

Maria Callas, 1923-1977: A Beautiful Voice and Intense Personality

She influenced opera more than any other singer of the twentieth century. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
03 November 2007

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ANNOUNCER:

Welcome to People in America in VOA Special English. I'm Faith Lapidus. Today, Shirley Griffith and Ray Freeman tell about one of the most famous opera singers of the twentieth century, Maria Callas.

(MUSIC: March From "Norma")

VOICE ONE:

Opera is a play that tells a story in music. The people in the opera sing, instead of speak, the play's words. Opera is one of the most complex of all art forms. It combines acting, singing, music, costumes, scenery and, sometimes, dance. Often there are many colorful crowd scenes.

Opera uses the huge power of music to communicate feelings and to express emotions. Music can express emotions very forcefully. So most opera composers base their works on very tragic stories of love and death. An opera often shows anger, cruelty, violence, fear or insanity. Opera has been very popular in Europe since it spread through it during the seventeenth century. It also has become popular in the United States.

VOICE TWO:



Maria Callas

Maria Callas was one of the best-known opera singers in the world. During the nineteen fifties, she became famous internationally for her beautiful voice and intense personality. The recordings of her singing the well-known operas remain very popular today.

Maria Callas was born in New York City in nineteen twenty-three. Her real name was Maria Kalogeropoulous. Her parents were Greek. When she was fourteen, she and her mother returned to Greece. Maria studied singing at the national conservatory in Athens. The well-known opera singer Elvira de Hidalgo chose Maria as her student.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen forty-one, when she was seventeen, Maria Callas was paid to sing in a major opera for the first time. She sang the leading roles in several operas in Athens during the next three years.

In nineteen forty-five, Callas was invited to perform in Italy. This was the real beginning of her profession as an opera singer. She performed major parts in several of the most famous operas. In nineteen forty-nine, she married an Italian industrialist, Giovanni Battista Meneghini. He was twenty years older. He became her adviser and manager.

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen fifty, Maria Callas performed for the first time at the famous La Scala opera house in Milan, Italy. She sang in the famous opera "Aida" by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi. She sang the part of Aida, an Ethiopian slave in ancient Egypt.

(MUSIC: "Ritorna Vincitor" from "Aida"))

VOICE ONE:

During the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, Maria Callas sang in about forty major operas in the most famous opera houses in the world.

In nineteen fifty-six, she appeared for the first time at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. She sang the lead in the opera "Norma" by Italian composer Vincenzo Bellini. She was a great success. Norma, a religious leader in the ancient city of Gaul, became one of her most famous parts.

(MUSIC: "Casta Diva" from "Norma"))

VOICE TWO:

During the years, Maria Callas often had problems with her voice. Critics said some of her performances were not her best. Sometimes she had to cancel performances. Her relations with the officials of major opera companies often were tense. Many harmful stories were written about Callas. The stories suggested that people she worked with thought she was difficult. However, many people who worked most closely with her denied this.

When she was not singing in operas, Callas was making recordings. She made more recordings than any other singer of her time.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen fifty-nine, her marriage to Mister Meneghini ended. Maria Callas became the lover of a rich Greek businessman, Aristotle Onassis. Callas suffered more problems with her voice. So she sang less. In nineteen sixty-five, she sang in the opera "Tosca" by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. She was Floria, an

Italian singer. It was a part she had sung many times. It was the last time she appeared in an opera.

(MUSIC: "Vissi D'arte" from "Tosca"))

VOICE TWO:

Now that she was no longer singing, Callas wanted to marry Aristotle Onassis and have a child. However, in nineteen sixty-eight, Onassis suddenly said that he was leaving her. He had decided to marry Jacqueline Kennedy, the widow of the murdered American president, John Kennedy.

Three years later, Callas decided to teach young opera singers. In the early nineteen seventies, she taught twelve classes at the Juilliard School in New York. Parts of these classes were released as records. Terrence McNally wrote a play about Maria Callas and her opera students called "Master Class."

VOICE ONE:

Maria Callas sang in many cities in Europe, the United States and East Asia in nineteen seventy-three and seventy-four. She performed with opera singer Giuseppe di Stefano. Critics said she was not able to sing as well as she had when she was younger. It is not known if Callas's troubles were caused by a physical problem or because she had not spent enough time training her voice.

Maria Callas died of a heart attack in her home in Paris in nineteen seventy-seven. She was fifty-three.

VOICE TWO:

Many experts say Maria Callas influenced opera more than any other singer of the twentieth century. They say she had the deepest understanding of the traditional Italian opera. Her beautiful voice and intense feeling increased the effect of an opera. One expert said: "Callas sees and hears in the great operas the poetry of music. Others sing notes. She sings meaning. "

People who heard Maria Callas sing say they will not forget the experience. Her voice lives on in the many recordings she made. Some experts say Maria Callas is as popular now as she was when she was performing around the world.

(MUSIC: March From "Norma")

VOICE ONE:

This Special English program was written by Shelley Gollust and produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Ray Freeman. Join us again next week for another People in America program on the Voice of America.