A CRITIC AT LARGE

HOW MARIA CALLAS LOST HER VOICE

Legend persists that the opera diva ruined her own voice for the sake of vanity and café society. But what she really sacrificed herself to was the music.

By Will Crutchfield

November 5, 1995

Maria Callas photographed by Horst in New York, in 1952. She could imagine almost anything, and give voice to it.

f only Maria Callas hadn't got mixed up with Ari and Jackie, we would be less a

I Within the opera house, Callas mattered in a way no opera singer had since Fyodor Chaliapin and none has yet mattered after her. She was not just celebrated and dominant in her field but permanently influential and artistically important in it. She achieved in her singing a level of musicality and technical capacity which places her among the greatest musicians (in any genre) of the century; she acted her roles with a physical eloquence that impressed audiences deeply; she restored to circulation a body of operatic literature that had lacked a commanding exponent for many years; 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 that it is difficult to disentangle her art from her life, and tempting to conflate the two. Few of her twenty-odd biographers and none of the documentary filmmakers have evaded the temptation. In an age when we can watch our wealthier contemporaries live out their tawdry fates on television, it is possible to lose track of just what tragic art has to offer besides the bald presentation of a life that will provoke pity or Schadenfreude. But some new materials can help. Callas's surviving television footage has been released to the public over the past several years, as have crucial recordings long known only to specialists, and in pirate form. If the arts have any importance beyond that of ushering successful individuals into the chamber of voyeurism, it is worthwhile to rescue Callas from her chroniclers.

Maria Callas was born in New York City, to George and Evangelia Kalogeropoulos, recent immigrants from Greece, in December of 1923. When her mother returned to Greece in 1937, Maria went along, and began studying music at the National Conservatory, in Athens. Her childhood was unhappy in a fairly typical way—she was overweight and quarrelled often with her ambitious mother—and music was the center of her emotional life from early on. She would listen all day to the lessons of the other students and then borrow opera scores and learn them at night. By the age of sixteen, she had her

first contract, with the national Lyric Theatre; at eighteen, she sang Tosca, and until 1945 she appeared in roles large and small in Athens and Salonika. In the fall of that year, she returned to New York, and she spent most of 1946 studying and auditioning; by the spring of 1947, she had landed a first-class Italian début engagement, in "La Gioconda," at the Arena of Verona. There she found herself among leading singers, under the wing of one of the greatest old Italian maestros, Tullio Serafin, and supported by a wealthy Veronese industrialist, Giovanni Battista Meneghini, who became her manager, her lover, and, eventually, her husband.

Callas's success at the Arena was instantaneous, and over the next five years a modern miracle revealed itself on the main Italian stages. This part of the story has been told often and well: how the agility, volume, and expressiveness of her singing caused excitement everywhere, while the actual sound of her voice—which was unusual and in some ways unbeautiful—occasioned differences of opinion; how her repertory, which consisted originally of heavy dramatic roles (Gioconda, Isolde, Turandot, Brünnhilde, and Aida), began to include virtuosic bel-canto parts (Bellini's Elvira and Norma) that had not in living memory been sung with such command; and how her strong stage presence announced unmistakably the arrival of a major new operatic artist.

In the season of 1951-52, after triumphs up and down the peninsula, Callas established herself as prima donna at Milan's La Scala, and made it her home theatre. For seven seasons, the house surrounded her with illustrious colleagues, conductors, directors, and designers, in revivals that were the news of the musical world. In familiar and unknown operas alike, Callas's work almost always became the focus of the world's thoughts about that role, and Callas herself became a celebrity. Then, in 1959, she went into sudden near-retirement, took up with Aristotle Onassis, and began the long professional and personal decline that still occasions deep regret and furious debate. Callas had been averaging fifty appearances a year; between her thirty-sixth and fortieth birthdays she sang in public only twenty-eight times. There was a flurry of troubled performances in 1964-65, and then silence until a disastrous

concert tour in 1973-74.

