

MARIA CALLAS AND LA TRAVIATA
The Phantom of EMI

by Réal La Rochelle*

In the film Maria Callas: Life and Art, in which EMI executives (among them Peter Andry) took part, it was recalled that in 1968 the company had to drop recording sessions for La traviata in Rome, sessions which would have featured Carlo Maria Giulini as conductor, and Callas and Pavarotti in the cast. Callas once again had canceled the project which was closest to her heart. This would be EMI's last attempt at a project which since 1952 had enticed, frustrated, and haunted the company. Sixteen long years with not a note of Callas' Violetta recorded!

The 1956 EMI Traviata--Without Callas

In 1956 EMI produced a recording of Traviata at La Scala under the direction of Walter Legge. The principal artists were Giuseppe Di Stefano, Tito Gobbi, Tullio Serafin conducting, and Antonietta Stella in the title role. Callas could not be in the cast because she had already recorded the work for Cetra in September 1953, and her Cetra contract prohibited her from rerecording Traviata for another firm until five years later. George Jellinek, Callas' first biographer, wrote in 1960 that EMI had gone ahead with this complete Traviata, despite Callas' necessary absence, in order to fill a major gap in its catalog. (Jellinek names Legge as well as Dario and Dorle Soria, then in charge of Angel Records, among his sources for the book, if not necessarily for this particular statement.) The commercial need must indeed have seemed pressing at the time for EMI to have been unable to wait the two more years until Callas would have been available. Not only was she EMI's star soprano in the Italian repertoire, but a few months earlier she had achieved one of the greatest triumphs of her career in the La Scala production of La traviata, directed by the filmmaker Luchino Visconti and conducted by Giulini. The demand for a recording based on this production, whose impact had echoed around the world, would have been enormous.

Be that as it may, EMI did go ahead with its plans, and without Callas. Naturally this resulted in some unpleasantness, especially between Callas and Serafin. Legge, writing about Callas, attributes this quarrel to the darker side of her personality. He also refrains from explaining why he cast the recording as he did--for Legge was the one person most responsible for the decision. But perhaps Legge did indirectly admit his own bad judgment in a 1957 note to Dario and Dorle Soria, then in charge of EMI's American label, Angel. Writing about an incident that almost led the Diva not to record Il barbiere in London (her poodles were to be kept in British

quarantine), Legge said, "Nothing would be diplomatically more unpleasant and give us all years of misery than to record the opera without Maria." He must have recalled the Traviata affair of the previous summer!

Doubtless the break between Diva and maestro has been greatly exaggerated. It is true that Serafin did not take part in Callas' 1956 recordings--Herbert von Karajan conducted Trovatore and Antonino Votto La bohème and Un ballo in maschera--nor in those of early 1957, Il barbiere di Siviglia in London with Alceo Galliera and La sonnambula, back at La Scala with Votto. But as early as June, 1957, Serafin was on the podium for her RAI broadcast of Lucia di Lammermoor, and shortly thereafter he and Callas were together again at La Scala for the EMI Turandot and Manon Lescaut as well as the Ricordi Medea; their last recorded collaboration was for the stereo remake of Norma in 1960. The "quarrel" obviously did not last "for years," as one often hears.

As for Antonietta Stella, was EMI committing "suicide" in recording Traviata with her? Not at all. Though lacking the international reputation of Tebaldi or Callas, Stella was already (at 28) an important artist in Italy with a growing international reputation; she and Callas were to make their Metropolitan Opera debuts the following autumn within a month of each other--Callas, to be sure, on opening night. Stella's recordings already included Simon Boccanegra for Cetra and EMI's strongly cast Don Carlo, and she was to go on to make seven more complete opera sets for three companies (EMI, Philips, and DG) before her recording career waned in the mid-Sixties. An attractive woman with an attractive soprano of the right size and color for Verdi, she had the misfortune to compete against the exceptional Callas, and for that matter against Tebaldi and Milanov. But from the point of view of the recording industry, and of EMI in particular, the choice of Stella would have seemed a reasonable solution--absent Callas.

The Stella Traviata remained in the Angel catalog for a decade. Naturally, however, it did not have the commercial success of the other, Callas-led La Scala sets. Willie Lerner, proprietor of the New York record store Music Masters, recalls: "The Traviata with Stella was not received very well. It certainly would have sold better had Callas been the Violetta." Heard today it seems no more than a routine recording whose other principals (Serafin, Di Stefano, and Gobbi) do not begin to make us forget the absence of Callas.

