television, it is possible to lose track of just what tragic art has to offer beyond the bald presentation of a life that will provoke pity or schadenfreude. If the arts have any importance beyond that of ushering successful individuals into the chamber of voyeurism, then it is worthwhile to rescue Callas from her chroniclers.

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To understand any aspect of her career, one must have the chronology of the whole career in mind, because it was short and fast and every year was different. This is the rough outline: From 1938 to 1945, conservatory study and professional apprenticeship in Greece; a steady ascent on the Italian circuit from 1947 to 1951; a triumphant international and recording career in the years 1952-58; an abrupt near-retirement from 1959 through 1963; a flurry of

troubled performances in 1964-65; then silence until the disastrous concert tour of 1973-74. One good decade, really. Callas sang Norma, her greatest, most emblematic and most frequently performed role, only 88 times in all; next came Verdi's Violetta (63 performances) and Donizetti's Lucia (45); most of her other parts she sang six times or fewer. Her entire stage career (excluding the Greek years) comprised only 539 performances. Enrico Caruso, though he died at 48, gave 862 with the Metropolitan Opera alone and at least 2,500 all told. Chaliapin, one of the various singers who "invented" acting in opera before Callas "invented" it, made his debut in 1891 and was still touring, recording and singing gorgeously until 10 months before his death in 1937. The only other musician in this century to make anything like Callas's impact in so few appearances is the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. Both Callas and Gould -- like Chaliapin and Caruso, like Arturo Toscanini and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and very few others -- permanently changed the way successors understood the music with which they were most closely associated. The great difference with Callas, compared to all the others, is the extent to which she did this through conservative means and affirmation of tradition. They were revolutionaries; she never was.

Callas was born in New York to George and Evangelia Kalogeropoulos, recent immigrants from Greece, in December of 1923. There is dispute about the exact date. The birth certificate gives Dec. 2 and the name Sophie Cecelia Kalos; "Maria" and "Anna" were added at her christening, and she grew up using at different times Mary, Mary Ann, Marianne and Marianna along with various spellings of the patronymic. Like most great musicians she was precocious, and made the rounds of school performances and talent shows singing and playing the piano. Her mother returned to Greece when the parents separated in 1936 and Callas, with her older sister, followed in the next year. She continued her studies at the National Conservatory, where her promising qualities were immediately apparent and where she made a debut as Santuzza in "Cavalleria Rusticana" at 15 years of age. She then transferred to the Athens Conservatory and the classes of the retired Spanish soprano Elvira de Hidalgo. Callas's childhood was "unhappy" in a fairly typical way, in that she was overweight and quarreled often with her ambitious mother, but her attachment to music was the intense center of her emotional life from early on, and clearly a nourishing one. De Hidalgo recalled later how Callas would listen all day to the lessons of the other students, then borrow opera scores and learn them at night, forming a musical foundation that would give her complete self-confidence with, and unstinting admiration from, the world's most exacting conductors. Nor were immediate rewards slow in coming; at 16 she had her first contract (incidental songs in a "Merchant of Venice" production) with the national Lyric Theater; at 18 she sang Tosca, and until 1945 she appeared in roles large and small, along with various concerts, in Athens and Salonika.

The young singer returned to New York in the autumn of 1945 to pursue her professional career and spent most of 1946 singing auditions, with results that can only have been encouraging to a beginner and have been quite unreasonably described as the reverse in biographies. In the fall of that year she took a detour to Chicago with a promising company that went broke before it could open; in the spring of 1947, she landed a first-class Italian debut engagement as Ponchielli's La Gioconda at the Arena of Verona. There, she found herself right away in the company of internationally established singers (Richard Tucker was her tenor; the abortive Chicago company had also been composed of big names) and under the guidance of one of the greatest of the old Italian *maestri*, Tullio Serafin. There too she met Giovanni Battista Meneghini, a wealthy Veronese industrialist 30 years her senior who quickly became her sponsor, lover and manager. Her success at the Arena was immediate, and over the next five years a modern miracle revealed itself on the stages of the main Italian theaters.

This part of the story has been told often and well: how the musicality, agility, volume and expressiveness of the singing caused excitement everywhere while the unusual sound of the voice occasioned differences of opinion; how the repertory based in heavy dramatic roles (Gioconda, Isolde, Turandot, Brünnhilde and Aida were her most frequent vehicles) startlingly began to include virtuosic *bel canto* parts (Bellini's Elvira and Norma) that had not in living memory been sung with such technical command; how the strong stage presence and deeply felt acting announced unmistakably the arrival of a major new operatic artist. Shortly after Verona Callas had her Venice debut (Isolde, again under Serafin); in 1948 she made debuts in Trieste, Genoa, Rome, Turin, Florence and smaller cities. In 1949 she was the talk of Italy for alternating Wagner's "Walküre" Brünnhilde with Bellini's high coloratura role of Elvira in "I Puritani" (at Venice, always with Serafin). In the same year she went to Naples, Palermo, and, joining in the then-customary South American stints with ad hoc Italian-staffed companies, Buenos Aires. She also made her first records, arias from "Tristan," "Puritani" and "Norma," for the Italian firm of Cetra in the moribund 78-r.p.m. format. 1950 brought, along with triumphs elsewhere, a Roman repeat of her Venetian stunt (this time alternating Isolde with Norma) -- and an oddly equivocal debut at Milan's La Scala. Callas jumped in as a substitute for Renata Tebaldi in the middle of a routine run of "Aida" performances, and made only a moderate impression compared with her successes elsewhere. She should have known better than to introduce herself to the first house in Italy without her own rehearsal period, audience of first-night *cognoscenti,* anticipatory buzz and press coverage.

We can hear very well why she made such a furor everywhere else: bits and pieces of broadcasts from the late 40's and, beginning with a Neapolitan "Nabucco" at the end of 1949, complete opera performances, survive in sound. Abigaille in "Nabucco" is the warrior daughter of Nebuchadanezzar, dedicated to conquest of Israel but secretly in love with the

Hebrew Ishmael. It is a role of fierce contrasts and cruel difficulty (and may have dealt the death-blow to the faltering career of Giuseppina Strepponi, for whom Verdi composed it). The first pages are emblematic: Abigaille enters at the head of an army seizing the Temple of Solomon. She opens fire with threats and taunts, exploiting powerful low notes, high ones flung out over the full force of the orchestra, biting declamation, and, at the end of her first speech ("the thunder of my revenge hangs over your heads"), two coruscating roulades, down from high A and then high B in rapid scales, turns and arpeggios. Then, in an aside of softly pleading melody, she begs Ishmael to turn aside all this force by responding to her desire.

In all of this Callas is magnificent. The roulades show some of the qualities that set her apart in technically difficult music: she requires no gradual acceleration, no testing of the water, to start the first scale in its rapid motion; it moves like lightning, yet every note is thrillingly distinct. In the second she varies the downward pace expressively, then negotiates the turn at the bottom of the run without even touching the brakes, and vaults up again like a rocket. The tone is charged with expressive force -- and what an excitingly big voice it obviously is, as we hear it surmount the orchestral tutti on the noisy old broadcast tapes! In the pleading trio, Callas begins with haunting smoothness and delicacy, yet finds a still more tender tone for the central line "Ah, se tu m'ami, ancor potrei il tuo popolo salvar" ("Ah, if you love me, I could save your people yet.") Then, as she rides the line of the trio up to its difficult high C's, all the figuration is shaped and nuanced as a Jascha Heifetz might shape Mendelssohn. Compare her with, say, Caterina Mancini, an impressive Italian soprano who was doing the role at around the same time and was chosen for the first complete recording of it; Mancini sounds like an amateur in the florid work. Compare her with her immediate colleagues in Naples, solid artists of the day, in their successive exchanged lines in the trio; their voices are fine, but they sound musically approximate, emotionally crude.

