



The Individuality Of Maria Callas's Timbre And Performing Style As A Manifestation Of The Vocal Genius Of The Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon and vocal individuality of Maria Callas, one of the most influential opera singers of the twentieth century. Particular attention is given to the structure and expressive capacity of her vocal apparatus, which combined rare technical precision with profound emotional depth. The study analyses the features that shaped her distinctive timbre, interpretative originality, and the evolution of her performing style within the *bel canto* tradition. It also considers Callas's professionalism, dramatic intuition, and ability to transform each operatic role into a psychologically convincing character. Her voice, capable of both lyrical delicacy and tragic intensity, redefined the expressive boundaries of the soprano repertoire. The article reflects on how Callas's artistic legacy, marked by extraordinary talent and a deeply tragic fate, became an enduring manifestation of vocal genius in modern operatic art.

Keywords:

Vocal art; soprano; coloratura; opera diva; *bel canto*; register; timbre; artistry; transformation; phenomenon.

Introduction

The choice of this topic arises from the needs of contemporary education, where fostering a deeper engagement of students with their future profession is of particular importance. Alongside the acquisition of vocal and technical skills, students must also become familiar with the creative legacies of great performers who shaped the art of singing.

It can be stated with confidence that the personality and artistic legacy of the great twentieth-century opera singer Maria Callas exerted one of the most powerful influences not only on the operatic world of her time but also on the subsequent evolution of operatic art. To this day, opinions about her artistry remain deeply divided: some admired and revered her, while others were unable to accept her unconventional interpretations. Yet no one has ever denied that she possessed an inimitable and radiant artistic individuality, distinguished by a performance style uniquely her own.

It was precisely the combination of her expressive temperament and her extraordinary vocal abilities that created the magnetic power of her art. Throughout her brilliant career, Callas left behind a wealth of recordings of operatic arias and complete roles, which continue to astonish listeners with their emotional depth, dramatic intensity, sincerity, and beauty.

Literature Review and Methodology

When considering the artistry of an opera singer, one must first of all turn to the quality of the voice itself — the fundamental element of talent. The Italian press once described Maria Callas's voice as possessing "an organ-like resonance." Combined with her acquired skills, tireless diligence, and mastery, this vocal quality enabled her to perform a remarkably wide range of roles — from those written for dramatic soprano to lyric-coloratura and even mezzo-soprano parts [1,2,3].

From the very beginning of her career, Callas's voice was characterised by a beautiful, soft

timbre and sufficient power to be clearly heard in ensemble scenes and soar above the orchestral texture — even in Wagner's operas, where every word reached the audience distinctly. According to Paolo Vinco, "The singer's vocal apparatus gradually acquired extraordinary flexibility and agility across all registers, allowing her to overcome any vocal-technical challenges with confidence" [2].

Callas herself recalled that her voice was naturally of a heavy type, but her teacher, Elvira de Hidalgo — a devoted adherent of the Italian *bel canto* tradition — instilled in her the principles of light vocal emission, which provided the necessary flexibility. Although Callas's coloraturas were considered rather heavy, they were never empty or superficial; they always carried expressive meaning and served the dramatic image she created. In her vocal practice, she consciously based her technique on *bel canto* principles, which she regarded as the only truly noble form of singing. At the same time, John Ardoin, in *The Callas Legacy* (New York: Scribner, 1977; 2nd ed. 1982, p.186), discussing her recordings of arias by Rossini and Donizetti (made between 4–23 December 1963 and 13–24 April 1964, first issued as Columbia SAX 2564 and Angel 36239, later reissued on CD as EMI 5 66464 2), wrote:

"Curiously, despite her abundance of expressive gifts, Callas was almost invariably lacking in charm when one compares her singing of Rossini with that of Supervia. Callas could use her voice in a fascinating, even bewitching way, yet the feminine charm with which Supervia constantly disarms the listener on record is missing. Fortunately, the vast majority of Callas's repertoire did not require charm as an essential ingredient." [3]

It is interesting that Ardoin's judgement was based on recordings made in the later stage of Callas's career — generally regarded as one of her least successful periods — while overlooking two brilliant complete recordings of Rossini's comic operas made for EMI during her artistic prime.

Franco Zeffirelli, who directed *Il Turco in Italia* at La Scala in 1955, recalled:

"Rossini left the line 'Che Turca impertinente! Osa a Fiorilla l'amante disputar!' [That

impertinent Turk! She dared to argue over Fiorilla's lover!] as a kind of spoken improvisation without music. Maria said, 'I want to speak it — to prove that I can act.' At first, she was terribly bad, and eventually our conductor, Gianandrea Gavazzeni, added a little music under the line. Then Maria did it perfectly, with exquisite charm and humour."

(John Ardoin & Gerald Fitzgerald, *Callas: The Art and the Life – The Great Years* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p.111 [4]).

Apparently, Zeffirelli slightly misquoted the passage, as in Act II, Scene 1, Rossini had already written those lines as a *Recitativo semplice* — exactly as performed in the EMI 1954 recording, which preceded the La Scala production by more than seven months.

To grasp the significance of Callas's voice as a physical and artistic phenomenon, it is logical to compare it with the voices of her contemporaries who sang the same repertoire. During that period, the operatic stage shone with such magnificent singers as Renata Tebaldi, Joan Sutherland, Leyla Gencer, Birgit Nilsson, and Montserrat Caballé, among others. All possessed beautiful voices and impeccable technique, yet none could eclipse the talent and magnetic presence of Maria Callas, whose unique place in operatic art remains unfilled to this day.