The Cetra Traviata--And After

In the 1952 contractual morass involving Cetra and EMI, it would seem that Callas herself made promises to record Traviata with both firms simultaneously. Why, finally, did she decide in favor of Cetra? Lacking any clear evidence on the subject, I

believe that Callas, now having recorded for both companies, realized how much more EMI had to offer her both artistically and commercially; that she was looking for a pretext not to record for Cetra all of the program to which she had contractually agreed; and that she therefore agreed to record the Verdi, potentially a far better seller than I Puritani, Mefistofele or Manon Lescaut would have been.

Looking back, EMI's mistake was of course not to make it absolutely clear, in negotiating their first contract with Callas, that she would record La traviata for them. This was their gamble in the game against Cetra, and they paid the price. But so did Callas. She must surely have realized that by doing Traviata for Cetra in 1953 she was preventing herself from rerecording the work for EMI (or any other competing firm) before 1958. Perhaps she and her advisers had thought they could negotiate with Cetra to buy their way out of that obligation. But within two years her market value had risen so sharply that it would have appeared pointless even to ask Cetra what those rights would cost.

Callas' public reproaches against Serafin and Legge for the 1956 EMI Traviata were therefore no more than a diversionary tactic. "Certainly," says Dorle Soria, "a Callas Traviata at that time [1957] would have had a huge sale! But Callas was not very meticulous about business matters."

According to her Cetra contract Callas was free to rerecord La gioconda in 1957 and La traviata in 1958 for whatever company she chose. From then until 1960 she worked on the stereo remakes of Lucia, Gioconda, and Norma. Why not also Traviata, with Legge and La Scala? The question gains force because EMI's HMV team, in June, 1959, recorded a stereo Traviata in Rome starring Victoria De Los Angeles and conducted by Tullio Serafin.

Perhaps this strange anomaly reflects the rivalry within EMI between Columbia (Legge's label) and HMV, a rivalry made sharper on both sides by Legge's remarkable record of success and by his prickly personality. Whatever the reason, EMI suffered during the Forties and Fifties from a flagrant lack of coordination in the choice of repertoire, and indeed it was at that particular time that EMI created its planning committee, the International Classical Repertoire Conference. Michel Glotz comments that it was out of the question that Callas would record this work with Serafin because of the quarrel over the 1956 recording with Stella, and perhaps there was still bad blood between them about this particular opera. Between 1961 and 1964, after the La Scala Norma, Legge produced no complete recording featuring Callas.

After Legge's Departure--The Last Efforts

In 1964, after Legge's resignation from EMI, the Traviata project was revived by Michel Glotz, and rumors flew about Paris. Callas wanted to sing Violetta on the stage again, it was said.

She was also still interested in making opera films--the EMI stereo Tosca of December, 1964 was believed intended for a Franco Zeffirelli film (which was never made), and that would surely be followed by another sound-track recording for Traviata. One of Callas' biographers, Stelios Galatopoulos, asserts that this recording was anticipated for April, 1965, between Tosca at the Met in late March and Norma at the Paris Opéra in mid-May. Roland Mancini doubts this, considering that those six weeks would have been reserved for preparing and rehearsing the Bellini work. It is more plausible that the recording project would have taken place in the summer as usual, for example in July.

But then, after the exhausting performances of Norma in May and a Tosca at Covent Garden in early June, Callas canceled everything. The recording of Traviata was buried yet again.

M. Onassis believed very strongly (against what Mme. Stassinopoulos says--her book** is full of errors), M. Onassis believed very strongly in Callas' career. He wrote a personal letter to Jack Warner, with the backing of M. von Karajan. He had met him thanks to me at a dinner I had organized, where there were M. and Mme. von Karajan, Mme. Callas, M. Onassis and myself. We wrote together a letter toward making a film of La traviata with Visconti, and Karajan who would conduct. Karajan was completely in agreement, and so was Visconti. Onassis was even ready to pay for the film.

And then, I don't know what happened. It never happened, on two levels. One which I do not know: what happened between Warner and Onassis, because that was the time when the relationship between Callas and Onassis was damaged. The other point I know well. There was a kind of misdeal about Traviata because Callas hesitated a great deal between Karajan and Giulini. M. Giulini had the dates, which she pushed back again and again. At the end he had had enough of it and let it all drop. M. von Karajan was much more patient and friendly with her. He told her, "Listen, I understand very well that you are scared to death of Traviata, but I will always be at your disposal in Berlin. You can come when you like; you can do the first act aria when you feel like it, you only need to ring me up on the telephone; we'll always be at your disposal. And once you have the first act aria in the can, well then! The rest will be no trouble."

