



CALLAS  
AT  
JUILLIARD  
THE  
MASTER CLASSES



JOHN ARDOIN

M.)

CALLAS  
AT JUILLIARD  
*The Master Classes*



by JOHN ARDOIN



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## FOREWORD

This is a book about tradition—a way of performing opera that goes beyond the printed page. It has come down to us by word of mouth and practice, often from the composer himself. For the first time, apart from Luigi Ricci's important collection of cadenzas and embellishments, this oral heritage is documented in print as practiced by one of its major exponents, Maria Callas. This book is important not only because of what Callas stood for musically but because we are in danger of losing these traditions. They are still available to singers, but "tradition" has become almost a dirty word.

This has happened, I firmly believe, because of the many atrocities committed in recent years in the name of tradition: making an effect at the expense of a piece of music; over-ornamentation of an aria to a point where it is no longer recognizable; the insistence on setting aside traditional cuts which have been arrived at through performances over the years and which strengthen the drama and the musical structure of a work.

Because of abuses of tradition, some have jumped to the conclusion that all tradition is bad. This, of course, is not the case. What is bad is not studying or understanding the reasons for traditional practices. In many cases, cuts were either made by the composer or sanctioned by him as an opera was being rehearsed for its premiere. The same is true of changes in the vocal lines not found in the printed score. Composers such as Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti tailored their music for specific singers, emphasizing their strengths and avoiding their weaknesses. When different singers took over the same music, alterations were made to accommodate their virtues and their limitations. This means that there was a great flexibility in the approach and performance of the bel canto operas in particular, for which Callas was so renowned.

Beyond this, there is the whole abstract way of feeling and responding to a piece of music which is beyond the power of musical notation. I remember reading of a famous instance when Verdi requested the broadening of a phrase during the rehearsal of one of his operas. Someone asked him, 'But, Maestro, why don't you write a ritard into the phrase?' "Because," Verdi responded,

"I only want a slight change in the tempo. I take it for granted a sensitive musician will understand this. If I write in 'ritard,' some imbecile will go from allegro to andante and ruin the phrase."

Much of the good in operatic tradition was created as well by great conductors, many of whom shaped Callas's thinking. They helped to make music live because they were willing to go beyond the printed page to reach the spirit of a piece. In law, every case is a little different from every other; yet all are tried under the same laws. Thus, a good law is one that has a broad application. So it is in music, where we have, as in the legal world, unwritten laws which have the power of law. Naturally, extremes must be avoided. They were not allowed by such conductors as Tullio Serafin, Victor de Sabata, and Arturo Toscanini. Yet each of these men had an individual approach to music: thus, we had equally historic but different performances of *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Toscanini and Toti dal Monte and by Serafin and Callas.

Throughout this book, you will find Callas speaking of good and bad tradition. You will also find that when she advocates a change in the music it is not for the sake of virtuosity but to bring out the intention of the composer. The constant quest of her studies was to realize fully the union of the word and the note. When I say "word," I also mean the dramatic development of a character from scene to scene through the use of the *sung* word. In this she was totally committed and uncompromising.

Callas was an extremely daring and courageous performer, who often courted disaster in order to achieve vocal and dramatic verity. I recall a series of *Traviatas* we did together at Covent Garden in 1958. Night after night she would sing an almost impossibly piano and disembodied A at the end of "Addio del passato," not for the sake of a beautiful soft tone but because that was the only way to convey Violetta's *stato d'animo* at that moment. Occasionally the note was not perfectly secure, but she could not bring herself to compromise by singing it slightly more forte.

Callas has very often been accused of having three voices. Nonsense! She had three hundred. Every role she portrayed had a special voice, and within that particular timbre she would constantly change colors to convey the message of the composer. You will read in this book what pains she took to stress a word or even a syllable, and what miracles of technique she employed to achieve this end. She carefully built each of her personages on the one principal characteristic of the character's personality, not her own.