What Callas presented to the Italian public was first of all a phenomenon of sheer capacity. High notes and low, power in full cry and delicacy in piano, fast passagework and sustained legato, extremes of tenderness and violence in expression, had not been so fully present in one soprano in living memory. Comb the lists; there is competition in any single facet, but scarcely a comparable abundance, certainly not at such an artistic level. That level was the other miracle: the most discriminating musician, whose interest might not be held by stupendous athletic feats but whose ear is sensitive to the minute gradations of rhythm, phrasing, and dynamic -- who hears the connecting phrases and the little moments with the same avidness as the climaxes -- found an ideal in Callas at the same moment the fans of larger-than-life excitement were finding an idol in her.

These qualities bespeak a deep and startling confidence, for in Naples, as in so many

other early performances that survive, Callas's surroundings offered absolutely no encouragement for subtlety. For the orchestra and the other two soloists, that "Nabucco" trio is just one more hearty generic sing; but this 26-year-old American girl still making her name has the nerve to create an interior atmosphere, to live in the mood she established in the opening line, even though it means being outshouted by the others in her very first scene. Throughout her career she would keep the courage to sing softly, to *assume* she would be heard, even when there was great practical danger of the contrary. She dominates by occupying a calm, quiet center. She gets no help, but she doesn't stand around waiting for any. Help would throw itself at her feet soon enough.

The only faint drag on the young singer's trajectory was something in the basic sound that fell harshly on some ears. But if the voice, tone for tone, was less beautiful than some that had been heard in her roles, the effect of the tones as Callas's imagination blended and phrased them was often one of almost overwhelming beauty. Even her detractors had to admire. And anyone who wondered how the early 19th century had been able to hear nobility and high dramatic truth in Italian opera now had a powerful, revelatory guide (many wondered then, few now). It was her special gift to feel and project a range of emotions both wider and more specific than even the most expressive of her colleagues, and to let her voice take on the very tone of each shifting sentiment.

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What Callas was helping to restore was once the most popular music in the world, bar none: the operatic repertory of Italy in the first half of the 19th century -- the *"primo ottocento,"* as the Italians call it, the brief period when Baroque virtuosity coexisted with high Romanticism. Cultivated singing had been taken to what was almost surely its highest point of development by those peculiar virtuosos of the 18th century, the *castrati,* who developed and taught--and inspired a compositional style around--a subtle and brilliant array of vocal feats, a high rhetoric of musical utterance that, as we grasp it through the serious operas of Handel, Pergolesi, Vivaldi, Gluck and Mozart, still stirs. Early in the 19th century this kind of training was still thriving (and indeed some few *castrati* were still on the stage) when new expressive currents swept through the Italian peninsula from the north. The novels of Walter Scott, the poetry and plays of Schiller and Goethe, a new and Byron-tinted enthusiasm for Shakespeare, thrilling and almost frightening encounters with the music of Beethoven, the mature Mozart, and eventually Schubert and Schumann -- the younger Italian poets and composers took all these like drugs. And the operas they created swept back over Europe and the world even more decisively than their predecessors' had done. (In fact it was arguably the first time that Italian music, which had always been dominant, was so as much for composition as for

execution.)

In terms of the *prima donna* roles, the budding glories of this school are the heroines of Rossini's Neapolitan operas (Callas sang one of them, "Armida"). Its full flower came with the tragic and pathetic heroines of Bellini's "Norma" and "Sonnambula," Donizetti's "Anna Bolena" and "Lucia" (three of these four written for Giuditta Pasta, whose gifts were often described in terms strikingly applicable to Callas), and in the early heroines of Verdi, such as Abigaille and Lady Macbeth. Its late blossoms are Leonora in "Il Trovatore" and Violetta in "La Traviata," where Verdi, already striking out on new paths, drew for the last time on the full expressive vocabulary of his predecessors and models.

That list also defines the important core repertory of Callas. It is a repertory that was on life support, or had been taken off it, by the beginning of the 20th century.

This was so partly because of the decay in vocal skill that inevitably followed as composers moved on--as they first took Romanticism whole, and then progressed toward ever more naturalistic and symphonic styles. The classical skills (we habitually call them "bel canto" skills today) necessarily concentrated musical interest and complexity in the melodic line. Retention of them would have stood in the way of the advances in other elements -- harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, form -- that the course of music's evolution dictated. Eventually Wagner's operas required a different "virtuosity" -- not the coordinative skill to handle the voice through intricacies, but the athletic stamina to produce tone in relatively simple phrases at previously unimagined levels of volume and endurance. And though Verdi's music was the opposite pole to Wagner's, his style in this regard took the identical direction.

By 1900, most of the great operas of the *primo ottocento* were forgotten, and the few that remained in repertory tended to be treated either as tired relics or as sure-fire comedies and romances that would "play themselves" while serious artistic effort was focused elsewhere. The popularity of "Lucia" and "Traviata" was the butt of any critic's joke about the public's want of taste. The scores were cut to shreds, details were neglected, tricky bits that would have required attentive ensemble rehearsal were shamelessly edited out. Even allowing that theater orchestras were far better than the rag-tag recording studio bands of the day, it seems clear from what we can hear on primitive records, as from what we can read or find marked in old scores, that performances of everything from "Barbiere" and "Elisir" through middle Verdi must have been scandalous. Arturo Toscanini (1868-1957) built his early career partly on cleaning up musical sloppiness, but even he gave up all but a tiny handful of these operas for lost. And Toscanini's cleanup was firmly a continuation of the Verdi-Wagner direction, away from refinement in singing. All his life he accepted and encouraged singers who were, by the

older bel canto standards or by Callas's future ones, musically inadequate. He showed how "Traviata" and "Trovatore" could benefit from the kind of orchestral attention habitually given Beethoven; it was Callas who replanted them in the rich soil from which they grew.

The single feature that makes a contrary impression in the earliest Italian recordings (dating from around the turn of the 20th century) is the sheer quality of the best singing: Even in its by then degraded state, it has touches of aural and stylistic magic that have since vanished completely. The general technical level was also still far higher than it soon became. But the "bel canto" skills, especially after World War I, began to be ghettoized in a small group of high sopranos, largely cut off from the musical mainstream, and scarcely encouraged by the state of things to develop any profound level of musical insight. And in that ghetto, not surprisingly, the skills were rather ill-tended.

Even the few exceptions to these strictures (Rosa Ponselle was a much-appreciated one in the 20's and 30's) fall short of what Callas achieved in her capacity for detail-work and precision. There had been almost nothing like Callas's alacrity and speed since about 1915. And what there had been then -- beautiful as some of it still sounds on the dim records -- came with all the haphazardness of a discipline no longer valued and slipping into disuse, whereas Callas had all the exactitude, purpose and expressive wholeness of a valiant rediscoverer.

The importance of the recovered skills can scarcely be exaggerated. You just can't represent this music properly without the rigorous preparation that Callas so atypically had. If each note in a rapid passage needs even a tiny separation or impulse to get it going, the passage will sound over-busy, emphatic, lumpish. If, even with such unappealing means, the appropriate velocity cannot be achieved, the music will either have to go too slow, or the singer will have to compromise accuracy; those frustrating alternatives ruled the florid repertory for years. Nor is all this of interest only for success in coloratura: A voice that cannot handle quick sounds nimbly, whether they come in a bravura passage or just on the short notes of ordinary lines, simply cannot be musical in the way that a more minutely responsive voice can be. The joins and curves of pure lyrical melody, and the occasional flickers of ornament within it, depend on the same set of disciplines for their fullest finish.

