I, Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Music History.

It is entitled:
Diva Rivalry for Fun and Profit: An Examination of Diva [Mis-]Conceptions via the Rivalry of Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi

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DIVA RIVALRY FOR FUN AND PROFIT:
AN EXAMINATION OF DIVA [MIS-]CONCEPTIONS
VIA THE RIVALRY OF MARIA CALLAS AND RENATA TEBALDI

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by

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ABSTRACT

The [in]famous rivalry between Renata Tebaldi and Maria Callas is part of a long tradition of diva competition and comparison. This thesis examines the historiography of prime donne and their feuds and then explores in turn the major components of this diva rivalry: the women’s public careers, their personal lives, and their depictions in media. Though the popular image of the two posits that Callas and Tebaldi were in direct competition for roles but strikingly different offstage, the facts suggest that they were far more similar in personality than generally acknowledged and that their repertoires had little overlap and thus sparse motive for direct professional conflict than widely assumed. I argue that much of the common knowledge about Callas and Tebaldi is the result of preconceived expectations and skewed representations rather than reality.
To Ben
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This project grew out of a paper I wrote for a seminar on Opera and Gender, led by my advisor, Dr. Jeongwon Joe. Dr. Joe’s vast knowledge of opera in general and divas in particular, her patience, and her willingness to share both with me are what enabled this project to exist; without her guidance, it surely would never have come to fruition.

Sincerest gratitude is also due to my readers, Dr. Jonathan Kregor and Maestro Mark Gibson, for their insightful comments and suggestions; to Dr. Mary Sue Morrow, whose historiography seminar resulted in much of the research found in chapter 1; and to Dr. Stephanie Schlagel, whose determination and attention to detail were inspiring. Dr. Steven Cahn gave some of the most honest and valuable advice I’ve ever received when he explained the flaws in my previous thesis topic regarding settings of the Mourner’s Kaddish.

My colleagues Steve Mathews and John Hausmann listened, encouraged, cajoled, and read drafts. Willow kept me company and made sure I went outside at least occasionally. And my husband, Ben, was by my side all along, watching everything from Wagnerian opera to Pasolini’s Medea, listening while I brainstormed, encouraging me when I felt stuck. Were it not for him, I might have lost faith in myself long ago.
INTRODUCTION

The figure of the diva, the prima donna, holds an allure that can transcend the operatic stage in a way few tenors or basses will ever experience.¹ Along with the potential for glory comes intensely gendered scrutiny: of their physical appearance, their morals, their relationships, and their career choices. Obvious ambition was frequently attacked, particularly in the twentieth century, and legitimate complaints were often dismissed as merely the caprices of a demanding diva. In many cases, the images constructed by the diva’s fans, mass media, and other agencies were more powerful than reality, with preconceived notions of a diva’s character determining the way her actual actions were perceived.

Along with the image of the diva comes the trope of diva rivalry—as clearly no diva worth her salt would be willing to share a spot at the top. These “feuds” were often driven by fans, and they often involved two singers of different style, repertoire, or character, removing the possibility of a definite conclusion. Maria Callas (1923–77) and Renata Tebaldi (1922–2004) stand at the foot of this tradition, their “rivalry” perhaps being the best known of all.² As two first-rate sopranos who both inspired devoted fans, it seems natural that discussion of who was the best would occur; the fact that their voices and aesthetics were completely different made disagreement virtually inevitable; and the media’s depiction of them as polar opposites, one feminine, good, even angelic and the other ambitious, angry, and ungrateful, sealed the deal.

While modern music histories tend to ignore the importance and creative role of the diva in opera, fans have kept their stories alive for centuries. Books devoted to opera stars exist

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¹ The Three Tenors’ broad appeal and financial success is perhaps the exception that proves the rule.

² The other major contender for this title being the eighteenth-century feud between Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, immortalized in John Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera.
parallel to general history texts from the nineteenth century to today, preserving the stories omitted by composer-centric works such as *A History of Western Music.* Chapter 1 considers the values and expectations of the authors, focusing on the importance attached to voice, artistry, and dramatic or virtuous narratives. As we will see, many of the characterizations commonly applied to Callas and Tebaldi predate the two women, some by hundreds of years. Five major divas illustrate these topics: Francesca Cuzzoni (1696–1778), Faustina Bordoni (1697–1781), Giuditta Pasta (1797–1865), Angelica Catalani (1780–1849), and Jenny Lind (1820–87). This historiography demonstrates that many elements of the Callas-Tebaldi rivalry predate their births by centuries and illustrate the narrative traditions to which their stories belong.

Chapter 2 delves into the diva’s professional careers and the public aspects of their lives. It begins with a discussion of their voices, arguably the fundamental element of divahood, before comparing their repertoires and finding little overlap. Further separating the two are their artistic decisions, as Tebaldi prioritized beauty of voice, while Callas was willing to sacrifice sweetness to her conception of dramatic truth. Comparisons are often made of Callas and Maria Malibran (1808–36); both divas amazed opera-goers despite imperfect voices. Tebaldi’s glorious voice also has predecessors, singers such as Catalani whose art resided solely in her throat. If we look further afield, we see Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni as prototypes of this divide, with one possessing a sweeter tone and the other greater agility and acting ability. The chapter continues by considering the facts of famous moments of diva behavior, particularly Callas’s famous “walkouts,” and contrasting them with the way they were perceived; here, one finds

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4. Callas’s sister, Jackie, believed Maria did so herself.
that reputations are more important than actions. Chapter 2 concludes with the divas’ ascent and
descent: the beginning and the end of their careers.

Far more difficult to ascertain are the details of their private lives, which are the subject
of chapter 3. As chapter 1 shows, the diva’s personal life is often an aspect of her public persona,
and Callas and Tebaldi are no exception. Their personalities, family relationships, and even
romantic engagements all became important components of their image, and in this chapter I
attempt to distinguish between fact and fiction. While this is inherently challenging, it is nearly
impossible in the case of Callas: the amount of mythology surrounding her, much of it generated
by her family and even herself, can be virtually impenetrable at times. Further complicating
matters is Callas’s performative approach to femininity as a whole. As such, I have attempted to
call attention to disagreements and contradictions, highlighting where truth may be buried even
if I cannot find it myself. Again, expectations come into play, as the strikingly different response
to similar behaviors in the two women (in this case, their choice in men) demonstrates that
something more must be in play.

These narratives and reputations remind us again that Callas and Tebaldi belong to an old
tradition: much like Callas would be 200 years later, Cuzzoni was painted as overly ambitious
and greedy, her pride leading to her inevitable fall; Faustina, like Tebaldi, was perceived as
properly feminine and humble, and their stories were given happy endings. Callas’s relationship
with her family, her marriage to Giovanni Battista Meneghini and affair with Aristotle Onassis,
and her high fees were all condemned at some point or another, and in the minds of some, her
lonely death in Paris was the end she had earned. Tebaldi was praised for her pleasantness,
hers closeness to her mother, and her unpretentiousness, and so her biographers depict a happy
retirement filled with friends.
This of course raises the question of who created these images and narratives, the major topic of chapter 4. There is no simple answer, but one major contributing factor was the media. Callas and Tebaldi, like many of their foremothers, were the subject of journalistic and biographical interest, and in the pages of magazines, newspapers, and books, their narratives were strengthened and perpetuated. Callas in particular held a special allure for the press, and her story continues to appeal to authors, journalists, playwrights, and filmmakers after her death. Tebaldi’s control over media access and thus her image was much stronger than Callas’s, and as a result, her story is more coherent and less dramatic.

The unequal interest afforded to Callas and Tebaldi is by necessity reflected in my text. While Tebaldi seems to have inspired equal loyalty in her fans, less has been written about her. Callas’s story was complicated and manipulated over and over again; the confusion that resulted from her own reshaping of her story and the misinformation given in other sources only compounds the already difficult task of writing about her. To any fans of Tebaldi, this thesis might be a disappointment because of the disproportionate amount of space devoted to Callas; take comfort, though, in knowing this is the result of disagreeing sources and sometimes malicious (or at the very least, self-interested and perhaps greedy) authors writing about La Divina.

In conclusion, I intend this thesis to provide a critical deconstruction of the many “constructed” elements outside of their “real” life subsumed within the “rivalry” that surrounded these great singers, a rivalry they both denied.5

5. At one point or another, though they certainly disagreed in describing the actual nature of their relationship. Callas, in her essay ”My First Thirty Years,” described them as close friends, while Tebaldi later denied the rivalry by saying, "and why speak of enemies when we had never been friends?"
CHAPTER 1: DIVA [HER]STORY

“... no Music can support an opera, without great and favorite singers”

—Charles Burney, A General History of Music

Diva stories are almost as old as opera, though where they were told varied depending whether they were perceived as belonging primarily to the composers who wrote them or the singers who performed them. Even as music histories ignored the contributions of performers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, opera lovers kept these women alive in their books, preserving their personal and professional accomplishments for future opera lovers, that these women might not be forgotten. They constructed narratives, vocal categories, dichotomies, and feuds. They dissected personal details and public triumphs and constructed many of the stock diva stories that survive today, drawing on historical facts but fitting them into a pre-existing narrative. The biographers of Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi clearly belong to this tradition, just as their depictions do.

In the eighteenth century, opera belonged to the singers, whose drawing power and vocal prowess allowed for great creative freedom, from the da capo aria’s space for improvisation to the practice of aria substitution.¹ Their pride of place was reflected in the attention paid to them in the historians’ accounts. Charles Burney, whose history of music was published in 1789, gave about as much space to describing and evaluating singers as he did to composers. This changed with general music histories written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which inherited the Romantic idea of the composer as ultimate genius. These accounts neglected the

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creative role and importance played by performers throughout history, and women largely disappeared from their pages. Even today, the most recent edition of *A History of Western Music*, one of the most widely used music history textbooks in the United States, makes no mention of many major singers who collaborated with composers and whose interpretations were phenomenally influential. The lucky few who do make it into the book receive little attention: Francesca Cuzzoni, whose “feud” with Faustina Bordoni polarized eighteenth-century London, is mentioned in two sentences in the chapter on George Frideric Handel, and Jenny Lind, whose tours in the United States sparked a popular frenzy, merits only a single sentence in the section entitled “Opera as Popular Entertainment.” Faustina Bordoni gets a whole paragraph to herself, though she is described primarily as wife to composer Johann Hasse. Though the textbook states “the center of attention in an opera seria was not the composer, drama, plot, or scenery, but the singers,” its actual content, which considers Handel and Hasse rather than Faustina and Cuzzoni, contradicts these words.

The diva histories, then, exist parallel to these general music histories, focusing specifically on the performers who occupy the operatic stage. In these texts, authors confront issues of greatness and explore the relationship between public and private through the stories of divas who made their names through voice, through artistry, through hard work,

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3. Ibid., 457 and 459.

4. “When Swedish soprano Jenny Lind toured the United States in 1850–52, singing before tens of thousands of people, her programs included opera overtures and Italian arias (especially Bellini’s *Casta diva*) alongside familiar songs such as *Home! Sweet Home!*” Ibid., 682.

5. Ibid., 491–93.

6. Ibid., 493.
and through image. As one author points out, opera-goers’ ears are not hearing the composer but the performer: “The work of the composer, the dramatist, and the librettist belongs to the past, however, and that audience of 5000 people did not bestow much thought on them. Nor did they think very often of the orchestra . . . the great applause, the ‘bravos,’ the cheering, the excitement, were reserved for the star, the soprano.” It is to opera-lovers that these books are addressed and it is these performers, these women, who inhabit most of their pages. The titles of these books proclaim their focus on singers, rather than composers or works: Queens of Song, The Prima Donna, The Great Singers, Some Famous Singers of the Nineteenth Century, Great Singers of Today, Singers of the Century, The Opera Singers, and Stars of the Opera all concentrate on singers, often discussing their roles and the composers with whom they worked but always depicting them as individual artists.

All of the books must wrestle with various difficulties, foremost among which is conveying the diverse qualities that elevate a singer to the ranks of the prima donna via the printed page and the written word: engravings and photographs can be reproduced to illustrate

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15. Wagnalls, Stars of the Opera.
physical beauty, but how can words represent stage presence, artistry, and voice? On a more basic level, who should be included?

The Books

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of divas in each of the thirteen books included in my survey. In the interests of both space and relevance, singers who appeared in only one text (diva unica, as they were) have been excluded, and the remaining sixty have been arranged chronologically by the diva’s birth date. Many of the divas appear several times, creating sort of a core pantheon of singers generally recognized as great.

There are two basic structural categories into which these books fall: collections of relatively discrete essays on singers and more integrated accounts of operatic history. Both are almost always subdivided by singers, who can be organized chronologically (obviously the most common for histories), alphabetically, stylistically, or arbitrarily. For the earliest, the line is a bit blurry: Clayton’s work is a collection of stories arranged roughly chronologically, as is Edwards’s two-volume text. Later works show the divide more clearly, though even Pleasants’s book, the clearest example of a narrative history, is still sectioned by singer, each chapter opening with an introduction before moving into the prima donnas’ narratives. These divisions can be seen in the table, with collections such as Kobbé and Wagnalls including singers bunched closely together in time, while histories (Clayton, Edwards, Rogers, and Pleasants) reveal a wider temporal spread. A few collections appear less focused (Steane and Rasponi). Steane includes singers whose life spans, though perhaps not operatic careers, continued into the beginning of the twentieth century,¹⁶ and Rasponi discloses in his introduction that the interviews which made

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¹⁶ Adelina Patti, the earliest diva included, retired from opera in 1897, but she continued performing in concerts until 1914 and lived until 1919, long enough to qualify for the book. Steane, Singers of the Century, 255–56.
up his research began in the 1930s, often after the singer’s career had ended, thus allowing for similarly early performers to be included.\textsuperscript{17}

Both types of books are limited in scope to a certain time and at times to a certain place, and all are inherently constrained by their date of publication: it would be impossible to include a singer before her debut, let alone her birth. All are further constrained by authorial choices, particularly in the case of collections of singers. These books are shaped by choices to include only singers one had heard live (Klein) or met personally (Wagnalls, Chapin, and Rasponi), choices to include only singers of a certain time (Rogers and the nineteenth century, Steane and the twentieth) or place (Tuggle and the Metropolitan Opera in the early twentieth century), and choices to prioritize morality (Clayton) over success or legacy (Pleasants).

What one finds is that, while many of the books themselves take both synchronic and diachronic approaches, there is little narrative to be found by examining them from such frames. There are categories of opinion and structure and changes in writing style, yes, but there is no clear evolution from, say, valuing voice above all in the earliest to prizing dramatic truth over vocal beauty in the late twentieth century. Both the stories the authors tell and the ways in which they tell them demonstrate that there has never been a consensus on the ideal diva: every diva is different, and each had her admirers and detractors.

So who are these authors, these storytellers? First and foremost, they are opera lovers. Many had careers as critics; for instance, Pleasants worked for the Philadelphia \textit{Evening Bulletin} as music critic and later editor and as the European musical correspondent for the \textit{New York Times}.\textsuperscript{18} Portions of Kobbé’s biographical essays were previously published in \textit{Harper’s Weekly}

\textsuperscript{17} Lanfranco Rasponi, \textit{The Last Prima Donnas} (New York: Knopf, 1982), xiii.

\textsuperscript{18} Pleasants, \textit{The Great Singers}, 384.
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Table 1. Singers included in the books surveyed in this chapter.
and *Woman’s Home Companion*,¹⁹ and the essays in Steane’s work first appeared in *Opera Now.*²⁰ H. Sutherland Edwards is perhaps the earliest author in this tradition; in 1905, *The New International Encyclopaedia* wrote that, “[Edwards] is distinguished as a journalist, political writer, dramatic historian, and novelist.”²¹ Others worked behind the scenes of the operatic stage: in addition to his writings on music, Rasponi was a publicity agent for several singers,²² and Chapin was the General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera from 1972 to 1975.²³ None of the authors, however, identifies him- or herself as a scholar. Even today, with many musicologists focusing on performance and on female singers in particular, these books written by amateurs in the truest sense of the word exist in parallel to scholarly treatments of divas.