She delayed, delayed, delayed. It was certainly in character for her always to put it off until later, and that is how it never happened. This was in 1965, yes, the project of the Traviata recording and film.

--Michel Glotz

In 1966 rumors about films and recordings involving Callas, Karajan, and Glotz were again circulating, and DG again made urgent offers. Even though she had for all practical purposes

abandoned her career, Callas remained the object of fierce competition among the recording firms, and various plans for projects were circulating behind the scenes. It's in this context that EMI organized the 1968 Rome recording sessions for La traviata with Callas, Pavarotti and Giulini.

In contrast with previous projects, Callas did not choose Michel Glotz as producer, and it was Peter Andry who was at the helm. Andry was notified by Callas at the last minute that she could not take part in the recording. According to John Ardoin, she said she had injured her ribs in a fall. The movie Life and Art, however, provides a more personal cause for all this, one which pressed Callas to abandon La traviata: Onassis had taken up with Jackie Kennedy and made a break with Callas. The whole project had to be dropped, and the prodigious costs of its preparation made it one of the biggest commercial fiascoes in the history of modern operatic recording. (This fiasco is evidently one of the subjects of Aria, the vitriolic novel by Brown Meggs, formerly on the staff of Capitol/Angel Records.)

When Callas returned to the recording studio at the Salle Wagram, in February and March, 1969, in compensation for the abortive Traviata, it was to complete an album of arias from rare Verdi operas which she had begun in 1964. On the television program L'Invitée du dimanche in 1969, Callas said that this "half a disc" went well but that she was not yet at her best, despite the opinions of her friends. She had analyzed the recording phrase by phrase and rejected it for publication. But she still dreamed of doing La traviata with Visconti at the Paris Opéra. "That is in God's hand."

The Gap Finally Filled

EMI's repeated failure for more than 15 years to produce a La traviata with Callas in her prime would have seemed even more bitter for operaphiles and record collectors but for a new development in the record business, at first apparently insignificant but rapidly growing in importance. That development was the appearance of so-called "private" published recordings.

In March, 1966, in New York, the esoteric and obscure label FWR brought out a complete, live Traviata with Maria Callas, given on June 20, 1958 at Covent Garden. Although limited to 1000 copies, this unauthorized and half-clandestine set not only affronted EMI, with whom Callas was under exclusive contract, but also served notice that EMI's failure to exploit its opportunities would now be made good by others with no legal rights but with the willingness to assume responsibility for this cultural inheritance.

Later, when the echoes of the last Traviata fiasco were dying away and Callas had sensationally returned to public view with her master classes at the Juilliard School of Music in 1971

and 1972, the hunt for more live performance recordings of her Violetta resumed with a vengeance. In August, 1972, MRF became the first of three American private labels to publish the La Scala performance of May 28, 1955, in RAI's broadcast of the famous Visconti production. And in 1973 Edward J. Smith, the most prolific and important of the "privateers," issued a Mexico City performance of June 3, 1952 on his UORC label.

These three sets, and still more Callas Traviatas published privately throughout the Seventies, were the response of the "pirates" to EMI's mistakes and failures. They found a ready clientele, the more so as Callas' vocal decline and official retirement from the stage had made any new, authorized recording impossible.

Perhaps this piracy across the sea provoked EMI to search for an issuable but unpublished Callas live performance, especially since the prospects for a new studio recording were so poor. David Hamilton is explicit on the subject: EMI certainly was trying to discover whether for one or another live-performance tape it could resolve all the legal and other complications concerning the musicians who took part. This proved impossible, what with the involvement of several musicians' unions, with singers under contract to other companies, and so on. Despite all its good intentions, EMI did not succeed in extricating from this labyrinth of complications a tape suitable for a legal edition.

Actually, EMI did not officially admit that it was pursuing such a project, whether for La traviata or for any other live recording of Callas or anyone else. When, for the Callas issue of L'Avant-Scène Opéra, Pierre Flinois prepared his coverage of these questions, Michèle Lazare, general secretary of EMI-Pathé-Marconi, was quite categorical on the subject. "Callas," she confirmed, though "often asked to approve publication of such recordings, always refused."

