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*Лян Цайюн*

*Школа Архитектуры и Искусства  
Центрального Южного Университета,  
факультет искусств  
Хунань, Китай*

## МАРИЯ КАЛЛАС: ТЕХНОЛОГИЯ ВОПЛОЩЕНИЯ ЖЕНСКИХ ОПЕРНЫХ ОБРАЗОВ НА МИРОВОЙ СЦЕНЕ

*Caiyun Liang*

*School of Architecture and Art  
Central South University, Art Department  
Hunan China*

## MARIA CALLAS: TECHNOLOGY FOR THE FEMALE OPERA IMAGES EMBODIMENT ON THE WORLD STAGE

**Аннотация.** Выдающаяся оперная певица 20 века Мария Каллас создала в плоскости классического музыкально-сценического искусства новую эстетику, ставшую для современников и последующих поколений эталонной. Ее феномен, суть которого состоит в качественно новом подходе солиста к исполнению вокальной партии, заслуживает пристального внимания. В данной статье, посредством анализа аудио-, видеоматериалов, запечатлевших спектакли с участием Марии Каллас, ее интервью и воспоминаний современников о ней, рецензий и пр., рассматривается технология воплощения женских оперных образов.

**Abstract.** Maria Callas, the outstanding 20th century opera singer, created a new aesthetics in the plane of classical musical and stage art, which has become a standard for contemporaries and subsequent generations. Her phenomenon, the essence of which is a qualitatively new approach of soloist to vocal part performance, deserves close attention. In this article, through the analysis of audio and video materials that captured performances where Maria Callas took part, her interviews and the memoirs of contemporaries about her, reviews, etc., the technology of female opera images embodiment is considered.

*Ключевые слова:* Мария Каллас, опера, оперный театр, оперная драма, оперный артист, актерское мастерство в опере, создание оперного образа.

*Key words:* Maria Callas, opera, opera house, opera drama, opera artist, acting in opera, opera image creation.

In recent years, the cultural life of the East has experienced a rapid growth of interest in classical music such as European opera. The comprehension of Italian bel canto, which is considered a pearl in the shell of operatic art, is an integral component of world cultural integration in the mainstream of this process.

Maria Callas, one of the greatest 20th century opera singers, was the brightest representative of bel canto. During her short singing career, she made a kind of revolution in the art of opera, and her phenomenon deserves close attention. Leaving the features of the unique voice of Maria Callas along with twists and turns of her creative path outside the subject of this article, we will instead focus our attention on the technology with which she embodies female images.

Opera singer Maria Callas had gone through a challenging road winning the most distinguished titles of all possible with her work and talent. Nowadays even those who have never heard her voice live would not dare to question her deserved titles such as “La Divina” (Divine), Diva, Goddess. Reviews on her work are

interspersed with epithets “legendary”, “unique” and “unparalleled”. The article aims to identify main features of the Maria Callas phenomenon exemplified by opera images that are indispensable for her creative biography. That is to be executed by the original analysis of the selected audio and video recordings as well as scientific musicological literature dedicated to the phenomenon of the singer.

The Maria Callas phenomenon lies in the fact that she has managed to create new aesthetics of female opera images and convince the audience, critics and theater intendants not merely of her right to be, but to be worshiped and all that despite the shortcomings of her vocal technique; despite her appearance being hardly the standard expected from an opera singer; and after all despite her impulsive actions driven by Greek temperament and a complex character that have hindered logical development of Maria Callas’ career.

Maria Callas found credibility and persuasiveness of the newly created/newly recreated space reality the most significant elements on the stage. Her fortes as a

performer belong primarily to those competencies inherent to an actress rather than an opera singer in its traditional perception at the time. These days cultural medium would call any artist who possesses to a certain extent similar complex of natural qualities and has acquired more or less resembling competencies a performer. There's no doubt Callas had all the qualities required for a performer to be successful. Amongst such characteristics are distinctive charisma, profound meaning, bold form and distinctiveness of her artistic expressions.