The authors are not the only voices heard in these works, however, as the singers’ own words often appear. Unsourced quotes are common in the earliest works (Clayton and Edwards), while interviews form the major sources for many of the others (Kobbé, Wagnalls, and Rasponi). In the case of the former, these quotes are generally used to support the story the writer is telling, allowing her to speak only when she agrees with the author. The latter allow quite a bit more agency for these women, and Wagnalls goes the furthest in this regard; the copyright page of *Stars of the Opera* includes an author’s note which testifies that, “All the interviews in this book have been proof-read by the singers.”²⁴ This degree of control the singers exercised over her

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¹⁹. Kobbé, *The Opera Singers*, 3r. As this book lacks page numbers, I will use my own folio numbers to refer the reader to specific locations. Foliation begins with the title page, skipping the flyleaf.


²⁴. Wagnalls, *Stars of the Opera*, 4
work, beyond the fact that the majority of the content regarding the singers is furnished by the
women themselves, suggests that Wagnalls’s accounts resemble the public faces the titular stars
wished to present.

_The Narratives_

When one considers these works as the constructed narratives they are, examining them
in terms of the narrative structures Hayden White identified in his historiographical work, the
general lack of an overarching narrative becomes clear. As many of the works are collections
rather than histories, and as even the most cohesive books are still comprised of essays on
individual singers, it is difficult to find the markers of a strict narrative form. Similarly, it is
nearly useless to identify a mode of argument, as the clear categorization of virtually all the
works as formalist provides little additional information.\(^{25}\) However, the modes of emplotment
White identified undergird many of the individual diva stories. The life stories of “good”
women, such as Faustina Bordoni (and later, Renata Tebaldi), are often told as _comedies_, as
their conformity to what a woman ought to be results in a happy ending: the prima donna lives
to a ripe old age surrounded by family, the fruit of her hard work and virtue. The fate of “bad”
women, women who, like Francesca Cuzzoni (and later, Maria Callas), are immoral, demanding,
or otherwise unfeminine, is a concomitant black comedy, in which the diva must reckon with the
repercussions of her sins; these stories are not quite tragedies, as the point is not so much “the
resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. . . . set[ting]

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\(^{25}\) Hayden White, “Introduction: The Poetics of History,” in _Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in
the closest to contextualist, introducing each grouping of singers with a brief introduction and attempting to convey
the historic and artistic climate in which they lived and worked.
limits on what may be aspired to” but the “reconciliations . . . of men with their world and their society,” where the diva’s punishment is just.\textsuperscript{26}

The greatest stories, of course, are set as what White termed \textit{romances}. The emplotment of diva surmounting impossible obstacles and finally succeeding, proving her worth to those who doubted her, appears frequently. Kobbé’s account of Ernestine Schumann-Heink’s tribulations and ultimate success provides an excellent example; of her, he writes, “Few prima donnas have had a harder struggle for success than Mme. Schumann-Heink.”\textsuperscript{27} Born to poor parents,

she was sent to the Ursuline Convent in Prague. There it was discovered by a nun that she had a voice, and while no attempt was made to educate her musically, she was placed in the choir, where she sang entirely by ear. When she sang well, she received as a reward a \textit{kipfel} (a cookie with raisins). If she made a slip she had her ears boxed. Thus her musical education consisted of \textit{kipfel} and slaps.\textsuperscript{28}

After auditioning for the director of the Vienna Opera, “he said: ‘You had better go home, and get fed up, and then go to a ‘Mauser Institute’’” (This is a German derisive term for ‘finishing school’). The young aspirant went home broken-hearted.”\textsuperscript{29} When she did finally earn an engagement (at Dresden), her parents refused to believe her for six weeks until her contract arrived in the mail.\textsuperscript{30} Once there, she entered an unhappy marriage and lost her place after a disastrous performance. Luckily, the director of the Hamburg opera asked her to sing \textit{Fides}, and her performance was a triumph; however, her success angered the current prima donna of the company, who

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{27} Kobbé, \textit{The Opera Singers}, 22r.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 22v.
was so piqued at Mme. Heink’s success that at noon one day she sent word that she would be unable to sing Carmen that night. The manager dispatched a messenger to Mme. Heink and asked if she would take the rôle. Mme. Heink not only had never sung the rôle, she had never even studied it, but she had often heard the opera, and with her facility for picking up music by ear, she had acquired the rôle vocally and by watching other prima donnas had learned the ‘business.’ Therefore she consented to help the management out, went on in the evening and scored a veritable triumph.\(^\text{31}\)

This marked the end of Schumann-Heink’s trials; after these many setbacks, she had a happy second marriage and a renowned career: “Mme. Schumann-Heink has a superb voice of both mezzo and contralto compass. Her *Ortrud, Brangäne, Waltraute*, and *Erda* are her most notable achievements. She is also a very popular concert-singer and a splendid mother to her eight children, to whom she is absolutely devoted.”\(^\text{32}\) Her reward was both personal and professional.

So strong is the expectation for a rags-to-riches romance that one account of Nellie Melba foregrounds its absence: “It would, of course, be artistic and effective to picture Melba’s early life as one of struggle and privation. But, search as one will, not a crust or a tatter turns up in her history! She never shivered on a doorstep, or sang for pennies in the street! Let the dismal truth be told,—her father was wealthy, and his gifted daughter never lacked for anything.”\(^\text{33}\) Such an unequivocal declaration of the “dismal truth” of her privileged upbringing would be unnecessary without the pervasive convention of the romantic emplotment of a prima donna’s life story.

*The Prima Donnas*

The Oxford Dictionary of Music defines “prima donna” as “First lady. Orig. the chief woman singer in an opera cast, but term has been generalized to mean a leading woman

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 24r.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

singer.”34 Grove Dictionary of Music expands on this, describing the casting structure of opera seria and noting that “In the early 18th century, the term expanded to mean not just the role but also the singer who performed such roles. . . . Today the term is no longer exclusively associated with leading roles but may be used of any leading woman singer. It has also entered the general vocabulary as an expression for anyone (not necessarily a singer) who carries on in an outrageously egotistical manner.”35 According to Wally Toscanini, daughter of the famed maestro, “Prima donnas in my father’s day were, as the words indicate, the first ladies among the women singers, because of their vocal gifts and the considerable sacrifices they made for their profession and the art they served. These qualities gave them an intangible glamour.”36 These books tend toward the latter definition, of the premiere women singers in opera at any given time, a definition that leaves to the author the decision of just who merits the term.

The term “diva” is similarly problematic. The only article on the term Oxford Music Online sees no distinction between the two, as the entry for “diva” simply observes that the term is Italian for “goddess” and suggests the reader turn to “prima donna.”37 Others feel quite strongly about distinctions: Klein, for instance, believed that, “A diva ought, properly speaking, to be of Italian birth or descent.”38 Like “prima donna,” the term has also come to encompass more than a great female operatic singer; the Oxford Dictionary of English also defines it as “a


36. Quoted in Rasponi, The Last Prima Donnas, xii.


famous female singer of pop music” and “a woman regarded as temperamental or haughty.”

These terms depend heavily on the judgment of the perceiver to determine who qualifies as prima donna: there is no single attribute that defines a diva.

These diva histories, recounting litanies of prima donnas, make clear that this is no new phenomenon, that throughout operatic history each diva has had her own unique blend of the elements that comprise divahood: Ethan Mordden sums them up as voice, musicianship, temperament, and commitment. In surveying these texts, it appears that these characteristics have always been possessed by the best singers, and each diva’s own unique balance of these attributes is relatively stable from author to author, like an artistic fingerprint. What changes, then, is each author’s valuation of each characteristic and thus each diva.

It must, of course, be noted that no one diva possesses every trait in perfection (for, as Rogers sighs, “how vain it is to hope for perfection in this imperfect world!”). While each singer must have possessed each element to some (perhaps small) degree, diva narratives tend to highlight one or two areas in which the artist excels and, in some cases, a few in which she fails, and it is on these stories that I focus here.

Of course, there are some divas almost universally hailed as great, the core members of the prima donna pantheon. Though the basic characteristics of each woman are relatively constant, each narrative is somewhat (and in some cases, very) different. None appears in every book, though three books include all of them (Clayton, Edwards, and Pleasants; a fourth (Rogers) includes the three who fall within its purview). These five women, however, embody some of the

39. Ethan Mordden, Demented: The World of the Opera Diva (1984; repr., New York: Fireside, 1990). To these one could add other ephemeral traits, such as physical beauty, reputation for virtue, etc.

40. Rogers, Some Famous Singers, 45.
extremes of diva characteristics (voice, artistry, genius, image) and perhaps act as archetypes for later divas (or at least their stories) to follow.

Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni form the prototypical diva rivalry, one rarely spoken of without the other. Cuzzoni, the first of the two to join Handel’s troupe in London, is always credited with a beautiful and “pathetic” voice, corroborated by contemporaries such as Quantz. However, the other characteristics attributed to her are invariably negative: she is said to have lacked physical beauty, dramatic ability, and, particularly damning, a pleasing and feminine personality. Faustina, whose voice was, according to listeners and historians, a bit less sweet, is given in compensation excellent technique, physical beauty, and a pleasant personality. They inspired fierce loyalty in their admirers, and a feud emerged between their followers and, perhaps, the divas themselves. This animosity culminated in an outbreak of violence at a performance, which was immortalized in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera.*

Faustina later married the composer Hasse, who wrote several roles for her in his operas, while Cuzzoni passed away in poverty.

In the nineteenth century, the divide between voice and the other components of diva diverged widely. Angelica Catalani’s career began at the turn of the nineteenth century, and she possessed in abundance sheer vocal beauty; after one man criticized her voice, she supposedly said: “He is an impious man, for when God has given a mortal so extraordinary a talent as mine, everybody should honor and applaud it as a miracle. It is profane to depreciate the gifts of heaven.” Many criticized her lack of intellectual and artistic involvement in her

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41. This legendary feud and the fight between the two women are examined in scholarship such as Suzanne Aspden, “The “Rival Queens’ and the Play of Identity in Handel’s *Admeto,*” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 3 (November 2006): 301–31 and James Wierzbicki, “Dethroning the Divas: Satire Directed at Cuzzoni and Faustina,” *Opera Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 175–96.

work, comparing her unfavorably with Giuditta Pasta who, lacking such a marvelous natural endowment, succeeded solely through her hard work and artistry. Her career was not a long one, and at its end her voice was in shambles, but no one could fault her dedication to opera.

Finally, Jenny Lind, dubbed the “Swedish Nightingale” for her silvery tone, won great fame at home and abroad in large part because of her image of moral purity. While she studied with great teachers, she performed staged operas for only a brief time before moving to the concert stage, where she became “the idol of the English public, its incomparable singer, its standard of all womanly virtues.” Such proclamations of her virtue attended her throughout her tours, where she was perceived as a paragon of feminine purity.

Judging Art

It never seems to be enough to simply note the variety of forms that operatic success takes; instead, the authors must compare singers to highlight the clashes between aesthetic values. They do so by comparing contemporaries, often through the medium of a “rivalry,” and by comparing divas of the past to those of today. Ultimately, the victor must be determined by the author’s own preferences, as the lack of recordings of these singers presents a practical challenge and the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic division a philosophical one.

Faustina and Cuzzoni nearly always appear as a pair, their historic (though perhaps not historical) feud binds them together, and their characteristics are presented as two complementary halves of the whole of artistic perfection. Clayton writes that, “In truth, the rivalry . . . was all the more absurd as their respective qualities were totally opposed, yet obviously calculated to act advantageously in unison.” Tosi, a contemporary, lamented, “What

43. Rogers, Some Famous Singers, 84.

44. Clayton, Queens of Song, 55.
a beautiful mixture it would be if the excellencies of these two angelic beings could be united in a single individual!” Of course, the public (and the authors) took sides, and the singers themselves supposedly came to blows during a performance. Cuzzoni is clearly the ultimate loser, as Edwards notes: “Cuzzoni was not one of the fortunate prime donne. She was not, indeed, destined for a tragic end . . . but her fate was in its way quite as sad.” Cuzzoni’s pride proved to be her undoing: “[Cuzzoni] had solemnly sworn never to accept a smaller salary than Faustina, and they had hitherto been equally paid. The directors now offered an extra guinea to Faustina, and Cuzzoni, whether from wounded vanity or respect for her plighted word, retired from the theatre.” Clayton elaborated on the diva’s fate, stating that, “[Cuzzoni’s] recklessness and improvidence had brought her to a pitiable condition; and in her later days, after a career of splendor, caprice, and extravagance, she was obliged to subsist, it is said, by button-making. She died in frightful indigence, the recipient of charity,” while “a far different fate awaited Faustina,” who married the composer Hasse and lived to be “a jolly, chatty matron . . . With a couple of pretty daughters.” Indeed, as Pleasants notes, “upon few women in musical history has fortune smiled so consistently throughout a long life.”

Faustina and Cuzzoni’s feud ended with a clear winner and loser, but this was not the only possible resolution. Others ended ambivalently, as “Pauline Lucca and Her Renowned Rivals” coexisted as long as they stayed out of one another’s territory (Gounod’s Faust was

45. Quoted in ibid.
47. Ibid., 1:50.
48. Clayton, Queens of Song, 60–61.
one of the most hotly contested areas). The happiest possible ending to a feud is attributed to Henrietta Sontag and Maria Malibran by Francis Rogers, in which the two divas join together in song:

A few months later [in 1828] [Sontag] was again in Paris battling with Malibran for the crown of Queen of Song. The Spaniard was all fire and passion, the German mistress of a serene and perfect art. The question of supremacy could of course never be settled, because it was one of kind, not of degree, but the rivalry was none the less intense, even acrimonious, for a time. Finally some tactful person persuaded the two prima donnas . . . to commingle their voices in a duo from ‘Semiramide.’ The result of the combination was so happy that Spain and Germany declared peace on the spot and sealed their treaty with a kiss.

Thus in this one duet, two different kinds of voices are united. Such happy endings to feuds were, unsurprisingly, few and far between.

Though Catalani and Pasta did not “compete” directly on the operatic stage in the way Faustina and Cuzzoni did, their position on extremes of the artistic scale illuminates the continuing tension between the value of the voice and the value of the prima donna’s hard work and artistry. For instance, Francis Rogers links the two together in one chapter to do explicitly this: “Catalani’s life is a record of great gifts unused or squandered; Pasta’s one of mediocrity transformed into excellence.” In keeping with her opinion that voice alone is insufficient for greatness, the author clearly comes down in favor of Pasta, a judgment tempered slightly by the fact that Catalani was a loving, generous person. Other authors heap rather less approbation on Catalani, highlighting in some cases her virtue and in one, the lengths she had to go in order to marry her husband. Edwards, for instance, tactfully observes that she was “a singer of

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50. Thus was the chapter titled in Klein, *Great Women-Singers of My Time*, 50–66.
51. Rogers, *Some Famous Singers*, 76.
52. Ibid., 39.
53. Who is, depending on which book you read, kind, stupid, or greedy.
execution rather than expression.” 54 As with Faustina and Cuzzoni, the opposing nature of the two was clearly recognized and lamented: “If Catalani had only had Pasta’s artistic nature; or if Pasta had only had Catalani’s glorious voice and beauty.” 55 There was no definitive conclusion to this feud meted out by the universe; the “victor” was only determined by the artistic preferences of those who write about these singers.

This duality also highlights another division: the perceived gulf between popular appeal and appeal to the educated and tasteful elite. Sometimes Pasta is again contrasted with Catalani, her well rehearsed and affecting performances set in opposition to Catalani’s: “[Catalani’s] success was immediate with the general public, who went into raptures over her beauty, her noble bearing and her superb voice. The cognoscenti alone took notice that she was no actress and no musician.” 56 Clayton agreed with this assessment, writing that Catalani’s performance “disgusted connoisseurs as much as it astounded and charmed the multitude.” 57 Pasta’s position as the true connoisseur’s choice is cemented by Pauline Viardot, herself a thoughtful and creative singer of imperfect voice, comparing an aged and vocally decrepit Pasta to Leonardo da Vinci’s great masterpiece: “It is like the Last Supper of Da Vinci—a wreck, but still the greatest picture in the world.” 58 Rogers further emphasizes the misleading nature of the surface, as in her telling Viardot makes the comparison to one who cannot see the greatness under the flawed voice, just to hammer home the disjuncture between the masses who care only for voice and the cognoscenti who can perceive and appreciate something deeper. Rogers’s evident agreement with

56. Ibid., 33.
58. Rogers, *Some Famous Singers*, 44.
Viardot’s quote makes clear that he, like many other authors, considers himself to be an operatic connoisseur, more perceptive than the superficial audience.