In Callas, this nimbleness took its place with an extraordinarily lambent projection that allowed every word to tell without over-pronunciation, and gave her voiced consonants in particular (the consonants in which vocal sound continues, like L, M, B and the rolled R) a special expressive beauty. Her concentrated focus of tone allowed every gradation of softness to carry through the hall even in the middle range of the voice, and every minute manipulation of rhythm to register without resort to emphasis. There was simply no mechanical difficulty in getting from one note to another, with whatever degree of haste or delay, accent or negation of

accent, connection or separation, coloration of vowel or volume her ear might conceive. In every role, in practically every scene, came phrases that Callas was able to trace with a calligrapher's pen where audiences had become accustomed to a rough carpenter's pencil.

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Because of the lukewarm "Aida" and other reasons having to do with theater politics, La Scala kept Callas waiting. But when she came back in her own right, in December of 1951, she conquered completely and made it her home theater for as long as she had one, introducing almost all her new roles there and eventually singing 180 performances of 22 operas. From 1953, she sang rarely in other Italian houses, and her stage appearances abroad were limited to Scala tours, short guest stints with three American companies and London's Covent Garden, and a single visit to Lisbon – in all of these generally reprising her Scala parts.

In Milan she was as fiercely concentrated a worker as she had been in student days under De Hidalgo, astonishing everyone with her appetite for rehearsal, her meticulous preparation, her fanatical discipline and stamina. Everyone but a few lazier singers who got on her bad side remembers her as an ideal collaborator, always ready to help a colleague and to repeat a scene yet again for the sake of eventual success. Through all this Meneghini was at her side, driving hard bargains; they had married in 1949 and the artistic and financial management of Callas's career was their joint project.

These great Callas revivals were the center of every Scala season and the instant news of the musical world: in familiar and unknown operas alike, her work in a role almost always became the focus of the world's thoughts about that role. (The best Callas book, a 1974 coffee-table volume by John Ardoin and Gerald Fitzgerald that has been long out of print owing to tiresome problems over rights to some of the photographs, is quite rightly organized around the Scala productions.) The first, in '51, was Verdi's tremendously difficult "Vespri Siciliani." The role of Elena is less violent than that of Abigaille, but the main issues of difficulty, and of Callas's startling capacity, are the same. They are there also, along with a role of unconventional dramatic scope, in Verdi's "Macbeth," which followed in 1952. This was a new revelation – in fact a much greater rarity than "Norma" at that time, and a role farther removed from the operatic tragedienne's accustomed axis of love, fury, remorse.

Only one performance was taped -- the opening night, finally available in a legal recorded edition from EMI/Angel. It would be hard to praise the performance too highly. The old stories of the great 19th century singers (Pasta, for instance) abound in accounts of single words or phrases so filled with artistry and spirit that they leave listeners shaken and lives

changed. Sometimes it sounds a little mystical -- really, all that in one word? So it is good to have an example preserved on recording beyond all doubt. Callas needs only one syllable.

When Macbeth returns trembling and mumbling from the room where he has murdered sleep, the Lady (Verdi always called her just "Lady") takes charge of his faltering courage; he hears a sound that may portend discovery, yet seems rooted to the spot; she launches the allegro of their duet with the single word *"vien!"* -- "come!" It's a short note on middle F. As voiced by Callas, it contains the tactical decision to evade rather than confront the discoverers, a sense of purposeful haste, a sense of contempt for her husband's vacillation, and a tint of flushed anxiety on her own part for the enormity of the situation.

What can be analyzed here? A sound that is strong but faintly hesitant; a certain intake of breath – not much to describe. When the artist's palette is subtle, the hand sure, and the vision profound, things beyond analysis emerge. It is chilling. All evening long, down to the unearthly sleepwalking scene that she dares to half-murmur in the big theater, Callas seems possessed by the character. What could she not imagine, and what not voice? A wistfulness and resigned strength as Violetta agrees to renounce her lover; a brilliantly understated sexual taunting of Klingsor in "Parsifal" that one has never heard from any German interpreter of Kundry; Norma's generosity turning first to ice and then to fire as the situation of her faithless lover becomes clear; a lack of force in Gilda's ambivalent plea for the rapacious intruder (the Duke of Mantua) to leave; a transformation of mood and loyalty in the sound of one "ah" when La Gioconda realizes that her hated rival is the same woman who saved her mother's life; an affirmation of Aida's patriotism that manages to be decisive and at the same time to grieve for the love her affirmation must crush -- habituees of La Scala could become accustomed to such prodigies of dramatic clarity many times each evening, many evenings each season, over the better part of the decade.

From "Macbeth" onward we can hear almost everything Callas did at La Scala, in live performances or contemporaneous recordings or both. She turned next to her first Italian success, "La Gioconda"; soon followed "Trovatore," Cherubini's "Medea" which gave her a thrilling acting part that she repeated around the world for a decade, a "Lucia" production with Herbert von Karajan that revealed dark tints and measured grandeur in a score that had survived mostly on tunefulness and sparkle (the tape of this production on tour in Berlin in 1955 is the best "Lucia" yet captured on records). Then followed Gluck's "Alceste" and soon after it Spontini's severe *tragédie lyrique,* "La Vestale." A noble aspect of the Scala career was Callas's unfailing response to the restrained Classical world of Cherubini, Spontini and Gluck (she also did the latter's "Iphigénie en Tauride"), operas that asked nothing of her virtuosity but drew strongly on her purity of line and expression. The public will never love them as certain

conductors and singers do, but the breadth and patience they require lend a poise and inner stature unknown to most interpreters of a part like Norma.

That Bellini heroine challenges its interpreter with a musical statement as rich and daunting as Chopin's Ballades or Liszt's Sonata, and a character who spans political authority, religious charisma, sororal generosity, murderous and suicidal depression, reckless fury and eventual transcendence and self-sacrifice. As Callas sang Norma at the Scala, it stood revealed as one of the greatest tragic creations in any art form, and an operatic role as complete and perfect as Verdi's Otello, Wagner's Hans Sachs, Mozart's Countess, Mussorgsky's Boris.

During these years Callas also effected the physical transformation that had all Milan gasping: between late 1952 and mid-1954 she shed seventy-five pounds, and showed off her new 22-inch waistline in two revivals that were her most delirious successes of all with the Milanese public. The grand tragedienne of "Norma" and "Macbeth" now offered, in gorgeously costumed productions, rehearsed by Luchino Visconti in painstaking detail, the tender and vulnerable heroines of "La Sonnambula" and "La Traviata." Leonard Bernstein and Carlo Maria Giulini conducted. "La traviata" was so successful that this repertory staple was jinxed for the post-Callas Scala: it was not attempted again for eight years, and then -- when a Karajan-Zeffirelli-Freni production was booed off the stage after two performances -- not again for thirty more.

The Visconti "Traviata" may have been the most perfect totality of musical theater in Callas's career. A heartstopping series of photographs was taken by Ero Piccaglini; if only there had been a telecast! But the climax of her work at La Scala was yet to come, in her last two roles of the 1950's: Donizetti's "Anna Bolena" in 1957 and Bellini's "Il Pirata" the following year. Unlike "Lucia" or "Norma" or even "Sonnambula," these were true exhumations: works that had disappeared a century before and carried no tradition, no beloved hit arias, no foreknowledge whatsoever in the public or press. They staked everything on the inherent qualities of the *primo ottocento* school and Callas as its advocate, and they succeeded beyond all possible expectation. One proof: since the Callas revival in 1957, "Anna Bolena" has been done by Elena Suliotis, Leyla Gencer, Renata Scotto, Montserrat Caballé, Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, Marilyn Mims, Carol Vaness, Sylvia Sass, Lucia Aliberti, Olivia Stapp, Katia Ricciarelli, June Anderson, Cecilia Gasdia and Edita Gruberova. All of these singers have also sung other roles Callas revived. Related operas that she never got around to have come in their wake: Bellini's setting of the Romeo and Juliet story, Donizetti's "Lucrezia Borgia" and his other two operas on British queens; "Semiramide" and other serious Rossini scores: quite literally dozens of works, season after season in all the world's great houses. No other segment of the "lost" operatic repertory has achieved anything like this circulation, even

in our era of revivals: not the Verismo school, not Gluck, Handel or Monteverdi, not the French Baroque, not the Second Empire lyricists.