Medea was an extremely passionate woman, and to that passion she sacrificed all, even her children. Norma had the same passion, but she was capable of repentance. On these very simple facts Callas created two unforgettable, distinct portrayals of basically the same type of woman. Violetta was a courtesan, but within her soul were firmly embedded the seeds of greatness and nobility. Lucia, a sick girl, is doomed from the very start.

Once Maria had established in her mind the keynote to the character, she

developed it with every possible means: the use of her voice, through which words took on myriad nuances (even her breathing was not a simple intake of air but could be a sigh, a laugh, a groan, or a snicker); the use of makeup, bodily attitudes, the superb handling of a costume or a cape to achieve certain effects, etc. On these bases she created her astounding gallery of portrayals: Lady Macbeth, Amina, Elvira, Leonora, Anna Bolena, Tosca, Iphigénie, Alceste, Elisabetta, Fiorilla, Lucia, and all the others.

I do not doubt that the natural talent of Callas was immense, but she perfected this gift with a great deal of study, discipline, and humility. I realize that humility is not a virtue one usually associates with the Callas personality. On the contrary, Maria, as an artist, was extremely humble. She was always the first to arrive at rehearsals and the last to leave, because of her eagerness to learn. She always sang full voice in order to arrive at the performance completely secure vocally. I recall a rehearsal of *Medea* in Dallas which lasted from seven p.m. to two a.m. After about four hours I suggested she “mark” rather than sing out. She politely told me to mind my own business, conducting, while she would mind hers. She completed the rehearsal in full voice.

Callas had completely freed herself of all the limitations singers usually impose on their acting: they can’t kneel because it is difficult to get up gracefully; they can’t bend because it decreases the capacity of the diaphragm; they won’t take certain positions on stage because they have to watch the conductor or prompter constantly. During these *Medea* rehearsals, Maria asked her stage director, Alexis Minotis, to give her the same directions he had given his wife, Katina Paxinou, the great classical tragedienne. When he countered that the directions had to be different because of the singing involved, she told him, quite emphatically, to disregard that fact and direct her as freely as if it were a play. She felt it was her professional duty not to sacrifice acting to singing, or vice versa.

The greatest mark of Maria’s humility was her subjection to the ultimate authority: the composer himself. She never sacrificed his intentions and indications to suit her gifts but rather put them at his complete service. This took a lifetime of hard work. One has to travel the road fully—there are no shortcuts in art. The old Latin adage “*Festina lente*” (“Be in a hurry slowly”) should be the golden rule of every person who aspires to be an artist.

The musical examples in these pages are of great use to a singer, no doubt. But the important message of these lectures is the uncompromising artistic credo of Maria Callas; it shines through every word she spoke and every note she sang. She will be remembered not only as a great musician and artist but also as a great teacher.

Nicola Rescigno  
New York City, 1987

## INTRODUCTION

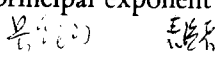
More than any other singer of this century, Maria Callas (1923–1977) exerted a dominant influence on the Italian operatic repertory and style of performance in our time. Even the most vehement detractors of her voice acknowledged this influence and the awesome range of her musicality. Indeed, Callas was not just a singer but a musician whose instrument was the voice.

After over fifteen years of appearances in the major opera houses of the world, Callas went into voluntary retirement in 1965 to work on her voice (beginning anew like a student) and reflect on questions of interpretation. A few years later, eager to share her feelings and findings, she accepted an invitation from Peter Mennin, then president of the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, to work with a select group of young professionals in a series of master classes in “The Lyric Tradition.”

Out of three hundred applicants, twenty-five singers were chosen by audition to profit from Callas’s instruction. For twelve weeks, two sessions a week, between October 1971 and March 1972, the singers took turns performing music from the standard repertory for Callas. Scenes and arias were heard ranging from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* to excerpts from all three periods of Verdi’s writing, through romantic French composers into such twentieth-century operas as Puccini’s *Turandot* and Cilèa’s *L’Arlesiana*. Under her probing direction, scores were often dissected bar by bar in order to establish their dramatic premise and how best a sense of the music’s drama could be achieved within a musical framework.

