

## 1. EARLY YEARS: MARIA BEFORE LA CALLAS

Maria Callas was born in New York on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1923, the daughter of Greek parents. Her name at birth was Maria Kalogeropoulou.

When she was 13 years old, her parents separated. Her mother, who was ambitious for her daughter's musical talent, took Maria and her elder sister to live in Athens. There Maria made her operatic debut at the age of just 15 and studied with Elvira de Hidalgo, a Spanish soprano who had sung with Enrico Caruso. Maria, an intensely dedicated student, began to develop her extraordinary potential.

During the War years in Athens the young soprano sang such demanding operatic roles as Tosca and Leonore in Beethoven's *Fidelio*. In 1945, Maria returned to the USA. She was chosen to sing Turandot for the inauguration of a prestigious new opera company in Chicago, but it went bankrupt before the opening night.

Yet fate turned out to be on Maria's side: she had been spotted by the veteran Italian tenor, Giovanni Zenatello, a talent scout for the opera festival at the Verona Arena. Callas made her Italian debut there in 1947, starring in *La Gioconda* by Ponchielli. Her conductor, Tullio Serafin, was to become a decisive force in her career.

## 2. METAMORPHOSIS

After Callas' debut at the Verona Arena, she settled in Italy and married a wealthy businessman, Giovanni Battista Meneghini. Her influential conductor from Verona, Tullio Serafin, became her musical mentor.

She began to make her name in grand roles such as Turandot, Aida, Norma – and even Wagner's Isolde and Brünnhilde – but new doors opened for her in 1949 when, at La Fenice opera house in Venice, she replaced a famous soprano in the delicate, florid role of Elvira in Bellini's *I puritani*.

She enjoyed a sensational success. This led to her first recordings and she soon became a guest at Italy's leading opera houses, including the greatest of them all, La Scala, Milan. She also thrilled audiences in Latin America, especially in Mexico City.

Her first appearances as Violetta in *La traviata* came in 1951 and the following year, with her career gathering momentum, Callas embarked on a physical metamorphosis. Within 18 months she was 30 kilos lighter, cutting a strikingly elegant figure both on and off the stage. "She became another woman," said the conductor Carlo Mario Giulini, "and another world of expression opened to her ... In every sense, she had been transformed."

## 3. PRIMA DONNA AT LA SCALA

La Scala, in Milan, is Italy's greatest opera house, the theatre that hosted the premieres of such works as Bellini's *Norma*, Verdi's *Nabucco* and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.

Maria Callas made her debut at La Scala in 1950, as Aida. She soon became the theatre's prima donna assoluta, honoured with opening its season six times in the course of a decade. Special triumphs were reserved for her

collaborations with the stage director Luchino Visconti – most famously Bellini's *La sonnambula*, Verdi's *La traviata* and, in 1957, Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, perhaps the highpoint of her relationship with La Scala.

The following year, serious tensions arose between Callas and the company's manager, Antonio Ghiringhelli. A performance of Bellini's rarely-seen *Il pirata* brought matters to a head. It ended with Ghiringhelli lowering the safety curtain before Callas had finished her curtain calls.

She returned to La Scala in 1960, opening the season in another rarity, Donizetti's *Poliuto*, and in 1962 appeared there for the last time, as Cherubini's fiery *Medea*.

In the course of the 1950s, La Scala was also the venue for many of Callas's most celebrated recordings. Maybe the greatest of them all was *Tosca*, conducted by Victor de Sabata. Recorded in 1953, it remains an undisputed classic.

#### 4. RECORDING A LEGEND

It was in the opera house that Maria Callas first created her legend. A complete singing actress, she gave physical performances that both reflected and heightened the expressive power of her singing.

But it is her recordings that have sustained and propagated her legend. More than 50 years after her last operatic appearance, she continues to transfix millions of listeners with her unmistakable voice, her dramatic insight, her subtle artistry and her sheer charisma.

Callas first entered the recording studio in 1949. Over the next 15 years she recorded nearly all her most famous roles – such as *Norma*, *Violetta*, *Lucia*, *Medea* and *Tosca* – and also operas that she never performed in the theatre. These include *La bohème*, *Pagliacci*, *Manon Lescaut* and, perhaps most fascinating of all, *Carmen*. Among her colleagues for these recordings were some of the greatest conductors and singers of her time.

There is also a recorded treasury of individual arias and of live performances, captured at opera houses and concert halls around the world. Maria Callas, purely through sound, never fails to work her theatrical magic. As she herself said: "Everything I have to say is in the music. It is all there in my records."