Ultimately, these books revolve around personal preferences. Though many authors (Pleasants and Edwards among them) are less vehement in conveying their personal preferences, the possibilities for selection offer other opportunities for judgment. For instance, Steane’s collection *Singers of the Century* omits Maria Callas, who was certainly a major figure in twentieth-century opera. Her conspicuous absence, coupled with a snide remark in Emma Calvé’s entry, 59 suggest the author’s disapproval more subtly than a constructed dichotomy between Callas and Renata Tebaldi would.

The authors also confront the issue of comparing past and present singers. Rogers acknowledge that the question is ultimately unanswerable, “of one thing we may be sure: the qualities that made these old singers famous in their day and generation, would, if they were living and singing now, make them just as famous as they were then.” 60 Many authors, however, considered contemporary opera to be hostile to singers and bewailed a lack of true prime donne, laying much of the blame at the feet of the composer. Richard Wagner is frequently fingered as the culprit, and sometimes Giuseppe Verdi and the verismo composers are named as accomplices. Generally, they and the contemporary composers of the author (if they are not the contemporaries, that is) are thought to care little for vocal art and health. Pleasants perceives Beethoven at the head of this trend, “and composers ever since have tended to behave as though the accommodation of singers were beneath the dignity of a composer’s calling. Neither vocal art

59. “The account [of Calvé’s performance of Ophelia] has a familiar ring. It might have been written 60 years later about another Madame C in another mad scene, and provides commentary on the quaint notion that acting on the operatic stage began with Callas.” Steane, *Singers of the Century*, 9.

60. Rogers, *Some Famous Singers*, 112.
nor vocal health has profited from this presumption.” Edwards sums up most of these musical reasons in a passage that attributes it to a change in audience taste: “If audiences think more at present of the music of the opera than of the manner in which the music is sung, that fact is in itself not in the least to be regretted. But it ought not to be forgotten that many modern singers can scarcely be considered vocalists.”

A related problem is the power dynamic between singer and composer, which many of the authors considered to have skewed too far towards the composer and his proxy, the conductor. Rasponi, for instance, despaired of the current state of opera, writing that,

the divas as I knew them are members of an extinct race. . . . The explanation as to why prima donnas no longer exist are manifold. As we will hear from those interviewed, the main factors are the constant traveling, the wish to earn money quickly, the lack of connoisseurs at the head of opera houses, and the concentrated effort on the part of conductors and stage directors to quash the individuality of artists.

Some also offer up a few non-musical reasons for the modern poverty of both voices and divas, including popular journalism reporting too many details about the prima donna, bringing her closer to the unwashed masses, the growth of other celebrities about whom the public could obsess, and the car: referring to the well-known tradition of a diva’s fans unharnessing the horses from her carriage so that they might pull it to her hotel themselves, he laments the automobile, saying “not until the horse comes back, perhaps, shall we find humanity again making an ass of itself over the prima donna.”

64. Ibid., 3.
The Value of Virtue

Public aspects of the divas’ careers, including popularity, artistic success, and aesthetics were not the only factors determining a singer’s place in these books: many authors included personal lives, particularly a singer’s private conduct, as important aspects to be considered. Clayton specifically stated that her intent was not to include all divas but to provide moral instruction to the reader, presumably a young woman. As a result, her choices are not only shaped by a diva’s professional success but also her personal life:

The author has chosen her heroines with a view to a two-fold source of interest. She has taken those whose genius and labors have stamped the deepest impress on the state of contemporary art, and some of those, likewise, who, though of secondary artistic name, have had eventful histories, or from whose fortunes, in their brilliant and most perilous career, an instructive moral may be gathered.\(^6\)

Such instructive morals can be found in both models of good behavior and bad, though the latter may feel a bit gratuitous, as in the case of La Maupin, whose sordid story (including an exhumed nun, a duel won, an arm amputated, and a judgment of death by fire pronounced) only sees her repent after a failed attempt to return to the stage, at which point, “a fit of penitence for a life misspent seized the poor siren, who regretted the dissipation of past years, and bewailed the errors of her youth.”\(^6\)

More common are scenes of steadfast, moral young singers who, through patience, are acquitted in the end, whether by recognition of a secret marriage by a highborn husband (as in the case of Anastasia Robinson)\(^6\) or by eventual marriage to a duke after a long period as his mistress (as in the case of Lavinia Fenton).\(^6\) Clayton also spent pages recounting the romantic

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65. Clayton, *Queens of Song*, x.
66. Ibid., 50–51.
67. Ibid., 33.
68. Ibid., 41–42.
story of Catalani subverting her greedy father to marry her well-meaning, if a bit stupid, husband, and she extols Catalani’s “blameless domestic life” as one of the things that endeared herself to the English public.

Edwards, too, praised Catalani’s virtue, quoting an unnamed biographer who proclaimed “the purity of Madame Catalani’s private conduct, amid scenes and temptations where numbers would have made shipwreck of all but professional fame; and this duty [to tell of her virtue] . . . is the more incumbent upon us, since in some recent biographies not only is the art of music treated as if it were the sole business of every man’s life, but all considerations of moral worth are made of no account in comparison of the excitation of a sense of voluptuous enjoyment.”

In general, though, Edwards was a bit more practical, pointing out that, “those being the most famous who have not only sung admirably, but have also played a dramatic part in life.” Here, he too points out Robinson and Fenton:

Anastasia Robinson is remembered as one of our leading English vocalists by many who do not know in what operas she sang or what was the character of her voice, but who have heard of her marriage to Lord Peterborough, and of the dramatic circumstances under which Lord Peterborough at last acknowledged her as his wife.

Again, there have been English singers who probably sang better than Lavinia Fenton—the original “Polly” of The Beggar’s Opera. But she is one of the few vocalists who have had an English Duke for a husband, besides which his Grace ran away with her; and, most important point of all, the elopement was chronicled and commented on by Swift.

69. A factor which, in Clayton’s mind, makes her otherwise disappointing artistic career a bit more tolerable. Ibid., 187–89.
70. Ibid., 196.
72. Ibid., 2:181.
73. Ibid., 2:181–82.
Rare, then, is the sentiment expressed by Rogers regarding Pasta: “Few artists have left behind them as few memories of their private lives as has Pasta. But, after all, it is the artist, not the woman, that concerns us.”  

This thought returns at the end of the book, as Rogers states that, “Artists live in history mostly by their public achievements,” but it is preceded by a defense of operatic morals and followed by an assessment of private happiness. The one “scandal” Rogers did find in the realms of private conduct was Maria Malibran’s liaison with the violinist Charles Auguste de Bériot, whom she later married. Rogers excuses this quickly, however:

Malibran, while still a young girl, was married, probably against her will and certainly under false pretenses, to a man more than twice her age, for whom she never could have had any love and whose conduct soon made even respect impossible. A few years later she met her real mate in de Bériot, whom she married formally as soon as the courts released her from the earlier tie.

This focus on fidelity and sexual propriety is present early on, as one of the first things Edwards notes is that in early English opera, “No one, even in those Puritan times, seems to have seen anything to object to in the appearance of a woman on the public stage. The scandal caused a few years afterwards, under the Restoration, by the performance of some actresses imported from France, was probably due to scandalous demeanor on their part; perhaps, also, in some measure to the mere fact of their being French.” The singer who perhaps benefited most from


75. “The popular idea is that life behind the operatic scenes is looser than elsewhere. This may be true in the case of artists not of the highest standing, but is not true of the very best.” Ibid., 124.

76. “An atmosphere of blissful domesticity pervades such records as remain of the conjugal experiences of Grisi and Mario, Lablache, Jenny Lind, Sontag and Catalani. . . . Whether it was chance, expediency or moral principle that underlay such respectability I cannot say; but the fact remains that the entire group [of singers included in this book] seems to have maintained a standard of private conduct that would be considered exemplary in any society.” Ibid., 124–25.

77. Ibid., 124.

her virtue and, more importantly, the public’s awareness of her virtue was Jenny Lind, “The Swedish Nightingale.”

The basic facts of Lind’s story suggest no special brilliance, but to say that she was a phenomenon on two continents would be an understatement, and her image as a pure, innocent, and generous young woman certainly was a part of her success. Rogers admits that, “To make a just estimate of Jenny Lind’s worth as a singer is difficult. Though the most described of all the great prima donnas, her exalted reputation is the hardest to explain. . . . The careers of the other great prima donnas can be explained and classified; Jenny Lind’s puzzles the imagination.”79 It is impossible to quantify the exact portion of her success that was due to her virtuous reputation, but it was certainly significant. Clayton upheld her as a great role model, highlighting her kindness, modesty, and virtue. Her demure femininity won her many fans in America when she toured under the management of P. T. Barnum; her fame was widespread, and her generosity was recounted as being even broader:

The first concert [in New York] realized $26,000. Mdlle. Lind gave her share, $10,000, to the benevolent institutions of New York, and on learning that some of the members of the New York orchestra were in indigent circumstances, she generously made them a substantial gift. Her beneficent actions during her entire stay in America are too numerous to detail. She helped numbers, and gave largely of the enormous sums which she received. Frequently would she flit away from her house, quietly, as if about to pay a visit, and then she might be seen disappearing down back lanes or into the cottages of the poor. She was warned to avoid so much liberality, as many unworthy persons took unfair advantage of her bounty; but she invariably replied, “Never mind; if I relieve ten, and one is worthy, I am satisfied.”80

After her brief career, she continued to garner respect for her nobility, as “in private society she meets with the esteem and regard due to her virtues and talents.”81

79. Rogers, Some Famous Singers, 91–93.
80. Ibid., 481.
81. Ibid., 482.
Pleasants reminds his readers of the constructed nature of the Jenny Lind story, recounting the tale of a very different Jenny Lind, one whose uprightness was little more than a clever marketing scheme. Pleasants saw her public persona as a major reason for her success in England and America: “It was not just her singing and acting, which were excellent enough. Far more compelling was her image, as we would say today. She was not what a singer, a woman of the theater, was expected to be. . . . And then she was so good, so pure, so simple, so charitable, so spiritual!”

Where Clayton waxes effusively about Lind’s great charity, Pleasants perceives yet another venue of self promotion: “Even her charity was piecemeal, unwisely diffused and tastelessly publicized; she may have been motivated by an unwitting desire to ennoble the pleasure she derived from her success as a singer.”

George Biddlecombe explored the roots of this remarkably persistent myth, which began in earnest as soon as she stepped foot onstage in England. After her debut at Her Majesty’s Theatre, she received largely positive press, but one account in particular stood out for its emphasis on her character:

[Rumsey] Forster’s accounts [in the aristocratic paper The Morning Post] exceeded all others. Within a matter of days he had not only told his readers of Lind’s ‘serenity and earnestness . . . elevation of intellect . . . deep sensibility . . . [and] Rafaello-like delicacy’; he insisted that when she performed her next role, Amina in La sonnambula, what the audience witnessed was not a theatrical illusion but a revealing of her innermost self: ‘the saint-like purity of her mind and heart.’

Forster, who likely had not actually met Lind at the time of his review, was the only source to bring up her saint-like character at this point, and Biddlescombe argues that it was an

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82. Ibid., 201.


intentional marketing move to drum up support for Lind.\textsuperscript{85} Her reputation spread quickly,\textsuperscript{86} and it was so widely accepted as fact, that when Lind was brought to trial for breaking a contract,\textsuperscript{87} her lawyer, Sir Frederick Thesiger, “portray[ed] Lind as an abandoned, persecuted heroine, basing his material on her own words. Even Bunn’s counsel, who had foreseen attempts to play on Lind’s gender and personal charisma, seems to have been caught unawares by the extent to which Thesiger exploited this theme.”\textsuperscript{88} The ploy was successful, as the pitying jury awarded Bunn just a fraction of the damages he had requested, and the narrative constructed around Lind, “dependent on the histories of the bourgeois values that were projected onto her persona—the values of female purity and matronly domesticity,”\textsuperscript{89} promulgated by Forster, and shored up by Thesiger, was perpetuated by her biographers, persisting into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{90}

The narratives of diva-hood, the values of fans and connoisseurs, and the conflict between different operatic aesthetics are nothing new. They are nearly as old as opera, and, as the next few chapters will demonstrate, the “rivalry” between Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi is a

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 47–49.

\textsuperscript{86} “Such was the momentum of the Lind image that, in Henry Chorley’s words, ‘Mdlle. Lind’s character stands high before the curtain for delicacy, modesty, an innocent undervaluation of her own genius—in short, for goodness unprecedented.’

As we have seen, some of this perception could be traced back to reports emanating from Germany, including Chorley’s own earlier comments. But Rumsey Forster had done his work well. At breakneck speed and with unerring judgement he had defined the image of Lind in terms of the essential desiderata of bourgeois Victorian womanhood: saint-like purity allied to attributes such as serenity and sensibility.

Forster’s key strategy in creating the image was to define Lind in opposition to Grisi, focusing on the core issue of ‘purity’ versus sexual immorality where theatrical women were concerned.” Ibid., 51.

\textsuperscript{87} Lind had first signed a contract with Alfred Bunn of Drury Lane Theatre, a contract she broke when she was offered a significantly more lucrative contract with Her Majesty’s Theatre. Bunn took her to court, publishing a 73-page pamphlet outlining her treachery. Ibid., 56.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 60–61.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 59–60.
modern incarnation of some of the same irreconcilable artistic and personal preferences that fill operatic history and books about divas. Many of the stories told in these books would easily fit one or the other of these modern divas with minimal changes, and authors such as John Ardoin have drawn such explicit parallels in their research.91 “Good” and “bad,” voice versus artistry, the telling and retelling of stories, and the ferocity of the fandom are all part of the history of the diva.

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CHAPTER 2: THE PUBLIC

Chapter 1 chronicles the variety of ways divas have been evaluated and eulogized over the last two hundred years. While different authors focused on different aspects of the diva, both public and private details of her life and career contributed to the way in which her story was told, how she was categorized, and the way in which she was remembered. This chapter will consider Renata Tebaldi’s and Maria Callas’s public lives: their voices, their careers, their professional relationships. These two women can be seen as the modern (and extreme) iterations of centuries-old archetypes: Callas most closely resembles the great singer-actresses of the nineteenth century, particularly Maria Malibran and Giuditta Pasta; Tebaldi, on the other hand, is recognized as a classic Italian beauty. Additionally, their career choices are often cast in the image of one of the most famous rivalries of the eighteenth century, with Callas linked to Francesca Cuzzoni in her ambition and visible agency, while Tebaldi is painted as a latter-day Faustina Bordoni, polite and obedient to male authority.¹

The image of the feud between Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi is persistent and pervasive, marking the two women as both rivals for roles and polar opposites. These images color accounts and interpretations of both their lives, concealing ways in which the women are not so different and distorting events in order to fit preconceived narratives. However, if one considers their voices, training, and repertoire, it becomes clear that comparing the two is in many ways fruitless—many of the issues ultimately boil down to a series of aesthetic preferences.

¹. An issue that will be examined in greater detail in chapter 3.
The voice, the very thing that catapulted both Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi to worldwide fame, is both enduring and evanescent. Video and audio recordings give some sense of the electricity of a live performance, bringing these women and their art to new generations of fans. However imperfect, these recordings are invaluable in explaining the art of Callas and Tebaldi, as words can give only the barest sense of their voices. While a perfect representation of Callas and Tebaldi's voices in text is ultimately impossible, a fruitful comparison may still be made, and, indeed, must be, for the voice is the core of both women's careers. The voice is the diva's most public attribute, but it is also her must vulnerable and intimate one. These two women's voices and their training are in many ways diametrically opposed: where Tebaldi is smoothness and classic beauty, Callas is dark and cutting; where Tebaldi is part of the verismo tradition, Callas is a disciple of the bel canto school. They also differed radically in their aesthetic philosophies: Callas devoted her voice to the service of her art; Tebaldi's voice was her art.