Callas labored not to produce a series of ‘mini Callases’ but to bring out the individual personalities and gifts of each singer. In doing so, she gave not only her views but possible alternatives as well. She adamantly insisted, however, that her students remain faithful to the style of a given piece, and she carefully explained of what this style consisted. She did this by delving into the text and its emotions, usually correlating the drama to an aria’s musical substance. Callas rarely said “Do this” but rather said “Do this *because . . .*,” giving musical, theatrical, and historical reasons for her approach to the music.

In the extensive press coverage given the classes, one writer described the singer as “presiding like a Delphic oracle” before sold-out audiences of other students, fans, the musical press, and luminaries from the world of the performing arts who included Franco Zeffirelli, Lillian Gish, Ben Gazzara, Tito Gobbi, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and Bidù Sayão. Other artists, such as Patricia Brooks of the New York City Opera, were seen, scores in hand, paying rapt attention to the discussion.

Not only were Callas’s comments extraordinary insights into her training and thinking, but they were a virtual summing up of a grand-line operatic tradition reaching back to Donizetti, Verdi, and beyond, which she had learned and practiced under such conducting giants as Tullio Serafin and Victor de Sabata. It is a tradition of which Callas was not only a principal exponent but one of the last of the breed. 

This book, I hope, will act as a guide through major sections of the standard repertory for both professional singers and students as well as teachers. Here can be studied the means of creating drama through music, as well as the principles of bel canto and the stylistic nature of Mozart, Beethoven, Bellini, the French school, and the verismo epoch from an epic interpreter of this repertory. Several arias performed during the classes have been omitted here, because either Callas did not delve into the interpretative side of the music, the student was not well, or time ran out after a beginning was made and the particular aria was not brought to class again. However, the principles of a certain style can usually be applied to other works by the same composer.

It would not be stretching a point to say that the principles of performance Callas stressed have validity for instrumentalists as well. Any conscientious pianist or string player strives for a singing sound and for the naturalness of phrase that characterizes great singing. It was Chopin, after all, who urged his students to attend performances by Henrietta Sontag and Giuditta Pasta to understand better how his music should be performed, and instrumentalists down through the centuries to Vladimir Horowitz have conducted lifelong affairs with the art of singing.

Producing *Callas at Juilliard: The Master Classes* was far more than a matter of providing a literal transcription of what went on in the classes, for many of Callas’s most penetrating “remarks” were sung rather than spoken. The points made through vocal examples had to be interpreted and translated into words. This meant listening “between the lines” to what was sung and supplying the reasons for many musical points when not given or fleshed out. Furthermore, as many of Callas’s remarks were directed to the specific problems of a specific singer, they had to be adapted to fit the problems that singers in general would face when beginning work on the arias studied and discussed at Juilliard.

In presenting Callas’s ideas, I have tried to keep her words when possible,



but at times foreign-language expressions and musical terms had to be converted into English, thoughts had to be paraphrased, clarified, and above all organized into a concise flow. This was especially true where the same aria was performed by different students in different classes. Also, in order to point up the text and to avoid confusion as to specific phrases being discussed, a large number of musical examples have been included. These are usually presented *not* as they appear in a score but as they should be interpreted. Therefore, an example should be compared with the original to understand fully the performance practices involved. Here, too, will be found in print for the first time many of Callas's own cadenzas for bel canto operas. A keen reader will also find several instances where Callas changed her interpretative ideas between the time she recorded an aria and when she taught the same aria at Juilliard.

I have created a prologue for the book from general remarks made during the classes and from interviews given myself and others. In this prologue Callas deals with a wide range of subjects, from her early training with Elvira de Hidalgo to her own feelings concerning her voice and career. I felt the text here and throughout would be less cumbersome and more to the point if structured around Callas's words rather than set in mine.