And all of these singers have responded in one way or another to the challenge embodied in Callas's technical mastery. We do not, in 1995, marvel at a soprano who can sound the written notes with basic accuracy and clarity at the end of Act I in "La traviata," because we have heard Joan Sutherland, Anna Moffo, Beverly Sills, Renata Scotto, Mirella Freni, Cheryl Studer, June Anderson and several other singers do so. But this renewal of respect for a certain standard has come in the wake of Callas. Among the Violettas who were her close contemporaries and predecessors, the following have left records to prove that they could *not* meet such a requirement: Renata Tebaldi, Magda Olivero, Rosa Ponselle, Lily Pons, Maria Caniglia, Bidu Sayao, Jarmila Novotna, Antonietta Stella, Licia Albanese, Margherita Carosio. This is a generational shift, and not a small one.

The influence also reached beyond the theater in ways that are still redounding back upon it, transforming the repertory and ways of approaching it. In the wake of Callas's successes, Herbert Weinstock, an editor at Knopf and the author of biographies of Handel, Chopin and Tchaikovsky, turned next not to Schumann or Stravinsky but to bel canto, producing the first non-condescending life of Rossini in English and the first modern biographies of Bellini and Donizetti. Around the same time, a Princeton doctoral candidate who had worked, as was then all but obligatory, on Baroque and pre-Baroque research topics turned his attention to the Callas repertory. Today Philip Gossett is the Dean of Humanities of the University of Chicago, General Editor of ongoing critical editions of the works of Rossini and of Verdi (whose works did not yet seem to merit scholarly treatment at the time the *second* Bach and Mozart complete editions were launched). He is not yet sixty and is easily one of the four or five most influential musicologists of the postwar period. When Harvard University Press invited him to inaugurate a series of monographs on compositional process with a study of Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony," he submitted instead a volume on "Anna Bolena." That would have verged on nuttiness in the year Callas revived the opera, but in 1985 it consolidated a revolution of musical thinking.

It is not just a matter of admitting previously marginalized composers to canonical status, but -- as the "Bolena" monograph shows acutely -- of revising the way the canon is understood in light of the manifest inapplicability of some traditional critical norms to the creative processes at work in Italian operas of the *primo ottocento.* Those processes are now of interest everywhere; Charles Rosen's long-awaited new book on Romantic music does not mention Callas, but it has a loving and astute analysis of melodic ornamentation in the very aria from "Il Pirata" that closed the singer's golden years at La Scala.

It is not at all clear that these things would have happened without Callas. True enough, the ebbing of Europe's compositional tradition dictated a revivalist impulse, a period of research and reconsideration. But what was being revived elsewhere was lute-song, Renaissance madrigal, concertos of Vivaldi and Telemann, cantatas of Bach -- all music much older than Callas's repertory. It would have been more logical for Italy to embark on a rehabilitation of the 17th-century operas of Monteverdi, Cavalli or Alessandro Scarlatti.

The reason Callas went in other directions -- crucial to her way of working and to the impact of her example -- is that she was herself not a scholar or revivalist but a late, improbable link to tradition.

"Tradition" has a bad name among old-guard thinkers in opera, who are reflexively averse to it as the historic opponent of "reform." But in fact Callas's ability to re-introduce this music was based in very consequential degree on her exposure to a few musicians who absorbed it on its way *out* -- in other words those in a position to pass on its traditions. It was a lucky accident of fate that the teenage Callas found herself in the hands of one of those light sopranos in whose custody the *primo ottocento* had been ghettoized. Elvira De Hidalgo was born in 1888, studied in Milan, made her career very early (her first records date from 1906) and sustained it through the 1920's as a second-choice soprano in the category of Maria Barrientos and Amelita Galli-Curci on the international circuit. She sang at least six roles by Bellini and Donizetti, and Rosina in *Barbiere* was her calling-card part. Callas must have come to De Hidalgo already with good musical foundations and an intense capacity to absorb instruction, but De Hidalgo in her turn was a strong shaper of students and a taskmaster of technique (a few years later, having moved to Ankara, De Hidalgo trained the *second* dramatic coloratura soprano of the postwar period, Leyla Gencer, who sang most of Callas's roles and was a cult favorite in her own right.)

Then, in Italy, Callas's first conductor was Tullio Serafin, just shy of his 70th birthday. It was he who took her under his wing, secured her many of her earliest prestigious engagements, persuaded her to put Hidalgo's training to work in those previously ghettoized operas, and eventually conducted 14 of her recordings. Serafin, already tradition-minded as a young musician, had come along barely in time to hear "Lucrezia Borgia," "Semiramide," "William Tell" and the like in the 1890's, just before they faded from the stage. He carried inside him a sense of what the century-old serious operas might hold, and from time to time even before Callas he had dabbled in reviving them. With Callas, he found his adept and the project took flight. A Callas born even ten years later would have been much less likely to find such a teacher, and Serafin -- who else could have played his part in this? -- would have been on the verge of retirement.

And here is something to think about: Callas was American. She grew up in New York, was absolutely not born to this tradition, learned it only by immersion and application. Her career is the best proof ever that opera can keep going, that it can rekindle itself in the talent of extraordinary individuals even as the culture and authors that created it recede into the past. The best part of her influence still helps to carry it into the future.

"Bolena" and "Pirata" both end with extended, multi-movement solo scenes for the soprano -- Ann Boleyn awaiting execution in the Donizetti, Imogene hallucinating and trembling as judges' council condemns her lover in the Bellini. And at the heart of each was a pathetic lyrical solo into which Callas concentrated her melodic genius at its purest. Both are in F major, with a simple accompaniment of arpeggiated chords. Everything a harmonic analyst could say about them could be both observed and reported in less than a minute. Even as tunes they are not exactly inspired: reduced to a skeleton, they would be no more than agreeable. But they are nevertheless a study in the essence of melody and its expressive adornments. The composers take the first step, making of each an essay in the "graces" that Italian singers of earlier times had long improvised: *appoggiature* and *gruppetti,* compound and simple; trills, passing notes, scales and arpeggios. Still, the music as it stands on the page is primitive, and is potentially dull in a way that no Beethoven sonata ever is; only through the nuances of dynamic and rhythmic manipulation, the weighting and lightening of the voice, the quickening and hesitating, the slurring together or separation of the notes, do they come to life. Callas proposes in this application of light and shade a sphere for the expression of genius, a source of musical richness on a par with Schubert's shifting harmonies, Debussy's orchestral colors, Bach's counterpoint. Outrageous comparisons? The musical joy and instruction so many have had from her singing forbid the objection.

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"Il Pirata" closed Callas's seventh Scala season. During each of these years, meanwhile, she came back to the theater in the summer to record operas under the exacting stewardship of Walter Legge, the impresario/producer of EMI records, and a team whose most frequent components were Serafin, the tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano and the baritone Tito Gobbi. This was not the Scala team: Serafin, who had been music director there in 1909-14, was on the outs with the postwar management; Di Stefano was in only three of Callas's Scala productions and Gobbi only one. Legge wanted the theater's orchestra, chorus, name and logo, and his own unfettered choices in artistic matters. Born in 1906, Legge was a musical amateur of ferocious intelligence who found his modus operandi in understanding the work of the greatest musicians so intimately that he could push them still farther in the direction of their own gifts. In 1927 he went to work in recording for HMV (which later became EMI), and effectively ran its classical

operations from the end of World War II. It was both an acknowledgement of Callas's artistic standing and a material boost to her career that Legge unhesitatingly made her his prima donna as he guided the world's oldest and most prestigious record company into the new era of long-playing records and complete opera sets.