Only one good decade, really. Callas's entire stage career (excluding the Greek years) comprised just five hundred and thirty-nine performances. Enrico Caruso, who died at forty-eight, gave nearly two thousand. Chaliapin, one of the various singers who "invented" acting in opera before Callas "invented" it, made his début in 1890, and was still touring, recording, and singing gorgeously in 1937, just months before his death. The only other musician in this century to make anything like Callas's impact in so few appearances was the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. Both of them—like Chaliapin, Caruso, Arturo Toscanini, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau—permanently changed the way their successors understood the music they were most closely associated with. But Callas brought this about largely by conservative means, through the affirmation of tradition. Gould and the others were revolutionaries; she never was.

Callas presented to the Italian public a phenomenon of sheer capacity, and she revived a repertory based on capacity. High notes and low, power in full cry and delicacy in pianissimo, fast passagework and sustained legato had not been completely present in one soprano in generations. The most discriminating musician, whose interest might not have been held by stupendous athletic feats but whose ear was sensitive to minute gradations of rhythm and phrasing, found an ideal in Callas at the same moment that fans of larger-than-life excitement were finding an idol in her. And neophytes, who may not have recognized any of these qualities but were open to a deep dramatic expressiveness, fell under her spell. For many, she was (and, through her records, remains) both the reason for and the means of learning to love opera itself.

We can hear why from the first of her complete opera performances to be preserved on tape—a dim Neapolitan recording of Verdi's "Nabucco" from the end of 1949. Callas, playing Abigaille, the warrior daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, enters at the head of an army and opens with threats and

taunts, exploiting powerful low notes, high ones flung out over the full force of the orchestra, and, at the end of her first speech, two coruscating roulades, racing down from high A and high B. Then, in an aside of softly pleading melody, she begs the enemy youth she secretly loves to turn away all this force by responding to her desire.

The singing is breathtaking. The roulades show some of the qualities that set her apart in difficult music. She requires no gradual acceleration to start the first scale in its rapid motion; it moves like lightning, yet every note is thrillingly distinct. In the second, she 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 is as it surmounts the orchestral tutti! In the pleading trio, she begins with haunting smoothness, yet finds a still more tender tone for the central line: "*Ah, se m'ami, ancor potrei il tuo popolo salvar*" ("Ah, if you love me, I could spare your people yet").

A startling confidence is at work here, for in Naples, as in so many other early performances that survive, Callas's surroundings offered no encouragement for subtlety. To the orchestra and the other soloists, that "Nabucco" trio is just one more hearty generic sing; but this twenty-six-year-old American who is still making her name has the nerve to create an interior atmosphere, to live in the mood she has established in the opening line, even though it means being outshouted by the others in her very first scene. Throughout her career, she kept this courage to sing softly—to assume she would be heard, even when there was great practical danger of the contrary. She dominated 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.

What Callas was helping to restore was once the most popular music in the world: the operatic repertory of Italy in the first half of the nineteenth century—the *primo ottocento*, as the Italians call it. This was the heady moment when Classical virtuosity, inherited from the brilliant vocal

rhetoricians of the eighteenth century, coexisted with high Romanticism. The novels of Walter Scott, the poetry of Byron, the music of Beethoven: the younger Italian poets and composers took all these like drugs, and the operas they created swept back over Europe and the world. Callas's core repertory came from this school, which reaches from the serious operas of Rossini (she sang one, "Armida") through Bellini and Donizetti, to "Il Trovatore" and "La Traviata," where Verdi, already striking out on new paths, drew for the last time on the full expressive vocabulary of his predecessors. Bellini's Norma was Callas's most frequent role, followed by Verdi's Violetta and Donizetti's Lucia; more than half her stage career was devoted to music composed in the narrow span from 1830 to 1853.

With opera moving on in symphonic and naturalistic directions, the decline of the Classical bel-canto skills was inevitable, and by 1900 most of the great operas of the *primo ottocento* were forgotten. The few that remained in repertory tended to be treated as tired relics, or as surefire comedies and romances that would play themselves (in shamelessly cut and edited versions), while serious artistic effort was focussed elsewhere. Some of the light sopranos kept the bel-canto skills flickeringly alive. But there had been nothing like Callas's alacrity and speed since about 1910, and what there had been then came with the haphazardness of a discipline no longer valued and slipping into disuse.

Callas had all the exactitude and purpose of a valiant restorer. She had mastered more fully than almost any of her Italian contemporaries the art of legato and portamento ("carrying" the voice smoothly from note to note), and she had an extraordinarily lambent projection, which allowed every word to tell without overpronunciation. Her concentrated focus of tone allowed every gradation of softness to carry through the hall, every minute manipulation of rhythm to register. In every role, on practically every page, there were phrases that Callas was able to trace with a calligrapher's pen where audiences had become accustomed to a carpenter's pencil.