As chapter 1 demonstrates, the multiplicity of routes to divahood are not new. Ethan Mordden, an American theater historian, offers concise nomenclature for two major types of diva and summarizes their value in his book *Demented*:

the ‘Stimmdiva’ and the ‘Kunstdiva’—roughly, the singer and the artist. The distinction is requisite to an understanding of one of the most inherent controversies in opera: the question of which is more useful, the stand-and-deliver sensuality of sound (Stimme means voice) or the intelligent, dynamic, versatile impersonation (Kunst means art). In short, the *Stimmdiva* is the diva who is prima donna solely because of her voice. Her art is in the glory of her voice, and even if she did nothing onstage but stand and sing, she would still

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be adored for the sheer beauty of her voice. In contrast, the *Kunstdiva’s* voice is subservient to dramatic truth; it is not her vocal beauty but the way in which she deploys it that enraptures her audience. Both are legitimate divas, though the gulf between them can arouse strong passions in the fans who favor one type over the other.

Tebaldi is categorized as a *Stimmdiva* by both her reviewers and herself. Regardless of any acting ability she may have possessed (and reviews and descriptions of her performances, particularly those from later in her career, maintain that she was capable, if perhaps not inspired), her primary asset as prima donna was her voice, and it was the attribute she valued most highly in opera:

I disagree with theatergoers who are satisfied that “she does not have a beautiful voice, but she is a great actress.” Of course, it is important to be a good actress, to make everything more realistic for the audience, but, above all, I go to the opera to hear people who sing. Therefore, if there is a beautiful voice and a great interpretation I return home perfectly happy and satisfied. But, if I must choose between a great actress with a so-so voice and a great singer who interprets adequately, I select the one with the great voice. If I want a great actress, I’ll go see a play.3

Thus she locates herself within the category of *Stimmdiva*.

She was frequently referred to as “the voice of an angel,” a title given to her by Arturo Toscanini.4 Her voice was an exemplar of the classic Italian sound, warm and honeyed:

“[Tebaldi] had a voice that poured like rich cream, effortlessly, exquisitely, and with ravishing


4. This was a popular sobriquet for her, though it seems to have grown out of a misunderstanding. In 1946, Tebaldi was chosen by Toscanini to perform in the rededication of La Scala after World War II. In Tebaldi’s words, “Right at the first rehearsal the Maestro [Toscanini] was very much impressed when after the trumpet takes an E natural, I followed it with the same note and in exactly the same timbre The Maestro said that this note should sound as if it came from heaven, and therefore during the performance I was placed high above the chorus. It was this remark of Toscanini about the sound of the voice which should be like that of an angel from heaven that started the story according to which he said that I had a voice like an angel.” Quoted in Victor Seroff, *Renata Tebaldi: The Woman and the Diva* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961), 70. Casanova also recounts the story, *Renata Tebaldi*. 27.
tone.” After her Aïda in Paris, a local newspaper stated that “Tebaldi’s is a voice without equal for its purity of timbre, extension, and depth.” Time described her arias from Otello as “wonderfully pure yet warm—not crystals, but moonstones or pinkish opals.” That is not to say it was without flaws. In 1948, reviewers noted some unevenness in her voice, particularly a weaker middle register; however, by 1958, the integration of her registers was hailed as one of her primary vocal assets: “[Tebaldi] has the unusual gift of moving from one register to another with no perceptible shift in the quality of her singing which is almost always unerringly accurate and clear, rarely marred by the edginess or brassy reverberations that afflict some singers.”

Louis Biancolli, writing for World Telegram & Sun, was effusive in his praise:

Miss Tebaldi would seem to have everything. The voice is full and firm and beautiful. It is capable of infinite shading and colored to suit every passing mood and fancy. The tones always lent glow and warmth to the gathering texture of Verdi’s fabric of doom. At all times she handled the music with mastery, from the hushed, unearthly pianissimi of the love music and prayer to the stunned outcries of shame and terror. This Renata Tebaldi is a first-class musician and an artist of rare thoroughness.

Her voice was certainly a superb one, and she shepherded it well, resting and returning to training as it required, so that a vocal mishap was a rare thing indeed. When one did occur, such as in her opening night for La Traviata at the Metropolitan Opera (February 3, 1951), she took a month of rest and then, in her words, “mounted the same horse that had thrown [her].”

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8. Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 44.


11. Renata Tebaldi, quoted in Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 46.
Callas’s voice was difficult for many to appreciate, let alone categorize, largely as a result of its sound. As one reviewer noted, “[Callas’s] voice . . . was not always beautiful, at least not in the popular sense in which beauty is equated with the quality of sweetness.”\textsuperscript{12} It was a voice that was used and perhaps abused for the sake of dramatic effect: “Miss Callas used the voice as an extension, a tool of her dramatic projection, and few will deny that she did it with stunning effectiveness.”\textsuperscript{13} Beverley Sills heard Callas perform \textit{La Traviata} in 1958, on a night in which Callas was not at her best:

She knew it, too. . . . She didn’t deceive herself about the state of her singing. She was visibly nervous. But her use of words, the vitality of language in her singing, was amazing. She was hellbent on her own destruction, and broke all the roles of singing. But so what? That’s why 20 years later we’re talking about her.\textsuperscript{14}

Shirley Verrett, a mezzo-soprano who was inspired by Callas to add \textit{Norma} and \textit{Tosca} to her repertoire, was astounded by Callas’s performance of \textit{Norma} in 1956, remembering how “it was not just her acting, but the way she acted with the voice. Every note was meaningful. The shape of the musical phrase and dramatic gesture were linked. From then on I thought, this is what opera should be.”\textsuperscript{15} Like Tebaldi, Callas made explicit her artistic preference:

It is not enough to have a beautiful voice. When you have to interpret a role you have to have thousands of colors during the performance to portray the words you [sing], happiness, joy, unhappiness, sorrow, fear . . . even if you have to sing harshly at times—which I have done frequently. It is a necessity of expression, it is written there, you have

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} \textit{Musical America}, quoted in David A. Lowe, \textit{Callas as They Saw Her} (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1986), 89.
\item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{Musical America}, quoted in ibid., 60.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Shirley Verrett, quoted in Tommasini, “A Voice and a Legend that Still Fascinate.”
\end{itemize}
to do it, even if people will not understand. But in the long run they will, because you have to persuade people of what you are doing.\textsuperscript{16}

While her belief in the insufficiency of voice alone is clear, her voice was still an essential component of her art and one that is frequently downplayed or forgotten.\textsuperscript{17} If one listens enough to her detractors, one could come to believe that she didn’t even have a voice, that she sang on “sheer willpower.”\textsuperscript{18} However, this belief does not withstand close scrutiny. While it is true that she was a determined and disciplined singer, it is also true that she was born with some sort of natural ability, though its exact quality during her childhood is uncertain, her mother and sister disagreeing.\textsuperscript{19} It was enough, though, to earn her a place and a scholarship at both the National and Athens Conservatories in Greece and enough to impress Elvira de Hidalgo, her most influential teacher. According to Tonis Yeoryiou, a pianist who accompanied her in recitals toward the end of her studies and early performances in Greece, “her voice then was much more beautiful than what you hear in her recordings,” and he knew then that she was destined for a great career.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} Maria Callas, interviewed by John Ardoin, quoted in Nicholas Petsalis-Diomidis, \textit{The Unknown Callas: The Greek Years} (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001), 557.

\textsuperscript{17} Sadly, her own mother included this line of thinking in her biography of her daughter, stating that “There is no doubt that Maria’s histrionics have played an important part in her success. Some critics (the unkindest) and the worshippers of Tebaldi say that her acting has been the greatest part of her talent since it sometimes draws attention from the deficiencies of her voice.” Evangelia Callas, \textit{My Daughter: Maria Callas} (London: Frewin, 1967), 124. Trying to disprove this stereotype seems to have been why Mordden named her both \textit{Stimm-} and \textit{Kunstdiva}; though he calls her ”pure Kunstdiva, making more than having” on page 56, he continues on, writing, “Callas shattered the choice [between Stimmdiva and Kunstdiva], for her interpretation was based on lovely noise: if not on how the voice wanted to sound, then on how she could force it to sound. She sang as if she had the most beautiful voice in opera—and sang so beautifully that she might as well have had such a voice. Thus she moved opera back a century to the age of Viardot, to the acting singer, Stimmkunstdiva.” Mordden, \textit{Demented}, 59.


\textsuperscript{19} Litza claimed that passersby stopped to hear her practice and, “at that moment I knew Maria had a voice that must be trained, and I began to make plans for the golden future before her.” Evangelia Callas, \textit{My Daughter: Maria Callas}, 17–18. In contrast, Jackie claims that “Mary had a nice voice but no more than that,” Jackie Callas, \textit{Sisters} (London: Macmillan, 1989), 45.

\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in Petsalis-Diomidis, \textit{Unknown Callas}, 469–71.
One of the most important aspects of her voice was the strict \textit{bel canto} training she received under de Hidalgo’s tutelage. She often criticized singers who cheated the music by not performing the ornaments stated or implied by the composer. She was not subtle about it, stating outright her opinion: “You don’t excuse things in a singer you would not dream of excusing in a violinist or pianist. . . . Look at your scores! There are technical things written there to be performed, and they must be performed whether you like it or not!”\textsuperscript{21} No one could ever accuse Callas of insufficient dedication, and as we will see in later chapters, anyone who tried to claim her success for their own by denying her hard work swiftly incurred her wrath. Her voice was her creation, the product of nearly ceaseless study and practice, and she believed she owed it to no one.

Thus, while it was because of her voice, the product of natural ability and hard work, that she entered the public eye, it was not vocal beauty that made her \textit{prima donna}, and so she is not \textit{Stimmdiva}.

\textsuperscript{22} No, it is what she did with it that made her diva, made her La Callas, \textit{La Divina}—made her \textit{Kunstdiva} incarnate. She seems to have made her choice early in her career, for complaints of her pushing her voice until its metal showed through appear early on. These reviewers seem to have missed the point, in contrast to later reviewers who appear to be deliberately looking the other way. As a young artist, her voice seemed limitless, her vocal agility and versatility stunning directors and audiences alike. Her performances of roles traditionally considered to be on opposite ends of the vocal spectrum, sometimes only days apart, contributed to her meteoric rise, and her vocal range and color were astonishing. Many saw

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} A point her sister seems to have completely missed, as she attempts to plead her case by citing many who believe her voice to be sweeter (and thus better) than her famous sister’s. “One night we listened to Maria on the radio. . . . I thought she sang beautifully but Milton [Emberikos, Jackie’s long-time fiancé] was dismissive. ‘You were much better,’ he said. ‘Your voice was lovelier, more natural.’” Jackie Callas, \textit{Sisters}, 152.
\end{itemize}
her as a reincarnation of the *soprano sfogato* ("unlimited soprano") of the nineteenth century, resurrecting the dramatic style of Maria Malibran and Giuditta Pasta.\(^{23}\)

At the height of her career, when she could pick and choose her roles, when long-dead operas were resurrected and restaged for her, her voice was less conventionally beautiful than it had been, but audiences thrilled to its affect and effect. Reviews highlighted her art: "But there has always been the Callas control, the sheer will power, that disciplined and integrated defects—made them strengths, urgent and electrifying, by means of a musicianship that no singer today can equal or imitate."\(^{24}\) Nicola Rescigno, who conducted her American debut at the Chicago Lyric Theater in November 1954,\(^{25}\) recognized her determination, reminiscing:

> Out of that fantastic willpower of hers came this superb, exciting thing at the performance, all in order. This woman was uncompromising when it came to music. I have seen her undergo the anguish of not singing good notes, but, however the note, she had to do what the music demanded. She had thought it out in a certain way and was not going to give in. This takes guts and a tremendous amount of artistic integrity.\(^{26}\)

Her sound aroused fierce debate, and some thought it ugly. Its metal and its wobble were more prominent than they had been when she was younger, but also present were emotions beyond the scope of most singers. As John Ardoin put it, Callas’s voice,

> in attempting to embrace the full drama of a text, expressed, in no uncertain terms and for the first time this century, unvarnished hatred. Other voices have moved audiences by conveying love, poignancy, fear, rage and ecstasy. To these sensations Callas added

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23. John Ardoin in particular promotes this idea, spending several pages discussing the history of Malibran, Pasta, et al. in *The Art and the Life*, 4–7. Callas appears to have encouraged this idea, amassing a collection of items relating to Maria Malibran. Her sister was awed with Maria’s audacity: "The most touching things were the souvenirs, engravings and mementos of Maria Malibran, the greatest diva of the nineteenth century. . . . I wondered what it could be like to feel yourself on a par with such a figure from musical history, not to feel that it was pretentious or false to hang up her portrait and say to the world, ‘she and I are as one.’” Jackie Callas, *Sisters*, 15.


25. At the time of her premiere, the company was known as the Lyric Theater. In 1959, its name was changed to the Lyric Opera. Lyric Opera of Chicago, “Major Events at Lyric Opera of Chicago,” Lyric Opera of Chicago, www.lyricopera.org/about/lyric-history.aspx (accessed August 26, 2013).

the disquieting element of loathing. It was not a comfortable emotion to encounter and required an adjustment on the part of the listener. Many for whom opera was a release or escape refused to accept it.\textsuperscript{27}

The two divas had very different voices, and they used them in very different ways—for Tebaldi’s fans, it seems to be enough that the voice was, that it existed. For Callas, dramatic truth was the goal, and she was willing to sacrifice her vocal beauty to achieve it. As tempting as it is to try to rank the two voices, there is some merit to the first portion of that famous quote attributed to Callas: “It is like comparing champagne and cognac.” Two such different flavors with such different intentions mean that, while some may prefer one over the other, excellent specimens of each may not be objectively judged as superior or inferior.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Repertoire and Career}

The roles Callas and Tebaldi performed also differed substantially, as befits their distinct voices and training. Table 1 includes the operas Tebaldi performed on stage, organized by composer, along with the date of her first performance and the number of times performed.\textsuperscript{29} Table 2 provides similar data for Callas’s career.\textsuperscript{30} As the tables show, Tebaldi performed a total of 33

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Composer & Opera & Performances \\
\hline
Rossini & Guillaume Tell & 4 \\
Verdi & La Traviata & 5 \\
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\end{tabular}
\caption{Tebaldi's Repertoire}
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\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Composer & Opera & Performances \\
\hline
Bellini & Norma & 3 \\
Donizetti & Lucia di Lammermoor & 2 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Callas's Repertoire}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{27} Ardoin, \textit{The Art and the Life}, 8.

\textsuperscript{28} Harris, perhaps the most open-minded Tebaldi biographer, acknowledged this, with a slight modification: “To compare the two sopranos would be like comparing champagne to Chivas Regal—both are superb and a choice of one over the other would be fruitless!” Harris, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 34.

\textsuperscript{29} Table data drawn from Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}. Casanova’s data is organized chronologically, giving dates, locations, performers, and the like for each opera. A few productions are missing specific performance dates, giving just the month of performance, so the exact number of performances is unclear. This is indicated by an asterisk (*).