Many helped and advised during the writing of this book, but I am particularly indebted to Nicola Rescigno. A longtime collaborator and friend of Callas's, he recorded extensively with her and conducted her American debut in 1954 as Norma in Chicago. He not only contributed a thoughtful foreword to this book but generously read the entire manuscript, checked the musical examples, and uncovered slips that might otherwise have gone uncorrected. This was of inestimable value, not only as Rescigno is a leading practitioner of the same tradition from which Callas sprang but because he is as highly regarded as a vocal authority as he is as a conductor. I am also exceedingly grateful to Callas's sister, Yacinthy Stathopoulou-Calogeropoulou, for her generosity in giving permission to use tape recordings of the classes as a basis for this book, and to Morgan Lowry, for his superb copying of the music examples.

*Callas at Juilliard: The Master Classes* is Callas on Callas, and Callas on music and on creating drama out of music. It complements rather than competes with my previous two books about this fascinating artist by unfolding in detail how she reacted to a score and her mental processes involved in bringing a piece of music to life. Once Callas said to me, "When it comes to music, we are all students, all our lives." Only the most serious and conscientious student can also be a teacher. Maria Callas was such a student.

John Ardoin  
Dallas, 1987

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CALLAS  
AT JUILLIARD





## PROLOGUE

西州府府の音楽家

"I started my vocal training early, as did my teacher Elvira de Hidalgo. In general, I think women tend to start early. Remember, too, I am Greek and de Hidalgo is Spanish. This means we are Mediterraneans; girls of this region grow up and mature earlier. A singer's career is essentially built on youth; wisdom comes later. Unfortunately, we cannot go on as long as conductors, for example. The earlier we receive our training, the better, so that we have the basis to acquire wisdom sooner.

"De Hidalgo had the real bel canto schooling; perhaps hers was the last of this great training. As a young girl, only thirteen, I was thrown into her arms to learn the secrets, the manner of bel canto. This training is not just 'beautiful singing'; that is a literal translation. Rather, bel canto is a method of singing, a sort of straitjacket you must put on. You learn how to approach a note, how to attack it, how to form a legato, how to create a mood, how to breathe so that there is a feeling of only a beginning and ending. In between, it must seem as if you have taken only one big breath, though in actuality there will be many phrases with many little breaths. 新

"Above all, bel canto is expression. A beautiful sound alone is not enough. For example, to make pasta you must have flour; that is the basic thing. Afterwards, you add other ingredients, plus knowhow, and shape the whole into something delicious. With a singer, we go to the conservatory for our basics. The training one receives there is crucial. If you start right, you are right for life. But if you start wrong, it is hard later to correct bad habits.

"After the conservatory, you make music with what you have learned. So, I repeat, it is not enough to have only a beautiful voice. You must take that voice and break it up into a thousand pieces so that it can be made to serve the needs of music, of expression. A composer has written the notes for you, but a singer must read music into them. Actually, we go by very little. Aren't there certain books that must be read between the lines in order to have their full meaning? Singers must do the same with their scores; we must add what the composer would have wanted, a thousand colors and expressions.

"Imagine how boring Jascha Heifetz would have been if he were only a wonderful technician. He is a great violinist because he goes beyond the notes. For a singer, this is even more important, because we have words as well as notes. We must do everything an instrumentalist does, plus more. It is very serious and difficult work, and it is not done out of our bravura or by willpower alone, but out of love, a devotion to what you adore. That is the strongest reason for anything.

"I must say that for me it was not really hard work. I suppose I was always a solitary girl; music was the main thing I loved. Whatever concerned music fascinated me. In Athens, I used to listen to all of de Hidalgo's pupils singing all sorts of repertory: light operas, heavy operas, arias for mezzo-sopranos, tenors. I was at the conservatory at ten in the morning and left with the last students. Even de Hidalgo was amazed at this. She frequently asked me, 'Why do you stay here?' My answer was that there was something to learn from even the least talented pupil, just as a great ballet dancer might learn from a cabaret artist.