Verdi's "Macbeth," which Callas revived at La Scala in 1952, was one of her revelations. (The broadcast is finally available in a legal recorded edition, Angel/EMI 64944.) Tales of the great nineteenth-century singers 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 record. Callas needs only one syllable. When Macbeth returns trembling from the room where he has murdered sleep, the Lady takes charge of his faltering courage: he hears someone approaching, 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, and, as voiced by Callas, it contains the tactical decision to leave quickly rather than be discovered; a sense of contempt for her husband's vacillation; and a tinge of flushed anxiety on her 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. There is little to describe. When the artist's vision is profound, things beyond analysis emerge. It is chilling. All evening long, right through to the unearthly sleepwalking scene, Callas seems possessed by the character. What could she not imagine, and what not voice? In Bellini's "Norma" she embraced a musical challenge as daunting as Chopin's Ballades and a dramatic part that spans political authority, religious charisma, sororal generosity, murderous depression, and eventual transcendence and self-sacrifice. As Callas sang the role in Milan, it stood revealed as one of the greatest tragic creations in any art form and an operatic portrait as complete and perfect as Verdi's Otello, Wagner's Wotan, Moussorgsky's Boris, or Mozart's Countess.

During the Scala years, Callas also effected the physical transformation that had all Milan gaping: between December, 1952, and April, 1954, she shed sixty-two pounds, and showed off her new twenty-two-inch waistline in two revivals that were her most delirious successes with the Milanese public. In magnificently costumed productions, rehearsed by Luchino Visconti in

painstaking detail, the grand tragedienne of Medea and Norma turned to 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 La 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 a quarter century. The climax of Callas's Scala seasons came with Donizetti's "Anna Bolena," in 1957, and Bellini's "Il Pirata," in 1958. These were true exhumations—works that had disappeared a century before and thus carried no tradition, no beloved hit arias, no foreknowledge whatever in the public or the press. They were productions that staked everything on the inherent qualities of the *primo ottocento* school and on Callas as its advocate, and they succeeded beyond all possible expectation. Both "Bolena" and "Pirata" contain passionate scenes of confrontation, in which Callas showed that the glories of "Norma" and "Lucia" were not isolated but emblematic of a great body of work. And in the poignant lyrical solos she concentrated her melodic gift at its purest. In the quickening and hesitating, the weighting and lightening of the voice, the slurring together or separation of the notes, she proposed—or reclaimed—a sphere for the exercise of genius, a source of musical richness to be compared with Schubert's shifting harmonies or Debussy's orchestral colors.

Since the revival in 1957, "Anna Bolena" has been done by Elena Souliotis, Leyla Gencer, Renata Scotto, Montserrat Caballé, Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, Katia Ricciarelli, and Edita Gruberova, among others. These singers have also sung other roles that Callas revived, and dozens more *primo ottocento* works have followed. No other segment of the "lost" operatic repertory has achieved anything like this circulation—not the verismo school, not Gluck, Handel, or Monteverdi, not the French Baroque, not the Second Empire lyricists. And all these singers have responded 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 elegance at the end of Act I in "La Traviata," because we have heard several of the above-mentioned singers

do so. But this renewal of respect for a certain standard has come in the wake of Callas; almost all the Violettas who were her predecessors or close contemporaries left records to prove that they could *not* meet such a requirement.

Today, Romantic opera is the hottest topic in musicology; Rossini, Verdi, and Donizetti are being treated to the elaborate scholarly editions once accorded only the German masters; Bellini is taught, and considered seriously and lovingly, by the passers-on of the canonical repertory. Such things would have seemed fanciful, bizarre, in the nineteen-fifties. A *Journal of Donizetti Studies*? Dissertations on "I Puritani"? When Callas was reviving the operas of Donizetti and Bellini, you couldn't even find a biography of either composer in English, or a non-condescending one of Rossini in any language. Now you can walk into Patelson's, in New York, and buy paperback editions of some seventy operas by these three composers.