\textsuperscript{30} Table data drawn from the Performance Annals summary in Henry Wisneski, \textit{The Art behind the Legend} (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 362–63 and Appendix: Appearances and Repertoire (1938–1945) of Petsalis-Diomidis, \textit{The Unknown Callas}, 577–90. I have tried to remain consistent, including only complete stage performances and omitting concert performances, excerpts, recordings, and the two incomplete \textit{Normas} (1958 and 1965). As the documentation for some of Callas’s early performances is incomplete, I have followed Petsalis-Diomidis’s estimates when appropriate, indicating such estimations with an asterisk (*).
### Table 1. Tebaldi’s repertoire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>First Performance</th>
<th>Number of Performances</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boito</td>
<td>Mefistofele</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Casanova</td>
<td>Salammbi</td>
<td>1948</td>
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<td>La Wally</td>
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<td>Adriana Lescaure</td>
<td>1952</td>
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<td>Andrea Chénier</td>
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<td>Fedora</td>
<td>1960</td>
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<td>Gounod</td>
<td>Faust</td>
<td>1947</td>
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<td>Giulio Cesare</td>
<td>1950</td>
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<td>L’Amico Fritz</td>
<td>1945</td>
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<td>Mozart</td>
<td>La Nozze di Figaro</td>
<td>1952</td>
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<td>La Gioconda</td>
<td>1966</td>
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<td>La Bohême</td>
<td>1945</td>
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<td>Puccini</td>
<td>La Fanciulla del West</td>
<td>1970</td>
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<td>Madama Butterfly</td>
<td>1958</td>
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<td>Manon Lescaut</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Puccini</td>
<td>Tosca</td>
<td>1946</td>
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<td>Refice</td>
<td>Cecilia</td>
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<td>Guglielmo Tell</td>
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<td>Fernando Cortez</td>
<td>1951</td>
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<td>Tchaikovsky</td>
<td>Eugene Onegin</td>
<td>1954</td>
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<td>Die Meistersinger</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>Tannhäuser</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>14</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Callas’s repertoire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>First Performance</th>
<th>Number of Performances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D’Albert</td>
<td>Tiefland</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>Fidelio</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellini</td>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bellini</td>
<td>Il Pirata</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellini</td>
<td>I Puritani</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellini</td>
<td>La Sonnambula</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boito</td>
<td>Mefistofele</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherubini</td>
<td>Medea</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donizetti</td>
<td>Anna Bolena</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donizetti</td>
<td>Lucia di Lammermoor</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donizetti</td>
<td>Poliuto</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giordano</td>
<td>Andrea Chénier</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giordano</td>
<td>Fedora</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluck</td>
<td>Alceste</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gluck</td>
<td>Il Pene in Tauride</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluck</td>
<td>Orfeo ed Euridice</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalomiris</td>
<td>O Promontorius</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>11*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mascagni</td>
<td>Cavalleria Rusticana</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Millöcker</td>
<td>Der Bettelstudent</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mozart</td>
<td>Die Einführung aus dem Serail</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Ponchielli</td>
<td>La Gioconda</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puccini</td>
<td>Madama Butterfly</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puccini</td>
<td>Tosca</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>Puccini</td>
<td>Turandot</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rossini</td>
<td>Armida</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossini</td>
<td>Il Barbiere di Siviglia</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossini</td>
<td>Il Turco in Italia</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spontini</td>
<td>La Vestale</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>von Suppé</td>
<td>Bocaccio</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Un Ballo in Maschera</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Don Carlo</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>La Forza del Destino</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Nabucco</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Rigoletto</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>La Traviata</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>Il Trovatore</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>I Vespri Siciliani</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>Parsifal</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>Tristan und Isolde</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>Die Walküre</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Giovanni Battista</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Callas completed 43 different staged operas during her career. Only nine roles were performed by both of them: *Aïda*, *Andrea Chénier*, *Fedora*, *La Forza del Destino*, *La Gioconda*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Mefistofele*, *Tosca*, and *La Traviata*. Of these, only three were performed in significant numbers by Callas (*Aïda*, *Tosca*, and *La Traviata*). Thus there were very few situations in which the two would have been competing directly for roles.

Maria and Renata took very different paths to the top of the operatic world where they performed these works. Callas was born in America and moved to Greece, where she trained and spent her early professional years. Tebaldi was born, educated, and “discovered” in Italy. Regardless of how circuitous their routes, both rose to perform in the greatest opera houses in the world, sometimes alongside one another.

Maria’s early life and career took a rather roundabout way to get her to the top opera houses in the world. Born in New York City, she moved to Greece as a young girl with her mother, Evangelia (Litza), and sister, Jackie. Litza apparently hoped that her family would support them and her efforts to further Maria’s career. Their monetary support denied, Litza enrolled Maria at the National Conservatory, falsifying her age so that she could attend. Maria worked hard there, studying diligently. Later, after she had enrolled at the Athens conservatory, de Hidalgo found her a job at the Greek National Opera (the G. N. O.), where she performed for several years.  

31. A total of 34 roles (she performed both the roles of Elena and Margherita in Boito’s *Mefistofele*).

32. With an additional four recorded in their entirety but never performed on stage: *I Pagliacci*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Carmen*, and *La Bohème*.

33. This is an extremely condensed version of her early life, synthesized from the many different versions told in her biographies. I have given greater weight to Petsalis-Diomidis, *Unknown Callas*, by far the most scholarly work on this period of her life, with Jackie Callas, *Sisters* providing a glimpse of Maria and Jackie’s mother, Evangelia’s motivations. Her biography, *My Daughter: Maria Callas*, is so transparently self-serving as to be nearly useless as a source for facts, a pit into which *Sisters* also occasionally slips, but both are valuable as windows into her dysfunctional family.
Maria’s Greek career has been neglected by many biographers, perhaps due in part to language issues. Most draw on a common body of stories, such as her being threatened by a jealous soprano’s husband. The reality of her career in Greece, especially during the war, is both better and worse than it is commonly portrayed. While she certainly did not earn enough money to support the family (they relied on Milton for that), her salary and, more importantly, her living allowance from the G. N. O. did contribute meaningfully to the household budget. Furthermore, her singing for enemy soldiers and officers sometimes resulted in gifts of food, even more valuable than money.

After an unfriendly departure from the G. N. O., Maria decided to move to America in order to continue her career. She moved in with her father, turned down an offer from the Met, deciding to wait for better terms and operas, and got involved with the Bagarozys, who signed

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34. This particular incident is illustrative of the difficulty in separating truth from apocrypha and the stubbornness of the mythology surrounding Callas. Despite its lack of veracity, this story reached a wide audience, particularly after being recounted in *Time*, “The Prima Donna,” October 29, 1956, and so it was quite influential in shaping Callas’s public image. Litza recounts the squabble in her biography: “Another soprano had been cast as Tosca that night, but at the last minute she fell ill and Maria was given the part. The soprano, whom I shall not name, was among the members of the repertory cast most virulent in her hatred of the 17-year-old upstart Maria Kalogeropoulos (as Maria was known in Athens) and was determined to keep her from singing. She sent her husband to stop Maria from entering the theatre, but when he tried to bar her way to the stage entrance she flew at him and scratched his face. Again I was proud of my daughter for her courage. She came home with a black eye.” Evangelia Callas, *My Daughter: Maria Callas*, 56–57.

Other accounts differ in their level of detail and establishment; for instance, Jackie only notes that Maria got the role because the other soprano was ill, making no mention of any fight. *Sisters*, 81–82. The location of the belligerent husband varies, too, with some tales placing him in the wings and others at the stage doors (as Litza does) or even in the audience. Details about the production vary from source to source as well: Litza says that this particular Tosca was unrecorded and unrehearsed (Evangelia Callas, *My Daughter: Maria Callas*, 56), while Jackie points out that Tosca, “the story of an opera singer struggling against an occupying power . . . must surely have been approved by the Italian Command.” Jackie Callas, *Sisters*, 81.

*Unknown Callas* argues that this story supposedly took place in July 1941 and notes that the unwell soprano is variously identified as Zozo Remoundo or Mirielle Fléri. According to Petsalis-Diomidis, it never happened, as Tosca was not performed at the Greek National Opera until August 1942. Petsalis-Diomidis, *Unknown Callas*, 279. Callas herself denied any such thing saying “It’s all quite untrue, all that stuff about a torn shirt and me with a black eye and bleeding nose.” (Quoted in Petsalis-Diomidis, *Unknown Callas*, 279). Problematizing Petsalis-Diomidis’s account is that the *Time* article he attempts to refute (“The Prima Donna,” October 29, 1956) states that the fight happened in 1942. The fight still seems unlikely, but Petsalis-Diomidis’s rebuttal is not as ironclad as he would like.
her. One of the Bagarozys’ planned performances fell through, and she ended up taking a job in Verona, Italy, where she met her future husband, Giovanni Battista Meneghini (nicknamed “Titta” by Maria). Meneghini’s biography of Callas goes into great detail describing the way she looked and acted at the restaurant where they met, emphasizing her weight and awkwardness. He explicitly claims an altruistic but not particularly hopeful attitude towards helping her, claiming to have not expected any sort of reward, just as he said he had helped other aspiring singers before. As the reader knows (and as Meneghini knew while he was writing), Maria turned out to be exceptional.

A major figure in that successful career was Tullio Serafin, who conducted her in the nearly simultaneous performances of *Die Walküre* and *I Puritani* that helped vault her to stardom. As her career began to take off in Italy, she was invited to perform in other countries and opera houses, though the Met was still hesitant to hire her. During her time in South America, she was heralded as a diva, earning high fees and audience respect.

She did make inroads into the United States, appearing in Texas and Chicago before the Met finally gave in and invited her to sing with acceptable terms in 1956. By that point, she had been recognized as one of the greatest singers in the world. Her reputation as a diva, however,

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35. This arrangement led to various legal troubles down the road, as they brought a suit against her for fees they believed the contract entitled them to. Their summons, finally delivered backstage at the Chicago Lyric Opera after a performance of *Madame Butterfly* yielded a famous picture of a raging Callas.


37. Maria Callas, “Callas Speaks,” in Lowe, *Callas As They Saw Her*, 131–32.

38. Callas had a particularly difficult relationship with many house managers, including both Rudolph Bing of the Metropolitan Opera and Antonio Ghiringhelli of La Scala. Henry Wisneski, in his preface to Meneghini’s book, comments on this: “One baffling aspect of her relationship with Antonio Ghiringhelli, the director of La Scala, was the precise basis of his aversion to her. Even after he knew she would be an invaluable asset to his company, he resisted engaging her for almost three years. No biographer of Callas has suggested a plausible reason for this antagonism.” Henry Wisneski, preface to Meneghini and Allegri, *My Wife Maria Callas*, xi.
often made trouble for her, as she was publicly skewered for two highly publicized “walk-outs”: Edinburgh, *La sonnambula*, and Rome, *Norma*. In the first, she refused to stay for a performance that had been advertised but for which she had not been contracted; in the last, she was too ill to continue a performance, and the house had secured no understudy. In both cases, she was excoriated as a capricious and irresponsible prima donna, and in both cases, she was ultimately vindicated, though it made little effect on public perception.\(^{39}\)

Tebaldi took a rather smoother path to world acclaim. She was born in a small town in Italy and began studying piano at a young age (her father, who abandoned her as a baby, was a cellist). She began her studies at the conservatory in Parma on the piano, but later decided to pursue a career in voice, to the disappointment of her mother, who had hoped she would become a concert pianist. She too suffered wartime privations, especially as her boyfriend (and later fiancé) was linked with the resistance movement.

Tebaldi’s voice is often described as a sort of *fait accompli*—something that naturally existed in a perfect form, something inevitable that destined Tebaldi for greatness. *Time* magazine, in its feature on Tebaldi, claims that, “Unlike Callas, Tebaldi did not have to claw her way to the top: she was a success almost from the first time she opened her mouth professionally, and her career since has unfolded with a dreamlike simplicity.”\(^{40}\) Mario Del Monaco claimed that he heard Renata at the age of 20 and knew immediately that she would be successful: “I was immediately aware of a voice of incomparable purity and brilliance. I urged her to continue studying and told her that if she succeeded in achieving perfect uniformity throughout her vocal

\(^{39}\) Both the popular perception of her “walkouts” and the truth behind them have been well documented, appearing in most decent biographies of her. Meneghini goes into great detail about both incidents in his book, condemning La Scala’s refusal to defend her and admit their own mistake and her vindication in Rome, which came too late to bandage her image. Meneghini and Allegri, *My Wife Maria Callas*, 255–65.

range, she would enter the operatic world as an exceptional singer. And so it was that a year or two later Renata made her operatic debut and her ascent was rapid, triumphant and inevitable.”

While it is certainly true that Tebaldi had a glorious natural voice, to treat her voice as something handed down from heaven denies the very real work that she must have put in as she studied and smoothly glosses over the “masculine” drive and ambition that led her to work so hard. Her biographies further distance her from such ambition by describing her as “almost frightened” at the thought of future glory, “unable to understand it herself.”

Tebaldi received her most influential vocal training from Carmen Melis, who gave her a firm grounding in the verismo tradition from which she would draw her greatest roles. Teacher and student were close: Tebaldi named her as her “mentor” and described how “[Melis] had a way of communicating her ideas that I instinctively understood, and I treasured all that she told me.” The two remained close for the rest of their lives, and Renata described her teacher’s death as “a painful shock . . . I lost the person to whom I went for professional advice and guidance.”

While he did not conduct at her debut, Arturo Toscanini was a major figure in her rise to international fame. Renata recounts their meeting in interviews with her biographers, telling this story, so central in the Tebaldi mythos, to Victor Seroff and Carlamaria Casanova. Much of the narrative downplays her ambition, portraying her as plucked from obscurity by the great maestro. While she is at first expected to be a man, her name having been misspelled as “Renato” on the

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41. Quoted in Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 22.
42. Ibid., 20.
43. Renata Tebaldi, quoted in ibid., 195–96.
44. Renata Tebaldi, quoted in ibid., 196.
list, her femininity, talent, and unassuming nature shine through her nervousness, and she is “discovered.”  

When she did come to America, having already conquered La Scala, Toscanini again helped pave her way, as the story in which she gained her famous nickname was one of the few pieces of information about her given to the press before her arrival. Thus her hard work was obscured for her American press and public, and she could appear before them as a natural, unpretentious, and thus un-diva-ish woman blessed with a God-given voice.

What this general narrative smooths over are the missteps and mishaps that occurred; while rare, they were significant enough that Callas likely would have been excoriated had she committed them. The 1951 *Traviata* at the Metropolitan mentioned above provides one example: after a wobbly opening night, she cancelled the other eight performances of the opera. Her fans were shocked but sympathetic: “There were no protests, only murmurs of surprise and disappointment.” According to Tebaldi, “It was as though I had betrayed my audience, and they, out of love for me, dared not express disapproval.” Even more potentially damaging to her reputation was her cancellation of the revival of *Adriana Lecouvreur* in the Metropolitan Opera’s 1963–64 season. The production was one of Tebaldi’s “pet projects,” and when labor difficulties in the 1961–62 season forced Rudolph Bing to cut it, Tebaldi cancelled her other commitments at the Met: though Bing offered Tebaldi a number of attractive alternatives, “her decision not to

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45. Seroff’s account of her audition plays up the drama of the mistaken identity and the agony of waiting for the call. Seroff, *Renata Tebaldi*, 1–6.

46. Her control over the press’s access to her personal life will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.


48. Quoted in ibid.

appear in New York until *Adriana* was to be performed remained final.\(^50\) When the opera was finally staged in the 1963–64 season, it was not the triumph Tebaldi had hoped for: as Harris put it, “Renata Tebaldi, for the first time in a career spanning two decades, tasted something less than success if not outright failure.”\(^51\) Tebaldi’s response was to cancel everything and return to her studies: “she felt compelled to cancel not only to cancel the remaining *Adriana* appearances but the rest of her American season as well.”\(^52\) As for the production, “Bing quietly had the sets and costumes placed in storage, and nothing was said at the time about future revivals of the opera.”\(^53\) Rather than raise a hue and a cry, the public’s response was one of surprise: “it was difficult to believe that she, who was so tireless and indestructible, should feel the need [for rest and vocal reworking].”\(^54\)

The conclusion of each woman’s career reinforces its general narrative. Maria’s career is often cast as a struggle, and its end was similarly problematic. Renata, who seemed to glide atop the operatic world, smoothly sailed on to the end, gracefully leaving the stage when she felt it was time. The way each diva left the stage mirrored the way she entered it; each woman had a “fitting” end.

Callas’s career was comparatively short; her wobble grew unmanageable and her notes unpredictable. Franco Zeffirelli mourned her choice to leave the stage: “Maria is a stupid woman, so professional that if she cannot cope with all the notes written or expected, she will not do a piece. This is a crime. She could have done so many more *Normas* if she had cheated a bit; but

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50. Ibid., 48.
51. Ibid., 50.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 51.
she couldn’t accept the principle.”

Even so, her art remained, perceptible to those who could see beneath the crumbling surface:

“There is no other singer in the field of Italian opera today who can work this sort of poetic magic. And even if one strikes Maria Callas on an evening when this magic is only intermittent and fleeting, it remains for me a haunting shadow of the perfection that opera so constantly strives for and so rarely achieves, in which drama and music effect a mutual reconciliation and illumination.”

Callas did not have a graceful exit, and her various attempts to perform after her *de facto* retirement, particularly those after Onassis’s marriage to Jackie Kennedy, were painful for her and her fans. The voice was a shadow of its former glory, Callas a ghost of herself. Benjamin Lumley, who attended one of Maria’s concerts from the end of her career, wrote, “the spectacle was melancholy, not to say painful, to all who could feel with true artistic sympathy. She moved like a mighty shadow of the past before the eyes of the spectators, but it was the shadow of a shade.”