With him Callas made 20 of her 25 complete opera recordings and several solo albums of arias; these are the best part of her permanent legacy. She worked hard and exclusively for EMI in the studio; in return, no other soprano sang an Italian role for the company unless Callas was not interested in it. She took criticism from Legge unflinchingly, even when it involved the implication that she should learn something from his wife, the German soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. (Through an elaborate and probably unspoken courtesy, Schwarzkopf and Callas studiously avoided each other's territory. Schwarzkopf dropped the role of Violetta even though it had been one of her great London successes, and took no new Italian parts on the stage. Callas meanwhile let no one persuade her to sing Mozart, to give a song recital, or to learn German.) These records stand as permanent statements, emblematic, deeply meant by all participants, essential to the catalogue in a way that today's nearly disposable retreads of the standard repertory can scarcely hope to be.

The period 1952 to 1958, then -- productions at La Scala, records with Legge, a bit of guesting -- is the prime of Callas's prime.

But a drastic reduction in activity began with the season of 1958-59, during which she sang only nine opera performances. Everyone around the opera world wondered what on earth was happening; everyone around Callas had a theory. There were concerts, more in fact than she had sung in the past, but they too trailed off; in the entire period from July of 1959 to the beginning of 1964 Callas made only 32 public appearances (half of them in concerts); up to that time she had been averaging about 50 *per season.*

Four tumultuous episodes preceded the abrupt change of habits. The first occurred when the Scala company took its celebrated "Sonnambula" production to the Edinburgh festival in August of 1957. Callas sang four performances, occasioning great acclaim but also comments to the effect that the voice was under noticeable strain. An extra performance was announced -- without her consent, the singer always maintained -- and she refused to appear in it. She was announced as being ill, but was spied up and about and far from Edinburgh on the day concerned, so the matter erupted in the press, and La Scala's management and prima donna were furious with one another.

In the meantime, pleading exhaustion, Callas had begged out of her contracted debut

season with the San Francisco Opera in the fall of 1957. She unwisely offered to fulfill a reduced schedule, which allowed the company to claim she was able to sing and to charge her successfully with breach of contract. In January of 1958 she was to revisit Rome as Norma, which she had sung triumphantly there in 1950 and 1953 -- but after the first act of the first performance she declared herself indisposed and withdrew. The theater had no understudy on hand, and the gala audience, including the president of the republic, had to be sent home amid cries of disgrace and scandal. Her re-emergence in Italy was in April at La Scala, in a gladiatorial atmosphere of post-Rome publicity and management hostility dating from the Edinburgh episode; after only nine performances, she and her home theater severed relations. Then, in October, just before going onstage as Medea with the fledgling Dallas Civic Opera, she was dramatically dismissed from the Metropolitan Opera by Rudolf Bing for her failure to confirm performance schedules for a season that had already begun.

Around the same time, Callas managed to withdraw more quietly from productions in Vienna (the Visconti "Traviata" was supposed to go there) and London (where planned revivals of "Lucia" and "Macbeth" were taken over by other sopranos). In the space of some 15 months she had gained a reputation for vituperousness and unreliability and had broken with almost all her main theaters. This was new behavior; she was already well known within the business for temperament, but it had been displayed mostly in the form of holding others to her own strict standards of professionalism and working conditions. In her two seasons at the Metropolitan she had called in sick only once; at La Scala in seven seasons, only twice.

Callas's first performance after the Bing scandal was a gala concert for her Paris debut on December 19: arias (with chorus and supplementary soloists as required) from "Norma," "Trovatore" and "Barbiere," plus the second act of "Tosca" staged in full with Tito Gobbi as the police chief Scarpia. Again a president was in attendance. This is the first Callas performance we can see today on film. On the same evening, at a reception after the program, the singer first met Aristotle Onassis.

Now available to home consumers for the first time, the video is a fascinating document of both stardom and artistry ("Callas: Débuts à Paris," EMI/Angel). The gala was sponsored by the magazine Marie Claire, and it was not just any concert: the stage is dressed as a grand ballroom with chessboard floor (from some opera set?), with chorus arrayed around the staircase on which the diva will make her spotlit entrance. A breathless announcer off-camera describes the glittering audience, the program, and finally, in hushed tones, confides: *"voici la Callas."*

But just then, "la Callas" must have feared that she would follow a season of

cancellation scandals with a musical scandal, because on top of all the other pressures, she had to deal with a conductor (Georges Sebastien, a Paris Opera veteran) in very shaky command of the music, which repeatedly threatens to fall apart. (There is a quietly hilarious moment where Callas, with seraphic poise, signals the chorus to give up on a botched entrance and subtly nods them in for a second chance.) After this evening Callas insisted on Nicola Rescigno or Georges Prêtre, two trusted and capable young conductors, for all her concerts.

Even under such conditions, even in this unfamiliar and relatively artificial atmosphere, we can see enough to imagine what she must have been like on the Scala stage. There is a plasticity of gesture, a restrained strength of gait and bearing, a deep expressiveness on the mobile, outsized features of the face, that live up to every description. Callas visibly created that same uncanny sense of intimacy, of private emotion overheard, that one had always found in the voice alone. For much of the time she cradles herself gently with both arms -- not a posture one would recommend to any other singer, but successful for one whose understated reveries somehow transmit themselves at high voltage.

Out of this quiet, the bold strokes of the Bellini and Verdi emerge with terrific force. And then "Una voce poco fa" (Rosina's teasing aria from "The Barber of Seville," which she had first sung at La Scala in 1956) is celestial: the florid tracery like fantastically fine lace, punctuated and articulated by diamond consonants. It is amazing how far she can go in the direction of *coquetterie* without triggering one's allergies to cuteness. No-one since Amelita Galli-Curci in the 1910's had sung the aria so musically. The audience was in transports.

The "Tosca" act is not exactly a cogent performance. No stage director is credited; Callas and Gobbi, well-versed in their roles even though they had not previously played them together, improvise their interaction with confidence, but Scarpia's henchman enters far too early for his crucial interruption in the seduction scene, and stands around sheepishly pretending not to overhear. Albert Lance as Cavaradossi bounds about the stage like any old tenor whose idea of passion is hyperactivity. He manages a superbly ringing high note for the cry of "Vittoria," but it blows the Italian text clear out of his brain and he finishes his role in French! During the curtain calls, Callas is presented a small parade float of roses; she gives one to Gobbi with a look that says "thank God *you* were here," and another to Lance with a gracious gesture and eyes that study the floor while his seek contact. It is nevertheless, as "Tosca" has always been, a sure-fire vehicle for a soprano with a strong voice and temperament. Callas phrases the aria "Vissi d'arte" beautifully and bears down hard on Gobbi in the murder scene.

But the problem that eventually cannot be ignored in Paris is the state of the voice itself. The high phrases near the end of the "Trovatore" aria are just painful: harsh, overloud, short of

breath, uncomfortably taken and released, and out of tune. If most of "Una voce poco fa" is from heaven, the sustained high B at the end, vibrating fiercely in both directions around the intended pitch, is from elsewhere. Callas does her best to keep the mood with gesture and facial expression, but dramatic illusion and the indulgence of the listener are steeply tested. These are the most obvious moments, but many others here -- and on the audio documents of the preceding seasons -- give us the real background to Callas's new professional problems: something is terribly wrong with her voice.

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There has arisen what can only be called a conspiracy of minimization, even of denial, around Callas's vocal problems. Writers and fans who had grown accustomed to rebutting her detractors continued to do so, sometimes with even greater intensity as their position became less tenable. Hers became the voice whose beauty only the wise could (still) hear. And the written historical record attests to the success of the minimizers. They have made it possible to ascribe the trailing-off of the career to the affair whose seeds were planted when Onassis first heard and met Callas on the night of the Paris gala. (Every one of the documentary films on Callas presents the story this way.) That affair blossomed during a cruise on Onassis' yacht in 1959, notable for the presence of Winston Churchill among the select guests, and described in excruciating detail from the cuckolded husband's point of view in Meneghini's 1984 memoir. By the end of the year Callas had renounced her American citizenship and become a Greek subject, which had the effect of annulling her non-orthodox marriage. Her romance with Onassis was instant gossip-column fodder; her life became a round of parties, cruises, and ups and downs with her charismatic but volatile and ignorant lover; her stage career very nearly ceased.