No leading figure brings about change single-handedly, of course; but it is not clear that these things would have happened without Callas. The ebbing of Europe's compositional tradition dictated a revivalist impulse, but what was being revived elsewhere was lute song, Renaissance motet, the concertos of Vivaldi and Telemann, the 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 operas of Monteverdi or Alessandro Scarlatti.

The reason Callas went in other directions is that she was not a scholar or a revivalist but a late, improbable link to tradition. "Tradition" has a bad name among Old Guard thinkers in opera: they are reflexively averse to it as the historic opponent of "reform." But Callas's ability to reintroduce the music of the *primo ottocento* had much of its basis in her exposure to a few musicians who had absorbed it on its way out. By a lucky accident of fate, the teen-age Callas found herself in Athens in the hands of Elvira de Hidalgo, one of those light sopranos who had been holding the bel-canto techniques in escrow. De Hidalgo made her Naples début in 1908 and sang almost all the *primo ottocento* operas that were then in circulation. She was a strong shaper of students and a

taskmaster of technique. (She also trained the *second* coloratura soprano of the postwar period, Leyla Gencer, who became a cult favorite in her own right.) Then, in Italy, Callas's first conductor was Tullio Serafin, who was nearly seventy. He secured many of her earliest engagements, persuaded her to put her training to work in those neglected operas, and eventually conducted fourteen of her recordings. As a young musician, Serafin had come along in time to hear operas like "Lucrezia Borgia," "Semiramide," and "William Tell" in the eighteen-nineties, just before they faded from the stage, and he carried within him a sense of what the serious century-old operas might be. A Callas born even ten years later would have been much less likely to find such teachers.

What's extraordinary is that the pupil was an American, who grew up in Washington Heights—who was not born to this tradition but learned it by immersion and application. Callas offers us the best proof yet that opera can rekindle itself in the talent of extraordinary individuals, even as the culture and artists that created it recede into the past. The best part of her influence still helps to carry it into the future. The worst part sometimes threatens to wreck it.

Four tumultuous episodes preceded Callas's abrupt reduction of activity in 1959. The first occurred in the summer of 1957, when the Scala company took its celebrated "Sonnambula" production to that year's Edinburgh Festival. Callas sang four performances, and received great acclaim but also comments to the effect that her voice was under noticeable strain. An extra performance was added—without her consent, she maintained—and she refused to appear in it. It was announced that Callas was ill, but she 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 its prima donna were furious with each other. In the meantime, pleading exhaustion, Callas had begged out of her contracted début 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 that she was able to sing, and to charge her 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 Act I of the first performance she declared herself indisposed and withdrew. The theatre had no understudy on hand, and the gala audience, including the President of the Republic, had to be sent home amid cries of outrage. Her reëmergence in Italy was in April of 1958, 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 theatre severed relations. Then, in November, just before going onstage as Medea with the fledgling Dallas Civic Opera, she was dramatically dismissed from the Metropolitan 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 and London. In the space of some fifteen months, she had gained a reputation for vituperation and unreliability, and had broken with almost all her main houses. This was new behavior; she was already well known within the theatre for temperament, but it had been displayed mostly in the form of holding others to her own strict standards of professionalism. 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 European appearance after the Bing scandal was a gala concert for her Paris début, on December 19th. Onassis was in the audience. She sang arias from "Norma," "Il Trovatore," and "The Barber of Seville," plus Act II of "Tosca," staged in full, with Tito Gobbi as the police chief, Scarpia. This is the first Callas performance we can see today on video ("Maria Callas: Débuts à Paris," Angel/EMI 91258). It's maddening that we have this—an ill-rehearsed hodgepodge with a very shaky conductor, Georges Sébastian—and not a single real opera performance from Callas's home theatre. But even under such conditions we can see enough to imagine what she must have been like on the Scala stage. The restrained strength of gait and bearing, the deep expressiveness on the mobile, outsized features live up to every description. Callas visibly creates that same uncanny sense of intimacy, of private emotion

overheard, that one has always found in her voice alone. She casts down her eyes, stands still, cradles her slender torso in both arms, and out of this quiet the bold strokes of the Bellini and the Verdi emerge with terrific force. "Una voce poco fà" (Rosina's teasing aria from "The Barber of Seville") is celestial, the florid tracery punctuated and articulated by diamond consonants. It is amazing how far she can go in the direction of coquetry without seeming coy. The audience was in transports.