Even after her effective retirement, Callas often mentioned that she’d like to return to the stage. She starred in a film adaptation of *Medea* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, but it was a spoken role. Giulietta Simionato, a mezzo-soprano and a friend, said of Maria and the film that, “[Callas] was the personification of music, so much so that in Pasolini’s film *Medea*, she was not at all herself without [Luigi] Cherubini.” She also gave a series of master classes at Juilliard in New York,

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56. Much as Pauline Viardot recognized the genius beneath Giuditta Pasta’s ravaged voice, which I referenced in chapter 1. John Ardoin includes the quote comparing Pasta to the *Last Supper*, explicitly drawing an analogy between Callas and Pasta. Ardoin, *The Art and the Life*, 46.

57. *The Observer*, quoted in Lowe, *Callas as They Saw Her*, 82.


which some interpreted as a way to ease back into performing. In April 1973, she tried her hand at directing, leading a production of Giuseppe Verdi’s *I vespri siciliani* that led to reports of her “mellowed” temperament and sensitivity, as well as mediocre reviews.

To the disappointment of her fans, Maria never did return to the operatic stage, though she did participate in a disastrous (in her eyes, at least) concert tour. She died in her Paris apartment on September 16, 1977, alone except for her faithful maid, Bruna, and her dogs. Jackie claimed that she had been sending her sister medications unavailable in France, as Maria was, by her account, taking both uppers and downers. Whether any medications she was taking played any part in her death is impossible to know for sure, as her body was cremated soon after her death. The official cause of death was reported as a heart attack. She was only fifty-three.

Even after death, confusion about the basic facts continued. Meneghini arrived, bearing a will that left all her possessions to him. Litza and Jackie contested this, but, according to Jackie, Maria’s “friend” Vasso Devetzi ended up with most of the money, never to be seen again. Other writers insist that Devetzi did nothing wrong, setting up a memorial fund intended to help aspiring singers. Ultimately, Maria’s story has a sad ending, one much like her heroine, Maria Malibran, and the romantic characters both divas embodied on stage.

60. John Ardoin wrote a book about these classes, transcribing her examples. John Ardoin, *Callas at Juilliard* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987). More famous, however, is the stage play *Master Class* by Terrence McNally, which was very loosely based on the classes and her life story. Terrence McNally, *Master Class* (New York: Plume, 1995). It will be discussed in chapter 4.


62. Theories continue to swirl around her death; one recent example, publicized in 2010, suggests that an illness called dermatomyositis, a degenerative disease of the muscles and tissues of the body, was responsible for both her vocal failure and her death. Giangiorgio Satragni, “Opera Legend Maria Callas ‘Didn’t Die of a Broken Heart,’” *Lastampa in English*, December 12, 2010.
Whereas Maria had a difficult time adjusting to life without the voice, unwilling to let it go, always hoping to return to the stage, Renata is depicted as accepting when it was time to retire. After her mother’s death in 1957, Tebaldi considered ending her career (and, it was rumored, joining a convent), but she was persuaded to continue singing by Cardinal Spellman, the priest closest to her in New York City, who reminded her that her voice was “a sacred gift” to be shared with others.63

She, too, experienced vocal troubles as her career progressed, which pushed her to take time off for the sake of rest and vocal rejuvenation. She continued to perform many of her most popular roles and add new ones to her repertory, including that of Minnie in La Fanciulla del West, in which she appeared on stage in pants for the first time.64 Her voice and acting both changed as she matured, understandably, but she left the stage before serious decline was evident. When the end of her career did finally come, it was a conscious choice, a decision she claimed to have made with no regrets or pressure.65

I knew that, sooner or later, I would have to decide and I thought, “Better now, at the right time, and not later at the wrong time.” It seems to me that my decision was right. Of course, God gave me the enormous strength needed to overcome the great pain of my decision. I was never very ambitious. I was concerned with my audience and their approval. When I stopped singing I felt that the “singing being” that existed within me had gone away.66

Tebaldi elaborated on her relationship to her voice after she ended her career:

It was not I who was singing but He who had given me my beautiful gift. That’s why, now that I no longer sing, I often have the strange feeling that two beings existed in

63. Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 102.
64. Ibid., 165.
65. Ibid., 1.
66. Renata Tebaldi, quoted in ibid., 206.
me and that the one who sang has gone far away and left me with many wonderful memories.67

Renata had a sense of humor about her life: when asked what she did after retirement, she replied, “I receive honors.”68 Her awards were many, and she even had a rose named after her.69 She spent her days shopping with friends, and Tina, her companion, housekeeper, and confidante,70 continued to care for her, the poodles, the house, the plants, and anything else Renata needed. Tebaldi died on December 19, 2004, at the age of 82.71

According to her biographers, Renata accepted her retirement and had a peaceful end to her career, enjoying the fruits of her years of labor: receiving awards, spending time with friends, and simply enjoying herself. The “anti-Callas” in her career, so too was she perceived as the anti-Callas in retirement, living to a ripe old age surrounded by friends and generally beloved.72

Both women were well known for their hard work and artistic integrity. Both were respected by their colleagues, and both demanded professionalism from everyone involved in the operatic process. Both were dedicated to their work, and their perfectionism drove their colleagues mad. Callas, for instance, refused to give anything less than her best, taking her

67. Renata Tebaldi, quoted in ibid., 3.
68. Quoted in ibid., 186.
69. Casanova includes a list of them, organized by date, Renata Tebaldi, 191.
70. Tina will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, as her relationship with Tebaldi was second only to Renata’s mother in terms of length and intimacy.
72. This peace and contentment was publicly maintained, though there are hints that perhaps she regretted having sacrificed her personal life for the sake of her career. Mark Gibson, e-mail message to author, October 30, 2013.
rehearsals in full voice and often requesting \textit{extra} rehearsal time.\textsuperscript{73} Renata publicly looked down on singers she thought were irresponsible and insufficiently prepared, including Giuseppe di Stefano.\textsuperscript{74} Both were firm in their beliefs: Callas was known to be determined, while Tebaldi cloaked her will with sweetness, possessing what Rudolph Bing called “dimples of iron.”\textsuperscript{75} But while Tebaldi’s public image highlighted her warm relationships with other singers and opera houses, Callas’s emphasized her storms. Many singers publicly declared they would never again sing with Callas, and virtually all of them did. This image of Callas as a diva no one wanted to work with is pervasive—witness Casanova and Seroff implying that Callas was running out of opera houses at which to sing. Much of her problem stemmed from troubles with administrations, not singers. She was unyielding, firm in the belief in her worth, and she demanded more from them: more rehearsals and more respect. She also demanded more from the other singers and the audience, too, a fact she was well aware of:

\begin{quotation}
I was something new to listen to and my voice disturbed people, my interpretations made them work a little harder, feel a little more. They couldn’t just hear me and say, “Oh, what a lovely voice! . . . Oh, what a lovely note! . . . Oh how nice, how pleasant—let’s go home.” I even had colleagues who said, “We were doing fine until she came along; now we have to work doubly hard.” I’ve caused, I must say, a bit of change in our art.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quotation}

Her drive for perfection was evident early on: in her first \textit{Tosca} (1942), she worked extensively on her part with the musical director and the singer playing Scarpia, going so far as to attend

\textsuperscript{73} “There is one thing that you really must do: that is to sing in full voice at the very first orchestral rehearsals, for your own and your colleagues’ sake, for they too dose their performance according to your coloring, and the conductor also and the stage director. The main thing is to test your own possibilities.” Callas, quoted in Petsalis-Diomidis, \textit{Unknown Callas}, 418.

\textsuperscript{74} Tebaldi recounts tales of di Stefano’s lack of dedication: di Stefano “used to sign contracts ‘distractedly’ and then forget all about them”; one time he completely forgot about a dress rehearsal for \textit{Tosca} in Brussels and had to sing in a black leather jacket as he had no time to change. Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 106–107.

\textsuperscript{75} “Rudolph Bing, the crusty general manager of the Met during Miss Tebaldi’s prime years, knew her demanding side. ‘Miss Tebaldi was always sweet and very firm,’ he once said. ‘She had dimples of iron.’” Quoted in Tommasini, "Renata Tebaldi."

\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Ardoin, \textit{Callas at Juilliard}, 6.
all the orchestral readings. This trend continued throughout her whole career and was highlighted by some of her closest and most respected colleagues. Carlo Maria Giulini attested to her commitment, writing that “When I worked with her, she was always the first to arrive at rehearsals and the last to leave.” Simionato, too, affirmed this: “I don’t exaggerate when I say that she was such a professional she never once missed a lesson or arrived late.” Her colleagues take special care to separate the popular image of Callas from her deeper nature, her hardworking, intensely artistic self.

Of course, the divas’ most famous interactions were with each other. Their earliest contact was in Italy. Maria claims that she first met Renata at a party in Verona, painting a glowing image of the other soprano, whom she called a friend: “I haven’t forgotten the agreeable impression made on me by that beautiful girl, by that wholesome, happy, and cordial face.” Later, the two met again in Venice after one of Callas’s performances of *Tristan und Isolde*. Renata complimented Maria effusively, as she did again at Rovigo during a performance of *Aïda*. Maria is commonly accused of attending Renata’s performances in order to intimidate her rival, but she maintained that she had no such intentions, especially because she believed that they were friends. Renata denied that the two were ever close enough to be friends, contradicting Callas’s account, but relations between the two appear to have been, at a minimum, cordial.

The first major incidents of trouble came in Rio de Janeiro, where both were performing. During a benefit concert, Renata took two encores. Maria claimed that the singers had agreed

79. Quoted in ibid., 9.
81. “Callas Speaks,” in ibid., 129.
beforehand not to perform any encores; some accounts hold that Tebaldi herself suggested it. Tebaldi, for her part, stated that there had been no such agreement. Since the encores were sung with full orchestra, some Callas supporters (including her husband, Meneghini) believed that it had been a prearranged trick at Callas’s expense. Incidents of this nature, where Callas and her fans perceived slights in incidents where it is no longer clear what transpired backstage, were reported and encouraged by the media, as we will see in more detail in chapter 4.

During their careers, the two women did not share the stage, but they did sometimes occupy the same opera houses. La Scala and the Met both had the divas on their schedules during their primes, and the media were happy to report a “winner” when they performed in geographic or musical proximity. Tebaldi, to her credit, generally remained above the fray; after Callas left La Scala, the house courted Tebaldi; Renata refused to sing without Maria, declaring, “I sing only for artistic reasons; it is not my custom to sing against anybody.” Her fans and biographers readily defended her, sometimes launching attacks of their own against Callas, often in retaliation for caustic words attributed to the latter.

As befits the dramatic nature of both women, the arc of their feud (which, according to Callas at least, began in friendship) ends with a great reconciliation between the two. Occurring after the de facto end of Callas’s career, the incident occurred backstage after Tebaldi’s successful opening night of Adriana Lecouvreur at the Met in 1968. One Callas biography quotes Tebaldi as describing their meeting thusly:

> On the evening of October 16 . . . I was about to debut at the Metropolitan with Cilea’s Adriana Lecouvreur and Maria Callas asked to see me. When they told me, I was quite taken aback. I had been her historic rival and we had not spoken since 1949: why did she want to see me? At the end of the opera, she came to my dressing room. When we stood

in front of each other and looked in each other’s eyes, we embraced. Maria embraced me tightly and I could feel her shaking like a leaf. I felt her tears fall from her eyes onto my neck. I couldn’t understand why she was so emotional. I understood everything the next day, reading the newspapers with the news that Onassis had decided to marry Jackie Kennedy. Callas had found out the day before. She was experiencing such dramatic human emotions that she had come to see me to release herself, since I represented the world she had sacrificed for the love of Onassis.83

Casanova, in her biography of Tebaldi, does not include such a specific depiction of their actual meeting, and in this narrative, Rudolph Bing ensures that Renata does not know of Maria’s presence before the opera. Casanova describes Maria’s participation in the standing ovation and her hesitation to impose upon Renata. Though Renata again cautions that they “were never friends. We never had the time or the opportunity for that,”84 they are explicitly described as “two friends who were meeting after a long time” after the show, as “the shadow of the many bitter misunderstandings that had divided them now seemed instead to unite them.”85 The link between the reconciliation and Onassis’s decision to marry Jackie Kennedy is also included, with both Casanova and Tebaldi taking a few mild jabs at Callas. Casanova compares Tebaldi’s tranquil life after her former lover Arturo Basile’s death to Maria’s agony over Onassis, noting that “Maria Callas was involved in a tragic love story that she would not have the strength to endure.”86 Tebaldi admitted that “Maria was not a lucky woman. She suffered many terrible humiliations without having the strength to react to them.”87 Fatefully, this would be their last meeting.

83. Quoted in Allegri and Allegri, *Callas by Callas*, 142–43.
84. Quoted in Casanova, *Renata Tebaldi*, 162.
85. Ibid., 162–63.
86. Ibid., 163.
87. Quoted in ibid., 163.
It would seem, then, that the two divas had few professional reasons to feud with one another. Both were in high demand, and they were generally not fighting directly for roles. There was plenty of room for disagreement between fan factions, however, as their radically different voices and interpretations provoked intense aesthetic reactions. The media, as we will see in chapter 4, encouraged them, often by delving into personal and private matters of Callas’s life. Both women’s private lives were part of their diva personae, the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3: THE PRIVATE

As we saw in chapter 1, a diva’s personal life is generally not something she can keep private, and in this regard, Callas was much like her foremothers. Her relationships with men were the subject of gossip and speculation during her life and continuing after her death, and her mother’s public airing of their poor relationship certainly affected her image as a star. Tebaldi somehow managed to keep a tight rein on the press, strictly limiting the information they had access to during her career. Her biographers, however, revealed her as a woman not nearly as dissimilar to Callas as either woman’s supporters would like to believe. Both women’s lives were flexibly interpreted in order to fit preconceived narratives: Callas, the mannish, devouring diva, and Tebaldi, the feminine prima donna. Callas, probably in part to contradict this image, worked hard to present herself as properly feminine, emphasizing her submissive role in her marriage. Tebaldi seemed not to be consciously working against her prescribed role, but her biographers actively supported it, downplaying her ambition and dismissing any other “masculine” behaviors as adorable personality quirks. Even when the events of their lives were strikingly similar, their stories were manipulated in order to support the narratives that fans (and detractors) had invested heavily in.

As we transition to the divas’ private lives, it is important to be aware of the degree to which those lives were made public, the manner in which they were made public, and the level of control each woman exercised over both aspects. As one of her (authorized) biographies notes, Tebaldi allowed the American press no more information about her than her name, date and place of birth, the story of her debut, and Toscanini’s “voice of an angel” anecdote; the press accepted that. For Callas, however, much of her private life was made public without her permission and
outside of her control. While most of the “tell-all” books came out after her death, her mother did not hesitate to portray her famous daughter as a terrible one in either her book or her interview with *Time.* Callas was sometimes compelled to make her personal life public in an effort to rebut some of the charges of diva-like behavior leveled against her, and the press seemed happy to dig. Callas, for whom conventional femininity sometimes seemed like just another role, often blurred the line between the personal and public. While she claimed to be willing to give everything up for love, saying, “If Battista had wished, I would have abandoned my career without regrets, because in a woman’s life (I mean a real woman) love is more important, beyond compare, than any artistic triumph,” but her own words contradict her:

> What do you do if you do not work? I do not understand. Perhaps some people who do not work pass the time in talking of themselves. I do not want to talk about myself. I find me boring. It was I do that interests me, not what I say. How can you exist if you do not do things, and how can you exist with self-respect if you do not do things as well as lies in you? And how can you achieve that if you do not work at it?