I find this statement ambiguous. Was it Callas alone who blocked the issue of her live performances, or was EMI also reluctant to issue recordings of this type? I have written to the direction of EMI, asking for an official answer if possible to the question, which I put in these words: "Was this refusal, to your knowledge, solely on Callas' side, or because of EMI's contractual arrangements?" Michael Allen responded, "I am sure this would have been both a personal decision and because of her contractual agreement with ourselves." I conclude from this that even if EMI and Callas had clearly stated in their contract their reluctance to publish live recordings, nothing would have prevented them from agreeing to make exceptions, for example for a Traviata. David Hamilton believes that such an agreement would have been made for this opera if the legal imbroglions surrounding the existing tapes could have been overcome.

While these investigations were dragging along, yet another live recording emerged from the shadows. In 1974 the American

private label BJR published excerpts from the Mexico City Traviata of July 17, 1951, which later appeared complete on the underground label Historical Recording Enterprises. By the end of 1974, taking account of the old FWR set, republished on Limited Edition Recordings, and the MRF set still in circulation, one could count no fewer than four different complete Callas Traviatas in the underground catalogs!

Callas died in 1977 without ever having seen any of her Traviata performances in the EMI lists. In the same year Cetra, exploiting a quirk in Italian copyright law, brought out its own edition of the La Scala broadcast of 1955 on its Opera Live label and offered it for general sale throughout Europe and America. Jacques Bertrand of Rodolphe Productions, a French firm specializing in live recordings, estimates that Cetra sold 15,000 copies of the set, three times as many as a good average sale for such a product. According to Bertrand, this commercial success could not but have convinced EMI to solve its problems and put a Callas Traviata into its catalog.

Meanwhile BJR had hunted out a fifth live recording of La traviata, this one from the Teatro Nacional de Sao Carlos in Lisbon with Callas and Alfredo Kraus in the leads and Franco Ghione conducting, in the performance of March 27, 1958. EMI knew about this recording too, and was interested in it. As Charles Johnson of BJR tells it:

We were at one time in negotiations with the opera house in Portugal who had the tape of the Callas-Kraus Traviata. We were advised that it had been bought by Kraus' recording company, Carillon Records, and we then negotiated with Kraus, who at one point suggested the performance be "leased" to us and appear simultaneously on both labels--he controlling European distribution and we, the Americas. Later, as you know, EMI entered negotiations and won by a very large offer to Mr. Kraus. This was feasible only because Mr. Kraus held exclusive rights to this tape and therefore EMI had to deal only with an individual--escaping the many complicated legalities inherent in obtaining "house" tapes.

Alfredo Kraus had therefore given his approval to EMI, and so had Vasso Devetzi, at that time Callas' "légataire universelle morale" and also president of the Fondation Maria Callas. For the rest, as David Hamilton remarks, "Portugal in 1958 was still a dictatorship, and there were no troublesome union contracts covering the rights of that performance!"

Thus, in 1980, EMI issued the Lisbon Traviata. The cover picture, a black-and-white photo tinted in pastel shades, ironically showed Callas as Violetta in the famous 1955 La Scala production. Though this was the "official" issue, EMI was not to escape direct competition. The previous year Carillon, as authorized in its agreement with EMI, brought out its own edition. Three Italian firms specializing in live recordings

published the same performance between 1979 and 1981. And Historical Recording Enterprises also beat EMI to market with the Lisbon recording, though it soon withdrew its set so as not to be the target of possible legal action.

So it was nearly 25 years before EMI finally succeeded in bringing into its catalog La traviata with Maria Callas. Ironies abound. One of the earliest projects envisaged by both artist and record company, it ironically proved to be their last. And that long-awaited issue is, uniquely in the Callas/EMI discography, one for whose artistic and technical quality the firm was not responsible, and for which EMI could not even obtain and enforce exclusive publication rights.

That EMI could not manage to make its own recording of this emblematic operatic portrayal, which would surely have been (in Legge's words) an important musical legacy, shows well the conflicts that can arise in the marriage of convenience between art and commerce that is the basis of a "culture business" such as the record industry.

Today there still remain some traces of the phantom Callas La Traviata. For example, Bertolucci's film Luna uses a prelude from the 1956 EMI recording which is remembered mainly because Callas wasn't in it. And Franco Zeffirelli, when he finally made his first operatic film a few years ago, wrote about "his" Traviata:

It remains to say why I chose La traviata for my first film of an opera. Well, then, because this is the opera par excellence, among the most beautiful in absolute terms that there are. Because, in dedicating it to Maria Callas, with the hope of attracting new spectators to musical drama (preaching to the converted does not interest me), I absolutely had to choose the best.

