

Réal La Rochelle. Callas: la diva et le vinyle. Montréal, Éditions Triptyque, 1987. 393 pp., illustrated ISBN 2-89031-069-8 (paperback)

Réal La Rochelle is an ARSC member and a researcher with wide-ranging interests in all aspects of audio-visual media, whether "high culture" or "pop". His book, Callas: la diva et le vinyle, is a revision of his dissertation (of the same title) for the Université de Grenoble; the thesis, incorporating as it does documentation not later authorized for publication in the book, is still worth seeking out.

La Rochelle, while respecting Maria Callas' integrity and uniqueness as an artist, uses her as a "case study" of the classical record industry and of the marketing of "high culture" (if one concedes that, with the passage of time, opera has become such). Hence, despite the focus upon Callas as a recording artist, La Rochelle's study bears little resemblance to John Ardoin's The Callas Legacy (Rev. Ed., C. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1982), which concentrates on the aesthetic aspect and merit of Callas' art as recorded in studio sessions and from live and broadcast sources. Few books about any "classical" vocalist, for that matter, attempt (much less succeed) in the kind of analysis and synthesis that La Rochelle achieves in his study. The nearest comparison would be to Gordon T. Ledbetter's The Great Irish Tenor (Duckworth, London, 1977) which deals with another best-selling recording artist, John McCormack. Maria Callas, for La Rochelle's purposes, is an even better example than McCormack of the "POPularisation" (the author's orthography) of opera and classical vocal music, since she made her career solely in that domain, unlike McCormack, who was a "cross-over" artist recording both "classical" music and the ballads and other popular music of his era.

To readers whose primary or exclusive interest is Callas herself, La Rochelle may seem to put too much emphasis upon the nature of the music industry in which she worked and upon the media that reported, documented, and publicized (even sensationalized) her career. Such a cavil, however, would reveal a misconception of the twofold aim of this investigation. Biographies and appreciations of Callas abound; La Rochelle's book breaks new and altogether different ground. He relates Callas to the music industry in a more integrated manner than did Ledbetter to McCormack, since, in discussing the music industry, La Rochelle digresses less lengthily from Callas' own involvement. Those whose heroine-worship balks at the more mercenary aspects of her career can feed their fantasies elsewhere! La Rochelle, while recognizing Walter Legge's greatness, ruthlessly strips away just such aloof pretensions from a figure who refused to acknowledge the importance of the technical and commercial side of his own activity in the classical record industry, very profitably in partnership with Callas herself on many occasions. La Rochelle documents Callas'

decline with a dry eye, making no attempt to sentimentalize or to explain away the factors underlying the diva's drift into musical inactivity; he also avoids maudlin attempts to portray Callas as a victim of the industry's Babbitry and exploitation. Sympathetically, but firmly, he traces Callas' decline and consequent neglect of the stage and recording studio to her own failings and misplaced priorities, rather than primarily blaming other parties.

One of the most provocative features of La Rochelle's inquiry is his analysis of popular music's impact upon the classical record trade, especially after the mid-1960's, when the sheer scale of the fast-growing pop market posed a major challenge to the classics' share of the market, and privileged status, in the record industry. La Rochelle traces the penetration of pop influence not only on classical music merchandising and image-making, but also on the performance of it. He analyzes the emphasis upon the individuality of the pop star, in matters of appearance, projected personality, and, above all, distinctive "sound", style, and expressivity. La Rochelle then charts the tendency to stress just such traits in classical performers lucky enough to possess them. In striking measure Callas, of course, had a voice among the most distinctive and easily recognizable of her time, which the industry, awakened to its value, leapt to exploit, package, and market. She had the looks (especially after her famous diet) and temperament to create, with that unforgettable voice, an "image" and personal appeal well suited to new marketing techniques at the time they were being implemented. It is ironic that Callas was already in vocal decline and retreating from active artistic life as these strategies were swinging into particularly high gear; the companies (E.M.I. foremost among them) drew upon her existing recordings rather than initiating, except very occasionally, new studio sessions. While remarking upon such developments, La Rochelle also charts the incorporation of classical elements into pop music that resulted in a fertile interaction of styles during those years and since.

Discussing Walter Legge and the husband-wife team of Dario and Dorle Soria (with John Culshaw's approach as a foil), the author traces the rise, then fall from grace (Legge) or retreat into other endeavors (the Sorias and Culshaw) of producers and promoters who capitalized on the marketing of opera and classical music in the first fifteen years of the LP disc by gearing promotion, image, and packaging to elitist tastes. La Rochelle credits the rise of a new breed of producers and A&R personnel to the shift to more populist marketing strategies in the classical field. This resulted largely from the influence of (and pressure from) producers and promoters in the increasingly dominant pop domain, with a consequent downgrading of classical departments in the major companies which control the industry.

In addition to detailing the soprano's work in the recording studio, to which she took like the proverbial duck to water,

La Rochelle discusses Callas' legacy on specialty labels ("pirates") which have issued her live and broadcast performances without authorization or clear legal right, and on labels (mostly Italian "corsairs") taking advantage of national laws which drastically limit the duration of copyright and mechanical rights coverage on recorded performances. The author thoroughly traces the rise and modus operandi of "pirate" record commerce in the U.S.A. Like so much in this book, only more so, this investigation entailed significant primary research. The reader benefits from hearing this saga often told in the words of those involved in, and of those opposing, this trade of dubious legitimacy. My own extensive acquaintance with this aspect of the recording industry, and with those involved in it, only confirms the accuracy of the author's reportage. La Rochelle's tortuous exercises in casuistry (in the technical, not pejorative sense of that word) to justify this recording and publication activity is not likely to convince those implacably opposed to it. Perhaps it is best simply to acknowledge the cultural importance and impact of these live and broadcast recordings and to leave it to history to justify or damn their perpetuation and dissemination. The author rather wryly notes how much these "pirates" and "corsairs" harken back to Callas' first "legitimate" recordings for Cetra, tied as they were in origin to the output of Italy's state radio system (R.A.I.); they presage too the widespread renewal of such recording methods, in whole or in part, by the "majors" in recent years to eliminate or to reduce studio costs.

The book's bibliographical apparatus is exemplary. The discography, while intentionally not exhaustive (Ardoin's work, especially, having made that unnecessary), cites all the initial and most important issues of Callas' studio recordings and is even more thorough in listing the various issues of live and broadcast material on special interest labels (both "pirates" and "corsairs"). The filmography/videography guides one down much less trodden paths, providing what seems to be thorough listing of the moving image documentation made of Callas. The bibliography will be particularly useful to those studying the socio-economic aspects of music, pop or classical. The author evaluates in the text itself, critically and perceptively, much of the literature that he lists in this bibliography, refuting or qualifying the ideological biases that mar much of the literature. La Rochelle enumerates, of course, all of the important literature on Callas herself. A book of this sort, especially one so important and full of original research, should have been published with an index, sorely lacking; perhaps the projected English translation will incorporate one, if and when it appears. The author's style, if less than graceful, is readable enough to make the book accessible to a public with a reasonable command of French as a second language.

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