The problem that eventually cannot be ignored, though, is the state of Callas's voice. The high phrases near the end of the "Trovatore" aria are just painful: harsh, overloud, and out of tune. If most of "Una voce" 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 the indulgence of the listener is steeply tested. These are the most obvious moments, but many others here—and on recordings from the preceding seasons—give us the real background to Callas's new professional problems: something is terribly wrong with her voice.

There has arisen what can only be called a conspiracy of minimization—eventually, 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. Callas's became the voice whose beauty only the wise could (still) hear. And the written record attests to the success of the minimizers: they have made it possible to associate the trailing off and eventual breakdown of Callas's career with the affair that blossomed the summer after the Paris gala.

The liaison began during a cruise on Onassis's yacht in the summer of 1959, which was notable for the presence of Winston Churchill, and which is described in excruciating detail from the cuckolded husband's point of view in Meneghini's 1981 memoir. By September, Callas and Meneghini were in separation proceedings. Her romance with Onassis was instant gossip-column fodder; her life became a round of parties, cruises, and wretched ups and downs with her charismatic but peremptory and ignorant lover; her stage

career very nearly ceased.

Arianna Stassinopoulos asserts, in her biography of Callas as the victim of manipulative men, that "1960 began with the first major crisis of her voice" and attributes this to "the effect of her emotional state" on her singing. John Ardoin, in the 1974 coffee-table volume that remains the best Callas book, says that "from 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 further and tailors it to the eventual myth:

> When Maria was living the life of a vestal virgin, so to speak, it was home-theatre-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 realized 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 offered 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 had probably never listened to her except in the heat of performance. Zeffirelli asked, "Who cares if she is no longer thirty and can't hit an E-flat?" and he publicly offered to prove that Callas could still sing by staging "Carmen" for her.

This was fantasy, but the more limited claim that her decline dates from the Onassis episode is not correct, either. Nor is the hypothesis, often 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 uncomfortable in 1956 on the EMI recording of that opera, and none too easy in 1953 at La Scala, and not really right even in 1950 in Mexico City. When you come right down to it, the high B in that magnificent entry in "Nabucco" in 1949 is under strain

—the vibrato a little too wide and too slow. Then try the same note at the end of "Ebben, ne andrò lontana" on an anthology recorded in 1954: the climax is already a kind of shout, held in place by sheer will. By 1956, almost all her loud B's and C's are quite bad. And all the while the "harsh" aspects of the voice have been growing. So have Callas's tact and resourcefulness at artfully disguising them, but there are limits.

Callas's problems were inherent in her vocal method. This is her tragic flaw, one much more profound than a thirst for glamour, or bad judgment in men: in the core of her artistic self—in the intensity of her will to make the music she loved sound the way she imagined it—lay the defect that had to ruin her. It was a voice divided against itself—unimpeachable 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. And this vocal paradox had to be related to her personality: a voice manifests its human host in complex fashion. Callas was driven, insatiable, omnivorous, grand, possessed. She wanted the roles in which she could dominate, astonish, bewitch; her voice would do almost anything, and what few things it would not do she forced it to approximate.

The biggest flaw from the beginning was her inability to keep her voice free and unconstricted as it rose in pitch, and her willingness to compensate by main force. Just why she had this difficulty, and whether it could have been remedied at the outset, is unknowable today, but what is certain is that it couldn't have worn well over time. Callas also had the bad habit, widespread in Italy in her day, of carrying the chest voice too high, like a Broadway belter. That, too, involves strain; and her slimming could well have accelerated the process by sapping her strength. But the strain, the roughening, was already there.