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2. One biography includes an unsourced quote that explicitly claims this: “[Being a housewife] was a game for her . . . . She could never have kept it up for long. But Maria equated having a husband and home with the security and love she had always sought.” Quoted in Anne Edwards, *Maria Callas: An Intimate Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 103. Her husband also includes anecdotes that support the perception of Maria as “performing” her role as a wife, often in extremely theatrical ways: “Maria never sat down at the table before I was seated. She would say, ‘Battista is the master of the house and one must show him great respect.’ She had a rigid and traditional concept of family life.” Giovanni Battista Meneghini and Renzo Allegri, *My Wife, Maria Callas,* trans. Henry Wisneski (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), 215–16. Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope explore the performativity of the diva both on- and offstage in their monograph, *The Diva’s Mouth.* One particularly relevant observation concerns the diva’s expected behavior: “It is not acceptable for women to succeed without men or for women to be happy without heterosexual love. Women who value their careers know this. Consciously or unconsciously, ingenuously or disingenuously, sincerely or cynically, they conform, or present themselves as conforming.” They also address Callas’s performativity specifically: “He [Meneghini] treats the notion that ‘her art was the most important thing in her life’ not as the proud and lofty claim of divas like Lilli Lehmann and Mary Garden but as an attack on Maria Callas’s femininity, of which he is the defender.” Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 121, 137.


4. Maria Callas, quoted in ibid., 160.
In the public’s imagination, she is always striving for more, proving her masculine ambition, and she is never satisfied, which leads to her downfall. Tebaldi is generally positioned as her opposite, depicted as complete within herself, much the same whether diva or woman, reasonably modest, with a fair sense of humor. She is presented as dedicated to her work but not consumed by it. As *Time* put it, “On the surface, at least, Renata Tebaldi is that rarest of phenomena in the posturing, wigged-and-powdered world of grand opera—a soprano without apparent temper, temperament or obtrusive ego.”

*Personalities*

Callas’s life and person, when refracted through the many lenses of those who have written about her and what she herself said, provide a deconstruction of diva gender roles. Many portray her as a workaholic, living only for her art, with “real life” a bothersome necessity. On the other hand, Meneghini argued that she cared more for him than for her career. And, of course, Callas’s own voice is maddeningly ambiguous, so often filtered through the mouths of others. She was made up of a startling number of paradoxes and dualities: she was Mary/Maria the woman and Callas the diva. She was the intensely driven artist and the docile wife who swore she would give up her career if her husband asked her to. She was capricious and exact, willful and obedient, Isolde and Elvira, tragic heroine on stage and in her own life. Part of the divide was probably in the minds of the media—as we will see, much of Callas’s supposed capriciousness seems to be willful misinterpretation by journalists and detractors. Some of it seems, though, to stem from the same roots as her curious accents—her disjointed upbringing.

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One of the most striking facets of her character, remarked upon by close friends and perennially confusing outside observers, was this divided nature. Her friends sometimes wrote that her private and professional identities—named as Mary/Maria or Maria/Callas, respectively—were struggling for dominance within her; John Ardoin, a friend and scholar, wrote that,

What you have to understand is that there were two sides to Maria—like two people sharing the same body. . . . There was Maria and there was Callas. In fact, she talked about herself in the third person as Callas when she was singing. I think Maria was wildly jealous of Callas. Maria was fat, unattractive, unloved by her mother, with all kinds of problems, while Callas was thin, elegant, and adored by the world.  

Callas seems to have dominated much of her life, with Mary/Maria asserting herself with her affair with Onassis. Many remarked on how onstage Callas was completely different from off- or backstage Mary/Maria, and many writers, deliberately or unwittingly, confused the two.

Callas, whose intense work ethic and complete artistic integrity were often remarked upon by her

6. Quoted in Nicholas Gage, *Greek Fire: The Story of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 34. The weight loss referenced here in Ardoin’s description of Callas was the most dramatic visual change in Callas, as she lost a significant amount of weight; as Meneghini observed, “In the middle 1950’s, especially among women, Maria was more famous for her weight loss than for her singing.” Meneghini and Allegri, *My Wife Maria Callas*, 209.

The method by which she did so is debated: many claimed she swallowed a tapeworm (Gage, *Greek Fire*, 66; Jackie Callas, *Sisters* (London: Macmillan, 1989, 139), while Meneghini asserted, against all scientific evidence, that it was a tapeworm that had made her fat and that by killing it, she lost weight (Meneghini and Allegri, *My Wife Maria Callas*, 212–13). He also suggested that her heaviness was the result of a glandular problem (ibid., 105). Her pre-weightloss weight was often exaggerated (Meneghini participates in this as well, describing her as “A kind of clumsy, encumbered whale,” ibid., 208), heightening the “ugly duckling” or “Cinderella” story often ascribed to her, but as Petsalis-Diomidis notes, while she was not overly thin, she was not the morbidly obese woman often depicted. Nicholas Petsalis-Diomidis, *The Unknown Callas: The Greek Years* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001), 516.

7. “The society figure, the side of her that interests the magazines, has nothing to do with the person we have known at work, but unfortunately too many people believe the two to be one and the same.” Quoted in David A. Lowe, ed., *Callas As They Saw Her* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1986), 220. Franco Zeffirelli wrote, “When people become legends, they also become victims of the popular imagination, and it is impossible to distinguish between reality and fantasy. The image of Maria Callas which is generally portrayed has little to do with the true identity of the singer. The only thing that reflects reality concerns her art.” Quoted in Renzo Allegri and Roberto Allegri, *Callas by Callas: The Secret Writings of “La Maria,”* trans. Peter Eustace (New York: Universe, 1998), 8.
coworkers and even record producers,\(^8\) was frequently accused of being willful, demanding, and capricious; those closest to her (and even some who were on less than friendly terms with her) maintain that her demands were not those of a stereotypical prima donna as her naysayers claim but rather those of a dedicated artist who strove for perfection and expected nothing less from her colleagues. Callas herself believed this to be the reason so many on stage and in the audience disliked her:

I was something new to listen to and my voice disturbed people, my interpretations made them work a little harder, feel a little more. They couldn’t just hear me and say, “Oh, what a lovely voice! . . . Oh, what a lovely note! . . . Oh how nice, how pleasant—let’s go home.” I even had colleagues who said, “We were doing fine until she came along; now we have to work doubly hard.” I’ve caused, I must say, a bit of change in our art.\(^9\)

Unlike Callas, for whom the chasm separating her public persona from her private self is vast, Tebaldi’s private life appears to be much like her career: complete and serene. In her biographies, she is a woman at peace with herself and her decisions, whether they are personal or professional. Her status as a single woman does not diminish her in any way; she is complete without a man, though her love may add to her: Casanova described Tebaldi in love as “more human, so very vulnerable, so feminine.”\(^10\) In terms of White’s narrative structures, most of her life is a comedy, with only the briefest hint of a romance at the very beginning.

Renata’s basic biographical facts, one of the few pieces of information given to reporters, vary little among sources. Other details from her life, more private things not printed in all the papers, are also consistent: her wonderfully close relationship with her mother, her decidedly

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8. An unnamed record producer was quoted in Gage as saying, “To be involved with [Callas] was not always easy but . . . one could never criticize her as an artist: she was the most professional, conscientious, hard-working artist I have ever known. Her musical morality was beyond reproach.” Quoted in Gage, Greek Fire, 38.


poor one with her father, her romantic engagements. The overall tone they take varies by author; the earliest, Victor Seroff, takes great pains to feminize Tebaldi in any instance he can, and later authors (Kenn Harris and Carlamaria Casanova) continue this trend, though they temper it with more modern understandings of working women. Seroff qualifies any potentially “masculine” traits she might have. He paints her as natural, uncultivated, innocent, and even childlike—she is diva uncorrupted and incorruptible. She prefers simple, wholesome food, she grew up around simple, wholesome country folk, she at first did not understand and later rejected the world of the wealthy in favor of her own simple life with her mother and Tina.

Tebaldi is often described in terms that highlight her anti-diva-ness. She is described as beautiful but not self-conscious.11 She is described as ill-at-ease (at least at first) among fancy people and “show biz” people, disliking the pettiness and gossip. Even her more “masculine” characteristics (swearing while driving, dancing the male lead part) are presented as endearing, not dangerous.

While the Tebaldi narratives are remarkably similar in detail, varying somewhat in terms of tone, her life story, like Callas’s, is subject to interpretation according to the author’s own expectations, leading to inconsistencies overlooked for the sake of the desired narrative. Thus Tebaldi can be both secure and confident enough in her ability and future to leave her fiancé, yet terrified of the thought of future success. Just as Callas’s feminine and reasonable attributes are disregarded to support the masculine, diva-izing narrative, so too are Tebaldi’s more assertive,

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11. Marlyse Schaeffer, writing for the France Soir: “Her alabaster skin, the gentle light from within, the captivating dimples, all reflected her serenity. We were seeing someone completely at peace with herself.” Quoted in Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 116. At her audition for Toscanini: “On the whole she looked like a healthy country girl who felt there was no sense in sitting very long in front of the mirror.” Seroff, Renata Tebaldi, 4. Shortly thereafter, the author met her: “Indeed she was beautiful. She radiated so much grace and charm that I could see how everyone, including Toscanini, would be impressed. She was tall and carried herself straight and with a certain dignity, but it was her great blue eyes that arrested one’s attention.” Ibid., 10. When Seroff saw her nine years later, “she neither behaved nor looked like a great prima donna. She still looked like a very young girl.” Ibid., 151.
un-feminine, and occasionally diva-like characteristics downplayed to support the pleasant, virtuous, feminine portrait of Renata Tebaldi, the yin to Callas’s yang, the “good,” “anti-” diva.\textsuperscript{12} This is the portrait of “La Serena,” the serene one, the polar opposite it would seem of La Divina. She is, again, the anti-diva, Callas’s inversion. However, this is a distillation of her life, one that gently smooths over her own behavior that might easily be considered diva-ish. We have seen a few examples of this in the previous chapter, moments of drama pertaining to her career.\textsuperscript{13} Her personal life contains a few such stories as well, including one that illustrates how different expectations led to very different interpretations. Renata was on a cruise, and she and the other passengers decided to hold an impromptu pet show. Her poodle New claimed no prize, which upset Renata so much that a new award (the Congeniality award) was created just for him.\textsuperscript{14} One can only imagine the accusations of pettiness, entitlement, and general diva-ness that would have resulted from such a tale if diva and dog had been Callas and her dog Djedda instead. As it is, it is recounted as an amusing anecdote.

Family Relationships

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to overstate the influence Maria’s mother, Evangelia (nicknamed “Litza”), had on her daughters’ lives. An outsider would condemn Litza as a terrible mother, a fact openly acknowledged by her daughters. Maria cut her mother out of her life, while her sister, Jackie, openly criticized her throughout her book. While Litza tried to portray herself as a victim of Maria, abandoned by her famous daughter and struggling to

\begin{itemize}
\item Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 57.
\item In particular, her cancellation of an entire production, \textit{Adriana Lecouvreur}, developed specifically for her, discussed in chapter 2, pp. 48–49.
\item “Renata was so deeply disappointed that she went to her room and cried like a child. Word of her disappointment got around on board, the jury was reconvened and a new award was devised for New: The Congeniality Award.” Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 129.
\end{itemize}
get by, objective assessment of her story results in a critical view of both her parenting and her narrative. The actions Litza took in Maria’s childhood and adolescence profoundly shaped both Maria’s professional and personal life—in some ways, Litza was responsible for Maria’s musical education and thus career; however, she also planted and nourished many of the emotional conflicts that plagued Maria throughout her life. “[Having] discovered her daughter’s vocal talent, Litsa thought she was entitled to lay down the law on everything, even the direction of Mary’s career. ‘She was always determined to bring up her daughters to be what she wanted,’ Jackie says even now.” It is clear that she was not a good mother to either of her daughters and that much of the “good” that she did was motivated by her self interest.

An observer would conclude that Litza saw her daughters as a means to a better life for herself—a conclusion those daughters themselves also reached. Jackie saw herself as something bartered, exchanged for financial support for her family and, in particular, her sister’s nascent career. Maria, in turn, was supposed to be the means to Litza’s “golden spoon,” as her mother pushed her to foreshorten her education in order to start making money as soon as possible. More sordid, though less verifiable, are the stories that claim Litza pushed Maria towards prostitution during World War II, claiming that Litza kicked her out of the house and wouldn’t let her return without food. Fortunately, the story goes, the soldiers accepted singing instead of sex in exchange for food. Maria also recounts a story where a teacher tried to rape her: “One evening when I was working late in a classroom at the conservatory, one of the teachers assaulted me and

15. Petsalis-Diomidis, *Unknown Callas*, 478–79. Throughout his work, Petsalis-Diomidis consistently spells Evangelia’s nickname as “Litsa.” As “Litza” is the most common spelling, I have chosen it as my preferred spelling, but I have preserved Petsalis-Diomidis’s spelling in quotes.

tried to rape me. I broke free and ran home in tears to tell my mother. Do you know what she said to me? ‘A pity he didn’t manage it—then we would have made him marry you and that would have been that!’”\(^{17}\)

Ultimately, Maria cut her family out of her life. Meneghini believed that the breaking point occurred when Maria invited Litza to Mexico City, where she was treated like a queen as the mother of the diva. There, Maria discovered that Litza had saved up a substantial amount of money while constantly begging her daughter for more, but the last straw came when she suggested Maria give Jackie some jewelry, gifts from Meneghini for her work. Giulietta Simionato, a mezzo-soprano and friend of Maria’s who dined with the two women at Maria’s request,\(^{18}\) described Maria’s reaction:

Maria reacted very badly to this request. Pushing her mother out of the dressing room, she said to her, “When my sister is working as I am and has found a husband like my husband, then she can claim something from me!” She slammed the door in Litsa’s face and flung herself into an armchair exhausted. . . . “I can’t stand that woman: she has ruined my life!”\(^{19}\)

After buying her mother a nice fur coat, Maria sent her on her way and never saw her again.\(^{20}\)

Litza lashed out and wrote angry, demanding letters to her daughter, demanding money; Maria told her godfather that Litza “wrote a letter cursing, etc., as is her usual way (she thinks) of obtaining things, saying also that she didn’t bring me into this world for nothing—she said she gave birth to me, so I should maintain her.”\(^{21}\) When the letters didn’t work, Litza gave

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18. Simionato recounts that Maria asked her to have meals with them or “otherwise we’d tear each other’s hair out!” Quoted in *Unknown Callas*, 536.
19. Quoted in ibid., 537.
20. Ibid.
21. Quoted in ibid.
interviews that portrayed Maria in a truly terrible light and published her own biography of her daughter. Jackie interpreted these actions as Litza’s attempts to rebuke her “naughty girl” and send her running back to her mother, an idea Litza herself foregrounds in her book: “I believe now Maria was in the first stages of the ‘prima donna disease,’ an infection from which she has suffered for years and which can be cured only by drastic means [i.e., a slap from her mother] at its inception.” These actions only further alienated her from her daughter, who continued her voluntary estrangement until her death.

Litza’s daughters had a turbulent relationship with one another as well. Maria (or Mary, as she was known as a child) was extremely close to her sister, Jackie, while she was a child. Jackie was six years older than Mary, and she adored her baby sister, claiming that she was only happy when alone with Mary, away from the incessant nagging and domineering of their mother. The two girls were both pretty and considered to be approximately equally talented at music, with Jackie having an affinity for the piano and Mary possessing what Jackie described as “a nice voice but no more than that.”

Sadly, it was Maria’s voice that led to their separation and much of the tragedy of Jackie’s life. After Litza decided that Mary’s voice could be great, Jackie’s life was seen in terms of how it could advance Litza’s vision. Thereafter, Jackie’s relationships were now part of Litza’s

22. “[Litza] was convinced that Maria was just a naughty girl who needed a smack and who would come running back obediently. The problem was that she had still yet to find the right place to land the blow.” Jackie Callas, *Sisters*, 145–46.