#### 5. LA DIVINA: THE GLORY YEARS

Callas' fans in Italy named her *La Divina*, and she did, indeed, reign like a goddess on the operatic stage. While La Scala, Milan, became her operatic home, she was courted by the leading opera houses of Europe and North America.

She first sang at Covent Garden in London in 1953, and the following year made her debut at Chicago's Civic Opera House. In 1955 she appeared for the first time in Berlin, with Herbert von Karajan conducting, while 1956 took her to the Vienna State Opera and, at last, to the Metropolitan Opera in the city of her birth, New York.

The media found her fascinating, sometimes portraying her as demanding and temperamental. A storm blew up in Rome in early 1958 when illness caused her to curtail a gala performance of *Norma* attended by the President of Italy. In November of the same year, her wrangles with Rudolf Bing, General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, made headlines.

1958 ended with her debut at the Paris Opéra, where she gave a spectacular concert that was the social event of the season. In the audience was a man who was to change her life, the Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis.

## 6. AFFAIRS OF THE HEART

As a supreme operatic diva, achieving at the highest artistic level, Maria Callas exuded glamour; but for years there was little excitement in her personal life. In 1949 she had found security in marriage to a man nearly 30 years her senior, Giovanni Battista Meneghini. His business was manufacturing bricks, but he became his wife's manager.

In 1959, the Meneghinis were invited by Aristotle Onassis to join a Mediterranean cruise on his splendid yacht, the *Christina*. Among the other guests was Winston Churchill, the great British statesman. A new world opened for Callas – above all through her chemistry with her charming and dynamic Greek host. Onassis was already married, but just weeks after the cruise, Callas left her husband.

Her often volatile relationship with Onassis lasted for nine years. Devoting her energies to him and to life in the jet set, she drastically reduced her performing schedule. As she later said: "I was kept in a cage so long that when I met Aristo and his friends I became a different woman."

She dreamed of marrying Onassis and having his children, but in 1968, he suddenly chose to marry Jacqueline Kennedy, widow of the assassinated American President. Callas was humiliated and her hopes were dashed.

## 7. THE CURTAIN FALLS

After Callas met Aristotle Onassis in 1959, her performances became rarer. Her voice also became more fragile, though her art was more refined than ever.

The last two operas to be staged for Callas were *Tosca* in London and *Norma* in Paris. Both were directed by Franco Zeffirelli: "The magic of a Callas is a quality few artists have," he said, "Maria is always a miracle."

Her final operatic appearance was in London in 1965, as Tosca. She settled in Paris and essentially retired, though she acted in a film of the story of Medea, discussed many musical projects and even recorded some arias. In 1973 she set out on a concert tour of Europe, North America, Korea and Japan with the tenor Giuseppe di Stefano, but she seemed a shadow of her former self.

Her final years were lonely and her health was delicate. In September 1977 the world was shocked by the news of her death, from a suspected heart attack. She was just 53. The words of Tosca's great aria inevitably come to mind: "Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore": I have lived for art, I have lived for love.

## 8. IMMORTALITY

More than four decades after her death, Maria Callas remains very much alive for opera lovers of all ages. Few artists could match her in capturing the imagination – and the heart – of the listener. Uncompromising in her quest for musical and dramatic truth, she defines the term 'singing actress'.

She changed the face of opera and helped to shape its history. Some people even talk of the pre-Callas and post-Callas eras. Through her achievements, the bel canto composers of the early 19th century gained a renewed currency. Today, the operas of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini are more widely performed than ever; many singers now excel in the intricate bel canto style, but Callas still reigns supreme.

Time and again, leading singers – especially sopranos – will say that it was Callas who inspired them to make opera their vocation. Callas never took on any pupils, though she famously gave public masterclasses at New York's Juilliard School in 1971. Yet she continues to nurture new generations of performers, just as she continues to illuminate, captivate and move new audiences.

## 9. THE HOLOGRAM TOUR

Maria Callas lives on through her recordings, her legacy, and now through an inventive worldwide concert tour. Presented by BASE Hologram, Callas in Concert – The Hologram Tour captures the mystical power of La Divina on stage at the height of her marvelous career, in the form of a three-dimensional hologram.

Using innovative technology, a team of highly experienced sound engineers succeeded in isolating Callas's voice within her recordings. Through the combination of this feat and the stagecraft of the show, the opera legend incarnate takes her rightful place on stage once more, alongside a live orchestra, singing such iconic arias as Bellini's "Casta Diva", Puccini's "Vissi d'Arte", and Bizet's "L'Amour est un oiseau rebelle", among others.

The hologram concert experience gives a new generation of opera lovers the opportunity to witness Callas larger than life, ensuring that her legacy lives on with a theatrical flourish fitting of her art and life.