Callas' contemporaries spoke of her as an incredibly hardworking singer, demanding of herself and her coworkers. Callas' colleagues remember her study 10-15 hours a day. We should however highlight that the work was not at all dedicated to analyzing and learning new texts, overcoming technical difficulties of voice parts or refining especially artful passages. Quite on the contrary, Callas considered all of the points above to be basic minimum prerequisites for the real work on the party — or shall we use the term “role” in the Chaliapin's definition.

In the first years of her operatic career acting intuitively independently, being afterwards under the careful guidance of the teacher Elvira de Hidalgo and even later under the supervision of directors Luchino Visconti and Franco Zeffirelli Callas in her effort to embody on stage a living multifaceted image of her heroine tried hard to delve into the psychological background of a character, to feel their nature, to appropriate motivations, the logic behind reactions and behaviors.

As can be seen from the above, there is a phenomenon of reparation for the imperfections of the vocal technique by the expressiveness of an actor's language. By carefully observing the latter and analyzing the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the “actor's vocabulary”, Maria Callas provide means for assuming that she, as an opera artist, especially at the beginning of her career, was more inherent rather in the techniques of the “art of experiencing” than in those of the “art of representation”. Having entered the stage for the first time as a very young woman, without any educational peculiarities, or sufficient life experience, or any acting skills due to her age, but possessing a subtle psychological intuition and natural musicality, Callas intuitively tried to find physical ways of expressing the operatic part that would be adequate to its content.

In 1967, in an interview with Edward Downs, a famous English music critic, M.

Callas recalled: “... when I was 13 years old, I performed on the stage in my first performance not even knowing at all what to do with my arms. At that time, we had an operetta producer – his name was Renato Nardo. And so, he said two things that are retained in my memory for the rest of my life. First, “Never gesticulate, unless the movement of your hands continues what is in your soul and head”. This was said in a rather peculiar way, but how very true he said that your mind and soul should guide your arms. I don't know whether he probably said the same to other

artists, but they didn't take these words for themselves personally. But I'm like a sponge – absorbing everything that others say and always taking something advantageous for me from their words. And the second thing he said: “When you are standing on the stage and your partner sings his part addressing to you, try to perceive his words as if you are hearing them for the first time, as though all this is your very first immediate reaction”. It was not until later that, when the talented singer is lucky enough to get stage directors interested in her, she will begin to comprehend the parts of acting technique that will become a support of great value on the way toward Callas' goal – the embodiment of a living temper on the opera stage. Callas recalled: “Luchino Visconti means a new important stage in my artistic life. I will never forget the third act of *La Traviata* produced by him. I went on the stage like a Christmas tree dressed up as the heroine of Marcel Proust, without any treacly sentiments and trivial pathos. And when Alfred threw money in my face, I did not bend down, did not run away but remained on the stage with my open arms, as if saying to the audience: “Here's a shameless woman standing before you”. It was Visconti who taught me to play on the stage, and I keep deep love and gratitude for him”. [1]

Let us trace the development of Callas' acting vocabulary on individual examples of her roles that have become significant in her creative biography.

The role of Violetta in Verdi's opera *La Traviata* performed by Callas is, in our opinion, a good material for the analysis declared above. On the one hand, according to Callas, the image of this heroine was close to herself, and on the other hand, this embodiment of Violetta's image was called by critics a benchmark, along with its reading by Teresa Stratas in the film of the genius Franco Zeffirelli.

In the scene of Flora's ball, Callas boldly slows down the general tempo in her apart cues (“Ah perchè venni, incauta!..” and “Che fia?.. morir mi sento ...”). We assume that the initiative to expand the meter belongs to the soloist here, since, judging by the recording (1958), conductor Franco Ghione still needs a split second to pick it up and adapt the former pulse of the orchestral triplets to it. Probably, Callas-as-actress felt that time stopped for Violetta and her appeal to heaven could not be subordinated to the general tempo.

Conceptually, such a move may well be justified if we consider it as an anticipation of the upcoming ensemble, the flow of which will be interrupted by

Violetta's replicas floating out of time “Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo core ...” - in a local cut, and as the inevitability of the final aria of *Andante mosso* “Addio, del passato ...” - on a large scale.