Arianna Stassinopoulos, in her biography of Callas as the victim of manipulative men, asserts that "[t]he year 1960 began with the first major crisis of her voice" and attributes this to "the effect of her emotional state on her voice." Ardoin has it that "[f]rom 1960 to 1965, the year she began an eight-year break in her career, a gradual disintegration took place in the remarkable artistic machinery she had so carefully built and so scrupulously maintained over twenty-five years." Her own preferred conductor in those years, Nicola Rescigno, takes it farther and fits it into the eventual myth:

> "When Maria was living the life of a vestal virgin, so to speak, it was home-theater-home. A dinner out was a big treat and an exception. When she broke that discipline, it was not the voice, I think, which suffered. It was the whole mechanism, for her voice had become a highly oiled machine which produced inhuman feats.

> ..... When there was an interruption, when these gears were slowed, a change took place. This began to be evident about the time of her separation from her husband in 1959. I don't think Maria herself understood exactly what went into her singing....when this naturalness was no longer there, it shocked her, and she couldn't fully understand it or cope with it.

Other colleagues have gone farther yet, denying that she had vocal problems at all, and offering nonsense that borders on the mischievous. "I don't think anything happened to her voice, I think she only lost confidence" said Tito Gobbi, who probably never listened to her except in the heat of performance, with vehement emphasis for the BBC's cameras. "Who cares if she is no longer thirty and cannot sing high E-flat," asked Zeffirelli, publicly offering to prove to Callas that she could still sing by staging "Carmen" for her. Alan Rich, reviewing her last New York Toscas for The Times, said that it was "in some ways not the voice of a singer in trouble at all." Tony Locantro, the annotator of the second EMI video release, cites bouts with bronchitis, maliciousness of critics, and whatever else comes to mind to defend Callas against the obvious facts, as though they could somehow even now be concealed.

These last comments are outright fantasy, but anyone who understands voice and listens to Callas's recordings can hear that even the more limited claim that she declined only during the Onassis episode is not right. Neither is the hypothesis, occasionally advanced, that her rapid weight loss was the origin of her difficulty. If the "Trovatore" high notes in 1958 in Paris are painful, they are already quite uncomfortable in 1956 on the studio recording, and none too easy in 1953 at La Scala, and not quite right even in 1950 in Mexico City. When you get right down to it, in that magnificent entry in "Nabucco" in 1949, anyone who teaches voice should be able to detect that the high B is under strain, the vibrato a little too wide and too slow. Only a little, at that time -- it's easy to understand if few noticed -- but it wasn't right. Then try the same note at the end of "Ebben, ne andrò lontana," included on a splendid anthology recorded in 1954. The singing has been deeply felt, colored with restrained passion and that peculiar serenity that made Callas's bursts of energy so unforgettable. But the climax is already a kind of shout, held in place by sheer willpower. By 1956 almost all the sustained loud high B's and C's are quite bad. And all the while the "harsh" aspect of the upper-middle range has been growing. So has Callas's tact and resource at artfully disguising it, but there are limits.

Callas's problems were inherent in her vocal method. This is her tragic flaw, one much more profound than thirst for glamour or bad judgment in men: in the very core of her artistic self, in the intensity of her will to make the music she loved sound as she could imagine it, lay the defect that had to kill her. It was a voice divided against itself: unimpeachable finish and

discipline in all the finer manifestations of singing, but in some basic aspects of tone production, improvisation on a base of plywood and scotch tape. (This is why honest expert opinion could be so grossly divided in the mid-1950's, with critics like Desmond Shawe-Taylor and Andrew Porter in London hailing a vocal nonpareil and Harold C. Schonberg of the New York Times insisting that she had never learned how to sing: they were arguing over different parts of "how to sing.")

That this vocal paradox was related to her personality is hardly to be questioned: a voice -- any artistic expression -- manifests its human host in endlessly complex fashion. Callas was driven, insatiable, omnivorous, grand, possessed. She wanted the roles in which one dominates, astonishes, bewitches; her voice would, by nature and hard, hard training, do almost anything, and what few things it would *not* do she forced it to approximate.

The principal flaw from the outset was the inability to keep the voice free and unconstricted in the high range, and the willingness to compensate for this by main force. Just why this was so, and how or whether it could have been remedied at the beginning, is probably unknowable today, and approachable only through detailed technical discussion -- but it couldn't have worn well over time. Callas also had the bad habit, widespread in Italy in those years, of carrying the chest voice too high, like a Broadway belter. That too involves strain, though I doubt by itself it would have done her in. Her slimming could well have accelerated the process by sapping her strength, as Jose Carreras's battle with leukemia may have accelerated his vocal decline. But the process, the strain, the roughening, was already underway.

At least two writers have said as much: Walter Legge himself, in a much-resented tribute/critique published in Opera News shortly after the singer's death, and Michael Scott, whose little-read 1991 book on the singer, though sometimes repetitive and contentious in tone, is the most soundly observed among extended treatments of her work. But it's all too easy for these voices to be drowned out in the roar of legend, or for the questions to be filed away in the collective mind as unresolvable. This matters, because getting the chronology wrong helps to get the biography wrong, which helps posterity learn the wrong lessons from the career. The spiral of her life into tawdry decline was a consequence, not a cause, of her artistic crisis. Singers, like dancers and athletes, expect physical deterioration to end their careers -- but singers expect it to be a gradual diminution of strength and range, not an encroachment of scorching ugliness, and they expect it in their fifties or later, not in their early thirties. The deterioration of Maria Callas's voice was already advanced, and almost certainly irreversible, at the height of her glory at La Scala, long before she met Aristotle Onassis or tasted jet set society.

And did she not know it? The career argues otherwise. Her problems were in high and highish music, at full voice. At first she coped on the strength of youth and of her extraordinary natural endowment. But the roles that require this quality in the most decisive and exposed way she either dropped ("Turandot," "Aida," "Forza," "Trovatore" and "Gioconda" had all disappeared from her stage repertory by 1955), sang with equivocal success ("Ballo in Maschera" in 1957 at La Scala had its touches of genius, but showed all too clearly why she had been prospering better in the florid parts), or got through on sheer temperament (Puccini's "Tosca," which loomed large in her repertory only at the end, can bear a certain amount of harshness, and the big surging orchestra can to a certain extent cover up the ugly high notes). At least three of her cancellations and withdrawals in the late fifties involved avoiding a return to Lady Macbeth; the five Scala performances in 1952-53 remained her only encounter with this superbly suitable role. Even her beloved Norma became too perilous for frequent exposure; between 1957 and the fantastically ill-advised series of performances in 1964-65, she sang it only twice, at 1960 charity performances in Greece.

Instead, her repertory moved in the direction of fragility -- Lucia, Sonnambula, Traviata, Rosina -- where she could rely on nuance and lightness and save the fullest notes for isolated climaxes. And these roles she lightened year by year, as long as she still could. Much later she told a Juilliard student that very little of "La traviata" should be sung out in full voice: "You learn to underplay such things, and the drama then increases." It actually worked for a precarious while. There was an inherent contradiction here, because these lighter roles tend to be the roles with the highest notes, which were getting ever riskier, and also the roles that demand most in terms of vocal sweetness and ductility. Callas's response is moving, almost heroic, in that even as subtlety becomes more and more difficult for her she discovers ever greater resources for it, developing the most delicately shaded contrasts within the lightest (therefore least inclined to harshness) part of her dynamic range. This is why the haunting detail-work of "Bolena" and "Pirata," together with the late "Traviata" performances and the Berlin "Lucia," are easy to hear as the artistic peak of her work, even though the vocal difficulties have already encroached on the command of "Nabucco," "Macbeth" and the other fiery achievements of the early fifties. But this can't be done everywhere, and it was getting harder to do.