At least three writers on Callas have observed some of this clearly: her own record producer, Walter Legge, in a much resented tribute/critique published in *Opera News* shortly after the singer's death; J. B. Steane, the chief singing critic of *Gramophone;* and Michael Scott, in a little-read 1991 study, whose

title pointedly includes her husband's name, as the singer herself did while the management of her career was their joint project—"Maria Meneghini Callas." 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 public mind as unresolvable. This matters, because getting the chronology wrong helps us to get the biography wrong, and posterity learns the wrong lessons. Singers, like dancers and athletes, expect physical deterioration to end their careers, but what the singers expect is 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 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? She had to—and better than anyone else. As early as 1958, she began to say in interviews that she would soon retire, vaguely suggesting that she had accomplished all she had set out to do. The roles that require sustained, highish singing in the most exposed way she either dropped (Turandot, Aida, Gioconda, and both of Verdi's Leonoras) or sang with equivocal success (a brief shot at Amelia in "Un Ballo in Maschera") or got through on temperament (Tosca). Even her beloved Norma became too perilous for frequent exposure. Instead, her repertory moved in the direction of fragility—to operas like "Sonnambula" and "Lucia," where she could rely on nuance and lightness, and save the fullest notes for isolated climaxes. And these roles, too, she lightened year by year. 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. Callas's response is moving, almost heroic, in that even as subtlety becomes more difficult for her she discovers ever greater resources for it. This is why the haunting detail work of "Bolena" and "Pirata," along with certain late broadcasts of "Traviata," "Lucia," and "Sonnambula," is easy to hear as the artistic peak of her work, even though the vocal difficulties have already encroached on the security of "Macbeth" and "Nabucco."

Callas was racing the clock. Imagine being the dominant figure in your profession, and knowing secretly that your professional wherewithal is slipping away from you month by month. Can anyone wonder that she began to lose confidence, to cancel performances and withdraw from projects, to let her volatile nature lapse into irresponsibility? Can anyone be surprised that when the alternative 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—Callas fled to it in miserable gratitude and relief?

When we watch Callas on film, it's important to remember that all the footage we have comes from the years of this flight. There is a moment in a 1959 Hamburg concert when we can almost see it happening: Her second selection is her opening scene in "Macbeth." It begins superbly, but when the line rises to a high C that had rung out steely-sure at La Scala, 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 moments before Lady Macbeth is back in focus. Yet there is pure treasure in some numbers. By the time Callas gets to the many-layered soliloquy of Elisabetta, in "Don Carlo," she is gloriously lost, immersed in the spirit of the drama. In the final scene from "Il Pirata," 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. This is not the busy, quasi-naturalistic acting that has been encouraged, too often in Callas's name, in recent decades; it looks like an instinctive re-creation of the kind of acting that was celebrated in the great operatic artists of the last century, an acting of dignity, spareness, emotional truth channelled through stylized conventions. She is doing what she said Serafin advised her to do: acting "according to the music—to a pause, to a chord, to a crescendo." Flaws and all, these two arias are fair mementos of the greatness that had so recently been in full flower. By the time Callas came back to Hamburg, in 1962, the high notes were ghastly beyond belief, and her persona, save for a few lucky

stretches, is one of gritty determination against the odds.

Callas's negative influence in this regard has been as profound as her positive: her example has led from the acceptance of strained sounds "for the sake of drama"—already a questionable formulation—to a sense, among some listeners, and even among some singers, that the strained or ugly sounds are in themselves dramatic. 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 that representational art cannot exist, that the painter is being false to the chaos of real life if he controls his brush. The fact is that you 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 an operagoer. In opera one sings "I hate you" in beautiful tones—though not necessarily beautiful to a rock fan. But how many younger singers realize that, before Callas, there was no known example of a major artist developing a "wobble" on the high notes? Many seem to 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 understand it when people find fault with Callas is that they've heard so much bad sound since.

Occasionally, Callas could still show why so many were willing to hold standards in abeyance for her. In a 1962 televised concert at Covent Garden, she tries out Carmen's Habanera, and it is superb: the diction in French is as startlingly immediate as it has always been in Italian, and the interpretation is bold and extroverted, but saved from vulgarity 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 used to do it on the pinnacles of virtuosity. But she *looks* radiant. Surely, she must have imagined in those months, she could build a new life this way: occasional gala appearances with carefully chosen music to keep her name alive; otherwise, life with Onassis, rest, surcease from the agony and disappointment that a full

operatic season had so rapidly 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. Even with the best will and the 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, so why doesn't she just quit? An anguished Callas made one more try.