We also note that this method of suspended, hovering time is consonant with other significant moments of the opera, namely the beginning of Violetta's first aria “È strano ...”, Violetta's remarks in the final ensemble “Se una pudica vergine ...” and, of course, the final “È strano! ..” of dying Violetta. Thus, despite the obvious risk of disintegration of the current form of the stage, the Callas technique described here,

at the same time, strengthens the form of the entire opera, throwing metric-semantic arches to the first and final acts.

As for the physical drawing of the actress, the white kerchief in the hands of Callas attracts attention. For an actress who strives to simultaneously display both the excitement of her heroine, bordering on panic, and her need to keep within the norms of behaviour befitting the half-light, the kerchief becomes an expressive actor's device.

The way Callas nervously pulls and crumples the kerchief with both hands cannot be hidden from the viewer's eyes. As we can see from other examples, hands were indeed the most important instrument of an actor's expression for Callas.

And if the kerchief is, most likely, a successful find of the director (a variant of the fans and gloves similarly used in other productions), then the next example proves the resourcefulness of Callas herself. So, she does not allow her heroine to fall out of the viewer's attention even for a few seconds of the mise-en-scene unsuccessful from the audience's perception point of view, when she turns out to be sitting with her back to the audience. Here her stage partners become "acting devices" for her. The Violet of Maria Callas, deprived of the opportunity to convey her inner state with the help of facial expressions, has no choice but to use the expressiveness of her body plastic. She alternately turns to Flora, then to the Baron, trying to make at least half a turn to the audience, then grabs their hands, then bows her shoulders in rue, then confidently straightens her back, lowers and lifts her head.

Callas builds the work on her part on the musical drama of the opera. For example, Violetta's first aria, catchy and brilliant, replete with contrasting episodes, by the end of whose performance it is usually decided whether the viewer will accept the soloist, whether the performance will become successful, Callas sings, erecting a "fourth wall" between herself and the audience. She views the aria as a monologue of the heroine alone with herself and does not seek to impress the viewer with her virtuoso mastery of vocal grace. Looking into the very essence of the masterpiece, Callas draws the image of the heroine, thinking aloud, peering into the flames of the fireplace with hidden anxiety and a sense of a new emerging feeling of love. The applause bursting into the aria would be disastrous for her and would mean the failure of the image. For Callas, the sense of the magic of true theatre is much more important than the sense of momentary pride satisfaction. In an interview with Edward Downs, Callas said: "... we tried to stage this opera as truthfully as possible, and in this scene I wanted to create a feeling of how the heroine would behave in real life during such a scene - a person cannot express such deeply intimate experiences openly, and besides, I am not one of those artists - at least I am it seems - who always asks the audience: "Please clap me, because I played or sang this number so well!" But all sorts of open gestures cause applause from the audience - I always try to keep the audience from this. I was taught this way: you can't interrupt the action, the music should sound

continuously, the music should sound a little quieter so that its inner meaning manifests itself ... I remember how Tullio Serafin told me one very important thing: "If you want to find the right step, the right movement on stage, remember that the composer has already thought about it, listen carefully to the music, listen to what the orchestra is playing, and you will find any movements and gestures in the music. The composer has already done everything for you." And if you think about it, it is really so..." [1].

Callas sings the final aria primarily as an actress. Slightly sacrificing the purity of intonation and the evenness of the vocal line, frozen without a single movement in a bent pose, she conquers the whole audience with the embodiment of the tragic image of a devastated, abandoned woman, releasing from her hands the last threads connecting her with earthly life. Thanks to the thinnest, heavenly piano, the free agogy of Callas, the compassion for her heroine is born in a viewer, and the impression is created that not only Violetta's lungs decayed from a terrible disease, but her heart also decayed from love. Callas does not care about the brilliance of her vocal performance, she does not play on the audience, in order to break the applause, she truly lives and dies in her heroine.

In deciding as to the approach to the final duet "Parigi, o cara ..." Callas also proceeds from drama. Her Violetta obediently, by the will of the composer, gives priority to her beloved one, echoes him like an echo. The singer's *Sotto voce* hovers somewhere between life and nothingness, and her descending portamento are not decoration, but natural intonations for the heroine, who is losing her last strength. By doing so, Callas, deeply delving into the text and context of the role, seeks to justify scenic - acting and vocal - every second of her heroine's life.