"This way of thinking and behaving was set early in my life, not by me but by my family—my mother mainly, who was in command of the family. She had decided that I should become a singer, an artist. Parents say, 'I sacrificed myself for you; now you must do what I was supposed to do in life.' Anyway, this is the way it was with my mother. She also taught me as a child not to indulge in emotions unless it was absolutely necessary, though by nature I think I tended to be that way. I remember my father would take me walking, and if we passed an ice cream parlor, I would stop and pull his jacket, not saying a word. Then, I'd look at him, not at the ice cream parlor. He caught on after a while, but we continued to play our comedy. He would say, 'Just what is it you want, Maria?' I wouldn't answer; I just looked at him. That was my way then, as it was later in the theater.

"My mother and I went to Athens when I was thirteen. The plan at first was that I should only study and not sing professionally. This did not last long, for after six months with de Hidalgo, I was engaged by the National Theater. They needed a dramatic soprano and took me for one year on the proviso that I would not sing anywhere else. De Hidalgo saw to that in the contract. The money I earned at the opera enabled me to study full-time and not have to work.

"I had already sung *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Suor Angelica* at the conservatory; *Tosca* came about a year and a half after I joined the opera. These are heavy roles for a young girl, but de Hidalgo taught me that no matter how heavy the part, a voice must be kept light, never overweighted, and limber like an athlete's body. I also enjoyed working for this lightness, because it had always amused me to conquer a difficulty. I like challenge. How nice it is to master a problem and present it to the public with a maximum of ease.



"This lightness I sought was not only a part of the bel canto training de Hidalgo gave me: it was a part of her philosophy that a voice must be put into a zone where it will not be too large in sound, but nonetheless penetrating. This approach also made it easier to master all the bel canto embellishments—a vast language on its own. A singer conquers these difficulties just as an instrumentalist must, beginning first with slow scales and arpeggios, then gradually building up speed and flexibility. These are things which cannot be learned once you are on the stage; it is too late then. These so-called 'tricks' are not tricks at all but exercises like those an athlete does to build strength, endurance, and muscles. It is a lifetime's work. Not only does it never stop, but the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know. There are always new problems, new difficulties; more passion and love are needed for what you are doing.

"My performances in Greece were a sort of early, preparatory period, the completion, so to speak, of my school days. There I learned how far I could go and what my possibilities were. It is after your school days that you become a musician, that you put your instrument to the service of music. Remember, the voice is the first instrument of the orchestra. 'Prima donna' means just that—'first woman,' the main instrument of the performance. This I learned from Tullio Serafin. One of the luckiest things that ever happened to me, perhaps the luckiest, was to have him conduct my Italian debut—Verona, 1947, the beginning of my real career.

"What you got from that man! He taught me that there must be an expression to everything you do, a justification. I learned that every embellishment must be put to the service of music, and that if you really care for the composer and not just for your own personal success, you will always find the meaning of a trill or a scale that will justify a feeling of happiness, anxiety, sadness. Maestro Serafin taught me, in short, the depth of music. I drank all I could from him. He was the first of this kind of maestro I had, and I'm afraid the last. He showed me music is so enormous that unless you know what you are doing and why, it can envelop you in a state of perpetual anxiety and torture.

"He had a reason for everything. Serafin said, and this impressed me most, 'When one wants to find a gesture or how to move on stage, all you have to do is search for it in the score; the composer has already put it into his music.' How right he was, for if you take the trouble to listen with your whole soul and your ears—the mind must also work, but not too much—you will find everything you need. He also taught me that opera must be a single reflex of singing and acting, that a performance is simply many reflexes put together. But you only achieve this if you have done your homework well. When you reach the stage, there must be no surprises.

"Music was all the acting training I ever had. It is true I had coaching from