Callas was racing the clock. Imagine being at the top of your profession, the dominant figure in your demanding and visible artistic world, and knowing secretly, even if you deny it to yourself, that your professional wherewithal is slipping away from you month by month. Can anyone wonder that she began to lose her confidence, to cancel performances and withdraw from projects, to let her volatile nature lapse into irresponsibility and vituperation?

Can anyone be surprised that when the alternate world of society and celebrity beckoned -- a world that celebrated her without reference to the standards by which she had risen and might fall, that included a magnetic and powerful lover who knew nothing about the operatic life that Meneghini knew so well -- can anyone wonder that Callas fled to it in miserable gratitude and relief?

The first Hamburg video -- from 1959, when she was in separation proceedings with Meneghini -- catches her on the cusp of this flight. There is a fleeting moment when we can almost see it all happening: her second selection is the opening scene of Lady Macbeth, begun superbly -- but when the line rises to a high C that had rung out steely-sure at La Scala in ‘52, her voice cracks, and for an instant she breaks character with an oddly coquettish, apologetic smile. Blink and you would miss it, but if you don't blink, it takes several more moments before Lady Macbeth is back in focus. And the crack, being not a momentary aberration but a portent, leaves a little crack on the artistic confidence as well. (The remaining high C's on the program are either skirted over cautiously or omitted.)

There are other problems too -- the voice won't sustain long phrases as it once would, and in almost every number there are extra breaths that Callas didn't have to take in earlier performances. The top notes are slightly worse than in Paris. And yet there is pure treasure in some numbers. "Una voce" is perhaps a little subdued compared to the Parisian version, but by the time Callas gets to the magnificent, many-layered soliloquy of Elisabetta from "Don Carlo," she is gloriously lost, immersed, in the spirit of the music and drama. Then follows the whole of that final scene from "Il Pirata," where the long prelude shows how she could compose herself into a riveting stillness, and how with a single gesture that speaks as loud as an orchestral tutti she could break it. She must be reprising some version of her Scala staging here, focused as it was on her own solo expressiveness.

This is not the busy, quasi-naturalistic acting that has been so encouraged, too often in Callas's name, in recent decades. In fact most of the postwar development in the theatrical side of opera was inevitable anyway, and several of Callas's important contemporaries were actually more in harmony with it than she. Her own work reads much more convincingly as an instinctive recreation of the kind of acting that was celebrated in the great operatic artists of the last century, an acting of dignity, spareness, formality, deep emotional truth channeled through stylized conventions. (In the "Life and Art" video on EMI, her London manager Sandor Gorlinsky mocks old-style operatic acting by raising his right arm; in the Ardoin-Fitzgerald book, a healthy majority of the photos from her early Scala productions show Callas doing exactly the same.) Callas had many of the technical skills and personal assets of a screen actress in her superb body control and her tremendously expressive and mobile face. And in certain scenes -- "Tosca" is the only one we have to judge by -- she could obviously put this to

work in a naturalistic way. But her real message lay with music like the “Don Carlo” and “Pirata” arias: Flaws and all, these two excerpts are fair mementos of the greatness that had so recently been in full flower. By the time she came back to Hamburg for a second televised concert in 1962, the high notes were ghastly beyond belief, and the persona, save for a few lucky stretches, is of gritty determination against the odds.

Her negative influence in this regard has been as profound as her positive: the example of Callas has led from the acceptance of pressed and uncontrollable sounds "for the sake of drama" -- already a questionable formulation -- to a sense, among some listeners, that the strained or ugly sounds are *in themselves* dramatic. To a feeling, among some singers and fans, that it is not just a matter of risking strain in the pursuit of truth, but rather that through strain, one may draw nearer to truth. (Think of the Teresa Stratas of recent seasons, overplaying every extreme and flaunting the worst notes as though they were badges of honor.) This is in the most precise sense a decadent pleasure: it works decay upon the art that is the original source of the pleasure.

Callas herself lent support to the idea as she began to adopt her supporters' arguments in interviews. "You cannot sing `I hate you' in beautiful tones" -- Stop right there! In the end, this is a way of saying representational art cannot exist, that the painter is being false to the chaos of real life if he controls his brush. In fact one absolutely can sing "I hate you" in beautiful tones if they are tones charged with that meaning, if they are tones that carry the expressive burden of hatred. Context is everything. In rock, one sings "I love you" in "ugly" tones -- that is, ugly to ears accustomed to a different vocal idiom. In opera one sings "I hate you" in "beautiful" tones -- which however may not sound "beautiful," even if the voice is Kiri te Kanawa's, to a kid raised on rock.

And alas, the voice is not so likely to sound like Kiri te Kanawa's. Previously intolerable levels of sheer vocal pressure, unwieldiness, gross wobbles, bad attacks and releases, have become commonplace. How many younger singers even realize that before Callas, there was no known example of a major singer developing such a "wobble"? Now some of them think that it's natural to get one sooner or later, and Callas just got it sooner. One reason some younger listeners don't quite get it when people object to Callas is that they've heard so much bad sound since. It's only a post-Callas ear, nurtured on a diet of mature Renata Scotto, Silvia Sass, Gwyneth Jones, Ileana Cotrubas, Beverly Sills, Peter Hoffman, Rene Kollo and the rest, that can find contemporary objections to Callas puzzling. Along with this has arisen the equally pernicious idea that a singer who "gives a lot" dramatically, who values emotional communication over fastidiousness, can be expected to burn out earlier. Or even worse: that good vocal production is incapable of reaching the same dramatic intensity that uncontrolled strain (euphemized as "risk-taking") can bring. If there were any truth to that,

Lotte Lehmann, Chaliapin and Jon Vickers – all comparable to Callas in their intensity and capacity for artistic abandon – should not have reached sixty with their voices in such beautiful shape.

Occasionally, in these troubled years, Callas could still show why so many were willing to hold standards in abeyance for her. The first half of the other new video from EMI comes from the middle of her nearly inactive period, a 1962 mini-concert at Covent Garden. She sings one aria from her familiar repertory, the "Don Carlo" soliloquy, and two that were new: the Habanera and Seguédille from "Carmen." There are many parlous notes and some painful ones in the Verdi, even though it does not go very high (and one is grateful for that). But both the physical presentation and the singing have great eloquence. When she least thinks of acting, during the prelude, what exquisitely interior response she makes to the shifting music! And then the Habanera is absolutely superb: the singing is smooth and nuanced, the diction in French is as startlingly immediate as it had always been in Italian; the interpretation is bold and extrovert, but saved from vulgarity, as always, by her innate elegance and sense of proportion.

Pleasure is clouded only by the reflection that she is achieving this in music that is very easy to sing, whereas she had used to do it on the pinnacles of virtuosity. But she *looks* radiant, happy. Surely, she must have imagined in those months, she could build a livable life this way: occasional gala appearances, singing carefully chosen, congenial music, to keep her name and work-sense alive; otherwise, recreation with Onassis, *rest,* surcease from the agony and disappointment that an operatic season had so rapidly and cruelly become.

If that was her hope, it was denied her. Each time she brought her voice back after "resting," there was a little less of it to be found. And the dreaded wobble refused to confine itself to those topmost notes; it inched down the scale, like a cancer invading the body. Hers was a singing based on capacity; with the best will and most supportive colleagues in the world, she could not be true to herself as a singer of artful dodges disguising incapacity. The brusque Callas of 1952 would have had no sympathy for the compromised and struggling figure of a decade later. She can't sing, why doesn't she just quit? The celebrated mistress of Ari made one more try.