Unlike the sacrificial Violetta and Norma, the singer Floria Tosca was not a heroine psychologically close to Maria Callas. She considered her stupid, frivolous and unnecessarily jealous: "In the first act, Tosca is just a jealous woman who constantly doubts. The second act is based on the aria "Vissi d'arte", which, I think, should be removed from the opera altogether, since it completely stops the action developing throughout the entire act." Nevertheless, being a talented opera artist, Callas strove to draw one line through sometimes impulsive actions of her temperamental heroine, reflecting their motivation on stage as expressively as possible. Thus, in the bright scene with Scarpia performed by another outstanding opera artist Tito Gobbi (staged by F. Zeffirelli in 1964), Tosca by Maria Callas literally visibly experiences a hundred different emotions. Other "Tosca" productions are not inferior to this version (for example, 1956, 1958). Determination, confusion, fear, resentment, despair, disgust, malevolence, bloodlust are clearly read on her face and are reflected in the plastic.

Even in those moments of stage life, when Tosca has no replicas, and the action is led by her partner, Callas continues to lead the inner monologue of her heroine. Thanks to her relentless involvement in the action, Callas manages to keep the viewer's attention on

her heroine, albeit temporarily silent. Callas plays mise-enscenes to her advantage, uses all possible and appropriate devices in the scene. For example, she abruptly changes the tempo and rhythm of her plastic drawing. Abruptly bursting into Scarpia's office and bumping into his ironic and lustful eye, she, as if feeling the threat emanating from him with her skin, freezes and presses her hands for a long time to the strings of her cloak. Later, trying to calm her trembling, she slowly and carefully sits down at the table, but on her face, hidden from Scarpia, emotions change one after another with lightning speed. Asking about the price, Tosca turns sharply to Scarpia, who is wandering behind her, practically grabbing his hand: this is how the singer demonstrates the courage and determination of her heroine, her unwillingness to listen to the cynical hints of the enemy. Scarpia's condition stuns Tosca: her eyes dart about in search of a solution, trembling fingers either fiddle with the necklace, then press against her cheeks, then convulsively squeeze the armrest, then later crumple the hem of her dress.

In "Vissi d'arte", the cutaway aria of the opera, despite the fact that Callas considers it unnecessary and destructive to the drama of the opera, the singer managed to give the image of her heroine the necessary touching, show her suffering and praying, but not losing her dignity. In her pleas, Tosca does not even look at Scarpia, so they are addressed rather to heaven than to the executioner. Tosca shivers chilly, hugging herself by the shoulders, as if trying to protect herself from the cruelty and lust of the opponent, presses her hands to the chest, weakly lowers them. Further, she confirms our assumption about the addressee of her prayer: in a desperate impulse, she stretches out her hands to the icon. And thus, she forms a thin (but incredibly powerful in meaning) dramatic arch with the first act, where she dared to be jealous of the image of the Mother of God and her beloved one.

How difficult it is for Tosca to decide to kill is shown by Callas with a hands trembling: unable to hold the knife, she pours red wine, staining the white tablecloth with it. Callas also solves the Scarpia murder scene in a non-trivial way: in an effort to reflect the decisiveness, temperament of his heroine, hatred of the enemy, Callas does not release the knife after the first blow, she keeps it lifted over the victim until the last breath, in order to finish off if necessary. Maria Callas' Tosca does not miss the opportunity to express her hatred of Scarpia with pleasure: she bends wildly, like an animal, trying to catch his eye fading away, and convulsively clutching the murder weapon in her hand. Thus, we can make sure that Callas, even within the

framework of one isolated operatic scene, seeks to fully reveal the image of her heroine, prompting the viewer to experience a rich palette of emotions with her.

So, using the example of selected opera images embodied by the outstanding opera singer and actress Maria Callas, we are convinced of the originality of her acting talent and the richness of her stage vocabulary. During her short career, Callas has embodied a huge number of unforgettably bright female operatic images on the opera stage. Deeply and selflessly getting used to each of her heroines through painstaking analytical preparatory work on the material and the adoption of the character's psychology, with the help of expressive facial expressions, thoughtful plastic drawing, original personal reading of the vocal part, Maria Callas created living full-blooded characters.

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