NOTES

*This article is a revision of Chapter 8 in L'Opéra POPularisé: Callas dans l'Industrie Phonographique, Université de Grenoble 3 (1985). Accepted on November 4, 1985, for the Doctorat d'Etat at the Université de Grenoble, and published under the title Callas, La Diva et le Vinyle by Les Editions Triptyque, Montréal, 1988. (Editions Triptyque, C.P. 670, Succ. N., Montréal, Québec, Canada H2X 3N4). This article has been translated from the French by John W. N. Francis.

**Arianna Stassinopoulos, Maria Callas: The Woman Behind the Legend (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981)

DISCOGRAPHY

Here, as of early 1988, is the state of the various Callas recordings of La traviata published over the last thirty years and more. I include the complete recordings and the most significant discs of excerpts. The named soloists are the tenor (Alfredo Germont) and baritone (Giorgio Germont). Dates of publication are given where known.

1. September 1953. RAI/Turin. With Francesco Albanese, Ugo Savarese. Conductor: Gabriele Santini. Studio recording; producer and sound engineer unknown.
 - Cetra LPC 1246, 1954
 - Cetra-Soria 1246, 1954
 - Everest S-425/3 (pseudo-stereo), 1967
 - Cetra MC 90/91
 - Cetra GVC 2345
 - Turnabout THS 65047/8, 1976
 - Fonit-Cetra TRV 01, 1983
 - Cetra CDC 2, 1985
2. July 17, 1951. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. With Cesare Valletti, Giuseppe Taddei. Conductor: Oliviero De Fabritiis.
 - Historical Recording Enterprises HRE 220-2
 - 4 excerpts on BJR-130-3, 1974, and in Cetra Opera Live LO 62 (Maria Callas Live I), 1977
3. June 3, 1952. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. With Giuseppe Di Stefano, Piero Campolonghi. Conductor: Umberto Mugnai.
 - Unique Opera Record Corporation UORC 181, 1973
 - BJR-130-3, 1974
 - Giuseppe Di Stefano GDS 2001 (Maria Callas Edition), 1981
 - Rodolphe Productions RP 12430/1/2, 1985
 - Rodolphe Productions CD-RPC 32431/32, 1987
4. May 28, 1955. Teatro alla Scala, Milan. With Giuseppe Di Stefano, Ettore Bastianini. Conductor: Carlo Maria Giulini.
 - MRF-87, 1972
 - Morgan 5501
 - Cetra Opera Live LO-28/2, 1977
 - Discocorp RR-474
 - Paragon DSV 5200-1
 - excerpts: Rodolphe Productions RP 12708
 - Hunt 2CD Q 501, 1987
5. January 19, 1956. Teatro alla Scala, Milan. With Gianni Raimondi, Ettore Bastianini. Conductor: Carlo Maria Giulini.
 - Historical Recording Enterprises HRE 272-2
6. March 27, 1958. Teatro Nacional de Sao Carlos, Lisbon. With Alfredo Kraus, Mario Sereni. Conductor: Franco Ghione.
 - Foyer FO 1033, 1979
 - Stradivarius SLP 2301/2, 1979

- Carillon CAL 27/28/29, 1979. (Coproduction Carillon/EMI)
- Historical Recording Enterprises HRE 277-2
- Angel 3910, 1980.
- HMV RLS 757, 1980.
- Movimento Musica 02.002, 1981.
- EMI CDS 7 49187 8, 1987
- 7. June 20, 1958. Covent Garden, London. With Cesare Valletti, Mario Zanasi. Conductor: Nicola Rescigno.
 - FWR 652, 1966
 - Limited Edition Recordings LERWC 102, 1974
 - CLS 22808
 - Voce 27, 1980
 - Rodolphe Productions RP 12384/6, 1980
 - MEL CD 26007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Jellinek, George. Callas: Portrait of a Prima Donna. (New York: Ziff-Davis, 1960)

Legge, Walter, with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. On and Off the Record. (New York: Scribners, 1982)

Mancini, Roland. "Spécial Maria Callas," in Opéra International (1978)

Zeffirelli, Franco. "Ma Traviata," in La Traviata de G. Verdi: Un film de Franco Zeffirelli. (Paris, Ramsay, 1983)

These sources were augmented by my own interviews and/or correspondence with Walter Legge, Dorle J. Soria, David Hamilton, Michel Glotz, Charles Johnson, Michael Allen, Brown Meggs, and Willie Lerner.

For the discography I augmented my own research with information from the, "Discography of Private Recordings," in Henry Wisneski, Maria Callas: The Art Behind the Legend (New York, 1975); Rodolfo Celletti, Il teatro d'opera in disco (Milan, 1978); and John Ardoin, The Callas Legacy, rev. ed. (New York, 1982).

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