In 1964-65, following a crisis in her relationship with Onassis (they set a wedding date and then quarreled fiercely; she aborted the pregnancy she had so long wished for) Callas briefly attempted a return to normal activity, singing 31 performances of Tosca and Norma to audiences in Paris, London and New York almost hysterically anxious for her reappearance. The other London telecast, again Act II of "Tosca" and again with Gobbi, but now in Zeffirelli's detailed and well-rehearsed production, was made as a pendant to the 1964 run at

Covent Garden. The murder scene has been shown many times on television; it is good now to have the whole act, including Gobbi's scenes with Renato Cioni, the new tenor. Callas's voice is in obviously desperate condition, but the full orchestration helps; very little in this scene is exposed. The acting is beautiful and cinematically precise. But what a poor vehicle, in the end, for such a talent: the police chief with his penny-dreadful sadism, the honest woman ground down in lurid detail to the point of selling her body, the brave lover nearby in the torture chamber -- it is too "effective" by half; some of Shaw's epithet for the source play ("Sardoodledom") attaches to Puccini, however expert his scoring of the melodrama. (Callas herself repeatedly suggested in interviews a sense that Puccini was in questionable taste, and sang him rarely; this is taken as an eccentricity, but I believe she felt it from the heart. The nine minutes of "Tu che le vanità" are worth five whole "Toscas.")

Despite all, the lyrical aria "Vissi d'arte" is the high point of dramatic truth here: even in her reduced state, Callas can pour feeling into a melody, can bind the notes, even ugly ones, into a beautiful line. When at the climax she impulsively steps forward, beautiful hands extended, beautiful face so full of feeling, something at the core of her way of making music drama is still alive.

But she could not continue this way. She returned to London the following season, announced for four more Toscas, but managed to sing only one, a royal gala before the Queen. Press coverage was unbelievably hostile, with gossip reporters delighting at finding her on somebody's yacht or at somebody's party when she should have been singing. Sympathetic music critics overcompensated, writing up not what they must have heard ("must have," in that most of these late performances were taped, so we can second-guess them) but what their will to defend a great artist persuaded them to hear. After that isolated Tosca began a long silence.

From time to time Callas would appear on television for sad celebrity interviews, all painted glamor, cultivated laughter and affected accent (speaking to Lord Harewood she actually stops herself in the middle of pronouncing "conservatory" and says *"conservatoire";* a little later Brooklyn peeks through as she recounts getting a contract with the Athens Opera on the condition that she would not sing "anywheres else.") After the final break with Onassis (there was another explosive quarrel in June of 1968; four months later he married Jacqueline Kennedy), she made sporadic plans to resume her career; various projects were announced, but Callas, clearly terrified and ambivalent, ultimately quashed each one, either through unrealistic demands, illness or sheer indecision. She made a film, "Medea," with Pierluigi Pasolini; it is beautiful to watch for her plasticity of motion and facial expression, but it has little to do with her genius of acting "according to a chord, a crescendo." She gave teaching one try (at Juilliard, in the master classes that the new McNally play treats). By far the majority of her

comments to the students comes straight from the discipline of her early training: she is simply an old pro helping young pros. This was probably the nearest she came to her true self in those years -- but not in the moments when she tried to demonstrate vocally what she was asking for.

The unpleasant secret is that damaged voices don't mend. Specific physical injuries or medical problems can be repaired before the instrument suffers systemic harm, but there is no example of an important operatic singer encountering serious vocal deterioration and returning to form. The best that can be hoped for -- and this description fits the few seeming instances of "recovery" -- is that the decline can be arrested, the technique can be stabilized at its reduced level, and the singer, through a combination of canny management and discreet lowering of aim, can go on working productively. An improvement in the consistency of performances may result -- but that is not the same as recovery of the voice. Quite a few well-known singers have suffered markedly and have developed coping tactics that allowed them to continue through a career of normal duration. Renata Scotto, Jose Carreras, Evelyn Lear, Sherrill Milnes, even Fischer-Dieskau (when wearing his operatic hat) come to mind.

But not one of them was able to bring back the lost freshness, beauty or finesse, and Callas, who was farther gone than they, would not have been able to do so either. Everyone around her was full of advice for coping tactics, mostly having to do with abandoning her high-soprano repertory: Zeffirelli said she should try Monteverdi and Carmen; Jeffrey Tate thought she should record the little ariettas she used as warm-ups; Gerald Moore lamented the art-song repertory she never explored; Neville Cardus of the Guardian (missing almost every stylistic point and displaying the too-typical critic's ignorance of voice) suggested in an open letter that she switch to German roles. She was even invited (and Newsweek reported that she had agreed) to record pop standards.

Callas knew better than her admirers, and still not quite well enough. Recording seemed slightly less threatening than stage appearances, and she picked her way laboriously through several Verdi arias at EMI sessions in 1969. These were left half-finished, but the tapes were patched together and issued in 1991 and 1994 in EMI's exhaustive cullings of unpublished Callas material. They show what a carefully coping, reduced Callas might have been like: disaster is avoided, but the glimpse is not encouraging. Better to hear the sad documents of the early sixties, where the voice sounds awful but she is still singing like Callas, still operating on her stage instincts and on the remnants of her old bravery.

That it could become worse -- worse still -- was demonstrated in the early 1970's in some truly gruesome recordings with Giuseppe di Stefano for Philips (still mercifully unpublished, but stay tuned) and in the worldwide concert tour -- her first performances since

the royal gala "Tosca" -- with the same burnt-out tenor. This was a failure so decisive that no one really expected another attempt. None was made, though Callas went on practicing and hoping. Tapes of the concerts have circulated in "pirate" form, and bits of one are now officially available on the Tony Palmer and "Life and Art" videos; they prove depressingly and conclusively that no Callas comeback would have been possible. So -- though they have been offered to the public to support the opposite conclusion -- do the even later fragments of Callas rehearsing with pianists right up to the year of her death. The idea that Callas lost not her voice but only her nerve does a profound disservice to her art -- reduces it to an art of mere theatrics.

Even theatrics abandoned her in the concerts with Di Stefano, which document one moment of artistic desperation after another. "Anything to survive, at my stage of the game," she told an interviewer shortly beforehand. But survival was impossible, and she must have known it. Several of her intimates suspect that Callas committed suicide. The body was cremated with unusual haste and without autopsy -- on whose orders it is still not clear -- and her husband, whom she had not seen for 18 years, said that he found in her prayerbook, in her hand, the lines Ponchielli's Gioconda sings when she resolves to take her own life. I don't doubt it; she had lived for her art and it was long dead. The tragedy of Callas is as simple as it seems, and as simple as the worshippers and the psychobiographers don't want it to be: She lost her voice, the most wonderfully musical voice we have ever heard.

Postscript 2015:

This article from two decades ago seems to me still valid as a summary account of Callas's basic contribution to operatic history, and her place within it. But about one aspect I have since learned more, and so should append a correction: I understated the possible effects of rapid weight loss on vocal function. Fatty tissue is distributed throughout the body, including the muscles directly involved in phonation, and though the effect on these is too small to be noticed by dieters using their voices in ordinary ways, it can be more significant for someone engaged in the high-pressure, athletic vocalism of opera. In effect the singer is suddenly playing a slightly *different instrument, and the highly developed muscular memories involved may need to be re-studied and adjusted. So it was not quite right to say that Callas's slimming diet could have affected her voice* only *by sapping her physical strength.*

At the same time, further study has shown more clearly than ever that her early singing involved vocal behaviors (mostly surrounding rate, extent, and irregularity of vibrato) that are conducive to later problems, so it remains true that the seeds of her vocal difficulties were sown before weight loss (or the other issues chroniclers have linked to her withdrawal) ever

entered the picture.