

“Puccini: Tosca”--Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano, Angelo Mercuriali, Tito Gobbi, Melchiorre Luise, Dario Caselli, Victor de Sabata (1953)

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Maria Callas

Opera lovers are notoriously opinionated about every aspect of their favorite art form. To get two aficionados to agree on performances, compositions, casts, productions, or producing organizations is close to impossible. That's why it's amazing that if asked to name the greatest recording of an opera, most devotees would suggest the same performance: EMI's 1953 "Tosca" starring Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano and Tito Gobbi, conducted by Victor de Sabata. As the "New York Times" music critic, Anthony Tommasini, wrote in 2017, "It's hard to think of a recording of any opera that nails a work so stunningly, that seems so definitive."

From the earliest years of recording, opera was well represented, and opera singers like Enrico Caruso and Geraldine Farrar were among the best-selling gramophone artists. But 78 rpm recordings were limited to carrying only three or four minutes of music on each side, and recordings of complete operas were rarities. (Even an abbreviated recording of Richard Wagner's "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" ran to 34 discs.) When long-playing, 33 1/3 rpm recordings were introduced in the late 1940s, the innovation made it more practical to record complete operas and, by the 1950s, record companies competed to expand their catalogues with longer classical works, both orchestral and vocal.

The British international conglomerate EMI was a little late in getting into the long-playing market, releasing their first LPs in 1952. Soon after the war, EMI had hired Walter Legge to develop their classical artists' roster in Europe and produce LP recordings of their performances. Among the first to be contracted by Legge were the conductors Otto Klemperer and Herbert von Karajan, and singers Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (who became Legge's wife), and the extraordinary Greek-American soprano Maria Callas.

Born in New York City and raised there and in Athens, Callas had begun making a name for herself throughout Europe in the late 1940s as a fearlessly versatile singer. (In Venice, she

astonished audiences by singing the lead roles in both “Die Walküre” and “I Puritani” in the same week.) She began making recordings for the small Italian recording company Cetra in 1949, and after Legge heard her perform live, he went backstage and offered her an exclusive contract with EMI. The negotiations dragged on for more than a year, with Legge later writing that, “She expected tribute at every meeting, and my arms still ache at the recollection of the pots of flowering shrubs and trees that Dario and I lugged to her Verona apartment.” The Dario mentioned by Legge was Dario Soria, an Italian-American recording producer who, along with his wife, Dorle, Legge had hired to create an American arm of EMI, which they named Angel Records. The fact that Angel was likely to greatly increase Callas’s record sales made Legge’s offer even more tantalizing to the soprano, but she still held out for better terms (as well as more plants for her terrace).

As if to make up for lost time, EMI made their first four complete recordings with Callas in 1953, soon after her contract was finally signed. “Lucia di Lammermoor,” “I Puritani” and “Cavalleria Rusticana” came first, followed by “Tosca.” The latter was also the first of the series to be recorded at Teatro alla Scala, one of the most revered opera houses in the world. Recordings had been made there before, but the EMI engineers conceived of a way to enhance the brilliance of the recorded sound by removing the theater’s seats and building a floor over the orchestra pit, bringing the soloists and chorus forward, and seating the orchestra in the auditorium.

The placing of the participants was supervised by the opera’s conductor, La Scala’s music director, Victor de Sabata. De Sabata was one of the 20th Century’s legendary figures, known more for his conducting of orchestral works than for opera. (He suffered a heart attack not long after making this “Tosca,” which was to be his only commercial opera recording.) He had conducted Callas in “Macbeth” at La Scala the year before, and perhaps more important, had led La Scala performances of “Tosca” a few months before the recording, so that the orchestra and chorus knew exactly what would be expected of them. Both he and Legge were perfectionists, and those present at the recording sessions later told of the hours spent recording and re-recording the finale of Act I (some stories claim there were as many as 48 takes), and Tosca’s first entrance calls of “Mario! Mario! Mario!” (for which De Sabata and Legge wanted to duplicate the effect of Tosca running in from afar). Legge later wrote that the conductor had spent a half hour recording Tosca’s *spoken* line after she has murdered Scarpia, “*E avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma!*” (“All Rome trembled before him!”) Tempers flared, and it didn’t help that the recording sessions took place in the un-air conditioned opera house in August (over a period of ten days), during the hottest summer Milan had known in years.

The summer heat contributed to that of the performance. For most of Callas’s 23 complete EMI opera recordings, Legge created something of a repertory company for her, with Giuseppe di Stefano and Tito Gobbi often taking the tenor and baritone roles, respectively. For this “Tosca,” Di Stefano was in top, early form. Blessed with one of the most beautiful voices of the 20th century, the tenor was wildly extravagant with his talents, and his years of great singing were few. Spurred on by his co-stars and conductor, Di Stefano was caught up in the excitement and propulsion of the sessions, delivering one of his strongest performances. As Baron Scarpia, Gobbi took a role often portrayed as a cardboard cutout villain, and made him a complex and fascinating human being. And recording one of her most frequently performed roles for

posterity, Maria Callas layered detail on top of detail, working with De Sabata and Gobbi to create a thrilling, propulsive performance of immense theatricality. This is especially true of the 2017 remastered CD edition, produced and distributed by Warner Classics (which has taken over the EMI library).

Like her co-star Di Stefano, Callas's peak performing years lasted only through the 1950s. In 1959, she met the Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis, and began a romantic relationship with him that distracted her from performing. In the 1960s, she gave only two performances at the Metropolitan Opera--as Tosca--and on July 5, 1965, she sang her final staged performance at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden (in the same role). After Onassis married Jacqueline Kennedy, Callas made sporadic attempts at reviving her career, including an ill-advised concert tour with Di Stefano in 1974. Ever the perfectionist, she realized that her vocal powers had seriously declined. Her final years were spent in seclusion in Paris, and she died of a heart attack in 1977.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.