In 1964-65, following a crisis in her relationship with Onassis (he had invited Jacqueline Kennedy on a cruise, and began spending time with her), Callas briefly attempted a comeback, singing thirty performances of "Tosca" and "Norma" to audiences in Paris, London, and New York, who were almost hysterically anxious for her reappearance. In a London telecast from 1964, again of Act II of "Tosca," in Zeffirelli's well-rehearsed production, Callas's voice is in obviously desperate condition, but the full orchestration helps: very little is exposed. The acting is beautiful and cinematically precise. The high point comes with the conventionally lyrical aria "Vissi d'arte": even in her reduced state, Callas can pour feeling into a melody, can bind the notes, including ugly ones, into a beautiful line. When, at the climax, she impulsively steps forward, her hands extended, her beautiful face full of feeling, something at the core of her way of making music drama is still alive.

But she could not continue like this. She returned to London, where it was announced that she would sing four more "Tosca"s, but she managed only one, a royal gala before the Queen. Press coverage was extraordinarily hostile, with gossip columnists delighted 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 (many of these late performances were taped, so we can second-guess them) but what

their desire to defend a great artist persuaded them to hear. After that isolated "Tosca" began a long silence.

From time to time, Callas appeared on television for sad celebrity interviews, all painted glamour, cultivated laughter, and affected accent. (Speaking to the BBC, she actually stops herself in the middle of pronouncing "conservatory" and says "*conservatoire*"; a little later, New York peeks through as she tells of getting a contract with the Athens Opera on the condition "that I would not sing anywheres else.") Her relationship with Onassis continued, but fitfully. In 1966, she told friends that she aborted a pregnancy, and there was another explosive quarrel in the summer of 1968. That fall, he married Jacqueline Kennedy. Callas made sporadic plans to resume her career. Various projects were announced, but Callas, clearly terrified and ambivalent, ultimately quashed each of them. She made one non-singing film, "Medea," with Pier Paolo Pasolini; her plasticity of motion and facial expression makes it lovely to watch, but it has little to do with her genius of acting "according . . . to a chord, to a crescendo." She dabbled in stage directing (in Turin, without success) and in teaching, in some Juilliard master classes that are treated in Terrence McNally's new play, "Master Class." By far the majority of her comments to the students came from the discipline of her early training: she was simply an old pro helping young pros. This was probably the nearest she came to her true self in those years—but all she really wanted was to sing again.

The unpleasant secret is that damaged voices don't mend. There is no example of an important operatic singer encountering serious vocal problems and returning to form. The best that can be hoped for is that the decline can be arrested at a point where the singer, through a combination of canny management and a discreet lowering of aim, can go on working productively. 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. But not one of them was able to bring back the lost freshness or finesse, and Callas would not have been able to do so, either. Everyone around

her was full of advice, mostly having to do with abandoning her high-soprano repertory. Zeffirelli said she should try Monteverdi and "Carmen"; Bing offered a Poulenc monodrama at the Met; Gerald Moore lamented the art-song repertory she never explored; Neville Cardus, of the *Guardian* (displaying the critic's too typical 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 in 1969 she picked her way laboriously through several Verdi arias at EMI sessions. These were left half finished, but the patched-together tapes (issued in EMI's exhaustive cullings of unpublished Callas material) show what a reduced Callas might have been like. 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 even worse was demonstrated in the early seventies, in some truly gruesome recordings with Giuseppe Di Stefano for Philips (still mercifully unpublished, but stay tuned) and in their worldwide concert tour. This was a failure so decisive that no one really expected another attempt. None was made, though Callas went on practicing and hoping. Tapes have circulated in pirate form, and bits are now officially available on the documentary videos: they prove depressingly and conclusively that no Callas comeback would have been possible. The idea that Callas lost her nerve rather than her voice does a profound disservice to her art—reduces it to an art of mere theatrics.

Even that art abandoned her in the concerts with Di Stefano, which document one moment of artistic desperation after another. "Anything to survive, my dear. At my stage of the game," she told an interviewer. But survival was impossible, and she must have known it. Several of her intimates suspect that Callas committed suicide. A heart attack was announced as the cause of death, but stories of drug overdoses abounded, and the body was cremated with

unusual haste, without an autopsy—on whose orders is still not clear. Her husband, whom she had not seen for eighteen years, said that he found in her prayerbook, written in her handwriting, the lines that Ponchielli's Gioconda sings when she resolves to take her own life. Callas had lived for her art, and it was long dead. Her tragedy 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. ♦

Published in the print edition of the November 13, 1995, issue, with the headline "The Story of a Voice."