Discussion

The voice of Maria Callas evoked profoundly mixed impressions. Within the same performance, she could captivate listeners with the beauty of her vocal line and, moments later, astonish them with the sharpness or even harshness of her timbre. This variability stemmed from the uneven nature of her voice across the three registers, each of which possessed distinct tonal characteristics. As a result, listeners often felt as though she "split" into three different voices — a perception that is quite understandable given her extraordinarily wide range.

The lower register was dark in colour and almost baritone in its power, which she employed to heighten dramatic effect. The upper register, by contrast, was brilliant and radiant, typical of a coloratura soprano. Even the most technically demanding passages

written for this range posed no difficulty for her; she performed them with astonishing ease. Callas herself admitted that she never experienced fear or uncertainty when singing in the upper register, but rather felt a sense of exhilaration and inspiration in producing high notes.

When singing *piano*, her tone acquired a sensual softness, and on sustained notes her voice seemed to descend from above, creating a truly divine resonance. At times, however, a slight guttural timbre appeared — especially in the transitions between the lower and middle, or middle and upper registers. Yet she skilfully smoothed these transitions through the use of *portamento*, blending the sounds seamlessly. This lent a particular charm to her lyrical passages and fully conformed to the Italian stylistic tradition.

From a technical standpoint, Callas was capable of executing the entire range of existing ornaments and dynamic nuances. She masterfully integrated trills into a single expressive line, treating them not as mere embellishments but as integral elements that enhanced the emotional and structural coherence of the musical texture.

Callas was renowned for her extraordinary diligence and discipline. Few singers have ever studied an operatic score with such meticulous attention to detail. She was acutely aware of the orchestration of every musical passage, and this awareness guided her in finding vocal colours that matched both the character of the music and the emotional atmosphere of the scene. Over time, she learned to alter the character of her voice not only from one role to another but even within a single role, according to dramatic circumstance. Some of her heroines — such as Anna Bolena and Lady Macbeth — were intentionally sung with four distinct vocal characters.

Her ability to transform her voice was astonishing. For instance, when comparing performances of Juliet's Waltz from Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* by three great sopranos — Joan Sutherland, Mirella Freni, and Maria Callas — it becomes evident that, despite the technical brilliance of the first two, Callas surpasses them in interpretative depth. She is not merely a

virtuoso singer mastering a demanding and dazzling piece; she becomes, through her voice, a young girl — innocent, joyous, and radiant — dancing and spinning with youthful abandon.

There are many such examples, confirming that the vocal phenomenon of Maria Callas should not be viewed merely as a natural gift refined by training, but as a genuine artistic phenomenon.

Maria Callas was undeniably an outstanding singer who, at the height of her career, exerted a significant influence on the development of opera as an art form. Every singer is, of course, unique and inimitable. Yet there are “vocalists” — and there is Maria Callas: unmatched in her artistry, stage magnetism, and charisma. Opera, the noblest of the arts, celebrating the dream of the impossible, became for her a refuge from herself. Perhaps herein lies the essence of the Callas phenomenon — one of the secrets of her enduring success.

Maria Callas stands among those rare artistic figures who defy conventional judgement and resist standard critical categories. Her artistry remains incomparable. As the Italian singer, theorist, and historian of vocal art Giacomo Lauri-Volpi wrote in his seminal book *Vocal Parallels*, where he compared singers of similar type, Callas's art was placed in a section entitled “Voices Without Parallels.” He wrote:

“Her voice — at once coloratura, lyric, and dramatic soprano — encompassed the principal operatic repertoire of three and a half centuries. A unique voice and a singular school of singing.” Indeed, connoisseurs of classical art can recognise her distinctive timbre from the very first notes — a testament to the individuality and enduring brilliance of her genius.

Conclusion

The name of this legendary and yet deeply tragic figure will be remembered for generations to come — and perhaps, as Franco Zeffirelli's film devoted to her once foretold, she will remain with us forever. Maria Callas can with full justification be called a true operatic diva. She combined intellectual depth, extraordinary charisma, an individualised musical style, exceptional acting skill, tireless dedication, and, above all, an incomparable natural talent.

Much of what she achieved in art was not necessarily the product of conscious intellect

but rather of instinct and spiritual immersion. For Callas, opera and the roles she embodied became a form of inner contemplation, akin to prayer. Her nature was too passionate to remain within the polished surface of traditional *bel canto* music, which she often found too beautiful and too shallow. Outward appearances meant little to her; for Callas, the essence lay in the primal forces of life. Styles and techniques were secondary — mere instruments for expressing truth.

She succeeded in transforming her volcanic temperament into a positive creative power that illuminated everything connected with the stage. Through her talent and her intuitive sense of beauty, she changed the very world of opera. At a certain stage of her life, she also transformed herself — spiritually and physically — becoming an even more expressive and luminous embodiment of her heroines. Step by step, through relentless self-discipline and uncompromising pursuit of excellence, Callas attained the summit of artistic perfection.

Maria Callas passed away in 1977. Yet the admiration and reverence for this extraordinary woman continue to live on. Her voice still resonates, her artistry still inspires, and the fascination with the singer whom a grateful public called *La Divina* — “The Divine One” — remains undiminished.

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