25. Ibid., 45.

26. Ibid., 40.

27. Ibid., 45.
plans—even her marriage prospects were seen as means for Litza’s greatness by proxy. Jackie received one proposal, but Litza decided against it, in order to keep Jackie as backup in case Maria didn’t make it;\textsuperscript{28} however, Litza pressured Jackie to accept a proposal from their landlord, saying “Listen, Jackie, this is a chance for you to do something useful. This man [the landlord] could pay for your sister’s [voice] lessons.”\textsuperscript{29} Jackie, understandably, was disgusted: “I was appalled. The woman would sacrifice anything including her daughter’s happiness for whatever was obsessing her at the moment.”\textsuperscript{30}

Jackie’s defining relationship was her decades-long engagement to Milton Emberikos. His wealth was the main reason the three Kalogeropoulos women weathered the Italian and German occupations with a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs, though it would be unfair to Maria to accept at face value Jackie’s statement that Mary contributed nothing, her salary just a token gesture and her greed boundless.\textsuperscript{31}

While Jackie acknowledged that Litza was the one responsible for her plight, she resented Maria as well. For instance, she felt that her relationship with Milton had been a sort of transaction: “Mary would have her voice; I had been offered in exchange.”\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, she describes Maria as having the “killer instincts” necessary to survive on stage (though admitting they were a gift from Litza\textsuperscript{33} and that “Since her arrival in Athens aged 13, Mother had done

\begin{itemize}
\item[28.] Ibid., 52.
\item[29.] Ibid., 53.
\item[30.] Ibid., 54.
\item[31.] Jackie Callas, \textit{Sisters}, 78–79. However, Petsalis-Diomidis in \textit{Unknown Callas} shows that while Mary’s salary was indeed a pittance due to the inflation that ran rampant at the time, the Greek National Opera’s living allowance at least attempted to keep pace with it, providing a moderate amount of money for Maria to contribute to the household, though the gifts of food she received from soldiers for her performances were probably more valued.
\item[32.] Jackie Callas, \textit{Sisters}, 66.
\item[33.] Ibid., 83.
\end{itemize}
everything possible to suppress any normal human reactions and instill in her daughter those selfish, aggressive qualities that she believed would enable her to claw her way to the top”).

She blamed Mary for some of what happened to her (she notes in her book that “nothing that the great adventure had brought to us had benefitted me.”) After visiting Maria’s body, Jackie writes: “I lowered my head and said a prayer. I asked God to forgive what she had done to me.”

A good deal of the resentment Jackie felt towards her sister may stem from her belief that Mary was their mother’s favorite, a belief she stated explicitly throughout her book. After Mary’s death, Jackie writes that “All she [Litza] ever thought of was Mary, Mary the beloved daughter she was never allowed to see,” and even more directly, that “she [Litza] had never disguised her adoration of Mary: Mary, the beloved daughter at whose side she would know glory; Mary who would free her from her bourgeois marriage, Mary who would let the world know that it was her mother, the still beautiful Evangelia, who had made all these wonderful things possible.”

Sadly, Maria believed Jackie was the family golden child, and she envied Jackie’s love.

It is clear that the primary emotion between the two sisters after Litza’s “discovery” of Mary’s voice was jealousy, which went both ways. When Maria had been Mary, she was jealous of the love directed at Jackie, leaving her hurt and lonely. As adults, though, it is clear that Jackie envied Maria, jealous of her successful career, her marriage and affair, and perhaps even her

34. Ibid., 135.
35. Ibid., 84.
36. Ibid., 5.
37. Ibid., 6.
38. Ibid., 8.
39. Petsalis-Diomidis quotes Jackie quoting Mary: “[Mary] begged [Marina] to explain why I [Jackie] and not she was always loved . . . ‘What is a voice?’ she cried. ‘I’m a woman, that’s what matters.’” Petsalis-Diomidis, Unknown Callas, 228.
break from Litza. After her sister’s death, Jackie noted that Mary had indeed become Maria, that she’d become everything she wanted to be.\textsuperscript{40} Remembering Mary’s engagement to Meneghini, Jackie reflects on the facts of her life: “I, who had always been held up as the one for marriage while Mary was the one destined for a career, was now scattering these prophecies to the wind. I, who had neither a career nor a marriage, was obliged to congratulate my sister who was to have both success and a rich husband.”\textsuperscript{41} After Maria’s death, that bitterness at life’s unfairness crystallized:

It still seemed impossible that that slim figure, that beautiful angular face could really be Mary Callas, dumpy Mary Callas, spotty Mary Callas stuffing her face with food before hurrying off to high school in Washington Heights. Now her hair was beautiful, her hands so long and fine—they were crossed, palms uppermost, the same gesture she used when receiving applause and I wondered if they had fallen naturally into that position or whether the person who had arranged her body had done it intentionally. Oh yes, she was very beautiful. She had had everything in the end. I had been the beautiful one. I was the sister who would marry. Mary, dumpy fat-legged Mary, would sing. Now there I was, sixty and unmarried and there was Mary, one of the most famous women in the world, married, divorced, the victim of one of the most famous affairs of all time. It wasn’t fair.\textsuperscript{42}

In contrast to Callas’s tempestuous (and unhealthy) relationship with Litza, Tebaldi had an exceptionally warm relationship with her mother and her mother’s family. The image of the diva suffering as a child is so pervasive that Seroff was forced to directly contradict her assertions of a happy childhood in order to sustain the myth.\textsuperscript{43} After her mother, Giuseppina, and father, Teobaldi, separated when Renata was three months old, mother and daughter went to Giuseppina’s hometown, Langhirano, where her family ran the post office. Renata grew up

\textsuperscript{40} Jackie Callas, *Sisters*, 3.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 124.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{43} “Although Renata has always claimed that she had a happy childhood, she has arrived at this conclusion, I imagine, because of her deeply religious nature and because she has resigned herself to accept life as it comes. Actually it was far from happy.” Victor Seroff, *Renata Tebaldi: The Woman and the Diva* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961), 12.
surrounded by a loving family who spoiled her quite a bit, especially after she contracted polio.\(^{44}\)

Her grandfather supposedly sensed her future greatness when she was a small child, saying to a piano teacher at the Parma Conservatory,\(^{44}\) “I don’t know what is going to happen to my Renata . . . but I have a feeling that she is going to be somebody in music, and you had better watch her and take good care of her.\(^{45}\)

Her closest relationship for much of her life was with her mother.\(^{46}\) Though Giuseppina was disappointed her daughter chose singing over a career in piano, she supported Renata unconditionally. Renata said:

> They would say that Mamma was a gendarme. . . . She certainly took good care of me, but she never forced her will on me. She accepted whatever my career brought, saying that we were like an army: she was the troops and I the general, and when it was necessary for me to make a decision she always adapted to it. It was her nature to detest continuous change, poor Mamma, but my career had become the sole purpose of her life, and my success was her only happiness.\(^{47}\)

Giuseppina traveled with her daughter, helping her with her hair, makeup, and costumes and, when necessary, shielded her from her fans.\(^{48}\) Her death on November 30, 1957 was a massive blow to Renata, and rumors swirled that she would join a convent rather than return to the stage.\(^{49}\) Support and condolences came from fans and colleagues alike: Rudolph Bing, announcing that she would not be performing as scheduled, said “I am certain that all of you

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\(^{44}\) Ibid., 20–21.

\(^{45}\) Quoted in ibid., 31.

\(^{46}\) A fact so well known that Litza took a dig at her daughter about this, stating that “It must be possible to have both love and adulation. Maria’s great rival, Renata Tebaldi, for instance, was devoted to her mother, and they enjoyed a very warm and close relationship until her mother died. If Maria and I could enjoy such a warm relationship, I should be the happiest woman alive.” Evangelia Callas, *My Daughter, Maria Callas*, 134.

\(^{47}\) Quoted in Casanova, *Renata Tebaldi*, 55.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 38–39.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 102.
join us in sharing Madame Tebaldi’s deep sorrow and in expressing our deepest sympathy and condolences.”

Elsa Maxwell announced Giuseppina’s death in her column, writing, “The music world is saddened by the news of the death of Renata Tebaldi’s mother. Miss Tebaldi loved her mother very deeply and it is difficult to imagine the grief this singer has endured during these last two weeks.”

Two months later, when she returned to the stage in a performance of Madama Butterfly, her fans were respectful, refraining from autograph requests and screaming. Her decision to continue her career was likely shaped by a reminder of her voice’s heavenly nature from a Catholic cardinal: “a beautiful voice is a sacred gift and must be shared with others.”

Giuseppina’s death was a major turning point in Renata’s life: “I think that it was with Mamma’s death that I ceased to be a young girl.”

Her relationship with her father, on the other hand, was less than warm, due mostly to his treatment of her mother. As a child, Renata was told that her father was dead, but Teobaldi reentered their lives after one of Renata’s elementary school classmates told her that her father was living in a nearby town. Father and daughter did have a few things in common, mostly musical interests, but Renata’s opinion of him was indelibly marked by his philandering. His adultery worsened after a surgeon botched a delicate operation on Giuseppina, paralyzing

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50. Quoted in ibid., 99–100.
51. Quoted in ibid., 101.
52. Ibid., 102.
53. Ibid. This meeting is also recounted by Seroff: “In the afternoon Cardinal Spellman came to see [Renata] and had a long talk with her. . . . Renata spoke quietly—she doubted if she would ever sing again. But Cardinal Spellman dissuaded her from such thoughts. As a true Christian, he told her, she owed to God to fulfill her duty and use her talents on the appointed path.” Seroff, Renata Tebaldi, 181–82.
54. Quoted in ibid., 184.
55. Seroff, Renata Tebaldi, 14; Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 11.
56. Seroff, Renata Tebaldi, 26; Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 11.
one side of her face. Renata confronted her father about his cheating, and though the two eventually established a cool relationship, she never did accept his mistress, even after he married her after Giuseppina’s death.

Romantic Relationships

Callas’s relationships with men have been just as fraught with drama as her relationships with the women in her life. Callas in many ways dwelt in a world of men: after she left her mother and sister in Greece for America, her closest female companion was her maid, Bruna. While it is certainly true that she had female friends (Giuseppina Simionato, for instance), her primary relationships after leaving home were with men: Battista Meneghini and Aristotle Onassis, her publicly recognized lovers, and Luchino Visconti, Franco Zefferelli, Leonard Bernstein, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, rumored romances and very public artistic collaborators. Even her relationship with her father, George, with whom she lived after coming to America, was complicated: though she idealized him on some level (perhaps because of her incredibly difficult

59. He re-entered her life again after he was hospitalized, and she established an annuity for him. Seroff, *Renata Tebaldi*, 194.
60. This male-centric worldview was apparent to listeners and watchers. Though Callas has a famously large following among male gay “opera queens,” her lesbian fans are so few as to be nearly nonexistent. Terry Castle, in her essay “In Praise of Bridgette Fassbaender,” explains that Callas was so male-oriented that she had little to offer female fans. Terry Castle, “In Praise of Bridgette Fassbaender,” in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corrine E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia Press, 1995).
relationship with her mother), she was angry when he divorced his wife and married his longtime mistress, Alexandra Papajohn.

Meneghini was the first major male figure in her life after she left her father, and unlike her father, who came in and out of her life over decades, Meneghini’s presence in Callas’s life lasted only twelve years, beginning in Italy, before Callas made it big, and effectively ending on Onassis’s yacht, the Christina. The years in between saw her rise to international fame, her greatest accomplishments on stage, and the weight loss that brought her to the attention of the world outside the opera house. Much like Litza and Jackie, Meneghini wrote his own biography of Maria; again, we reach the frustrating dead end of everyone having a say except Maria herself. During the decade they were together, he exercised a significant level of influence over her life and career. In his biography, Meneghini maintained that he began helping her for purely altruistic reasons, their friendship slowly blossoming into love; this is, indeed, the primary thesis of his book, that she truly loved him. They were married in a small, private ceremony before she left to perform in South America. Ultimately, he believed her love for him continued to her dying day.

61. Maria loved her father “not necessarily for anything he had actually done for her but simply because he was her father and had never persecuted or harmed her in any way. . . . Unlike Litsa, George acknowledged Mary’s achievement as purely her own.” Petsalis-Diomidis, Unknown Callas, 530.

62. Ibid., 532.

63. Meneghini and Allegri, My Wife Maria Callas, 305–6.

64. Meneghini quotes Giacomo Lauri-Volpi as attributing her success exclusively to him, and he claims that, “With my assistance she became, in just a short while, the Number One singer in the world.” Meneghini and Allegri, My Wife Maria Callas, 8, 7.

65. Henry Wisneski, preface to Meneghini and Allegri, My Wife Maria Callas, x; Meneghini and Allegri, My Wife Maria Callas, 8.

66. Ibid., 79–80.
day, as a note addressed “a T” was found on her nightstand after her death.\textsuperscript{67} How much of Meneghini’s account is true is difficult to say for certain.

During their marriage, Meneghini acted as her manager, a job he believed he was particularly well suited for, as he had no interest in his own fees and could instead negotiate what was best for her.\textsuperscript{68} Some of her friends disagreed, quoting Maria as saying he had mismanaged her finances. He bought her jewelry for every premiere, and together they decorated their home. Regardless of the precise name for the emotion she felt for him, he was by her side, figuratively or literally waiting in the wings for her, for many of her greatest successes. Some believe he took Litza’s place as the propulsion for her career, an odd thing to say about a woman who is “supposed to be” so driven. And here this relationship with Meneghini helps foreground some of the paradoxes of the Callas mythos and of Callas herself. Callas would give up her career if he asked it of her, but she cannot understand what one does without work. Callas marries Meneghini just to further her career, but really he is the one pushing her to perform, keeping her going when she might otherwise quit.

It is clear that Meneghini did support her career emotionally: he helped keep her going, dealing with the business end of things and rewarding her with jewelry for opening nights and new roles. He was at her side for many of her greatest triumphs. His attraction to her is documented by himself; though he parroted the “ugly duckling” line that says she was hideous at the start of her career, going so far as to say that her legs were “deformed,”\textsuperscript{69} he does state that he found her attractive.\textsuperscript{70} Her attraction to him is less clear—Jackie paints their engagement

\textsuperscript{67} Petsalis-Diomidis suggests that this was forged. \textit{Unknown Callas}, 656, fn. 29.

\textsuperscript{68} Meneghini and Allegri, \textit{My Wife Maria Callas}, 275.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 16.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 14.
as engineered by Maria as a business decision, but she also believed that Maria fell in love with him because he cared for the woman, not just the voice. Others, generally the less Callas-friendly, see him as just another means to an end—her career. Maria is quoted later in life, after her affair with Onassis had begun, as saying she had confused gratitude with love. “He [Meneghini] never gave me credit either for my talent or for the terrible struggle I had to reach the top. I was just a machine for making money.”

And thus we come to Maria’s relationship with Aristotle Onassis, such a central element in the story of her life. They met at one of Elsa Maxwell’s parties, but the first significant amount of time they spent together took place during a cruise aboard his yacht, Christina. Onassis was a fabulously wealthy Greek shipping magnate, married with two children, friend to the rich and famous. He was one of the most famous Greeks in the world— the other, of course, was Maria.

Onassis was another larger-than-life figure, and their relationship inspired many accounts, with such diversity of fact that they rival the plurality of biographies of Maria. Some of the books baldly accusing the other of promulgating falsehoods. There are a few common themes in many of the accounts, though they are likely exaggerated in some. First is the image of Onassis as conspicuous collector of art, riches, power, and fame, intending to add the world’s most

71. Jackie Callas, Sisters, 123.
72. Ibid., 119.
73. Attributed to Callas, quoted in Petsalis-Diomidis, Unknown Callas, 649.
74. Meneghini and Allegri, My Wife Maria Callas, 287.
75. Winston Churchill was another guest on the cruise
famous diva to the collection aboard the *Christina*. The second is the sexualization of Onassis. He is constantly depicted as virile, hairy, and sexually powerful. Multiple books recount the story that Maria’s first orgasm resulted from her first sexual encounter with Onassis. The power dynamics between the two are frequently explored, ranging from Callas as meek and abused, to Callas giving as good as she got, to Onassis as a wonderful, protective lover to the fragile Maria. Onassis is frequently depicted as verging on abusive: belittling Callas, minimizing her accomplishments, and offering her backhanded compliments that frequently focused on her weight, and he does seem to have been, at least sometimes, the stereotypical Greek male: loud, macho, and dominant. Callas’s feelings for Onassis seem clearer—she seems to have loved him for the rest of her life, though it’s unclear how much she really trusted him after he married Jackie despite promising her marriage for years. Aristotle’s sisters tolerated Maria as mistress but would have refused her as sister-in-law due to her low birth. One sister, Artemis, recognized that both their personalities were so strong that they would never be able to live peacefully, even if each was the only true match for the other.

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77. This might be accurately described as the willingness to talk about sexual matters pertaining to Onassis, though some writers hadn’t hesitated to conjecture about Callas’s sexual activity before him, either.

78. Gage, *Greek Fire*, 143. Onassis would later claim that Maria was at one point so impatient that she performed fellatio in his limo. Edwards, *An Intimate Biography*, 197. Steven Linakis, *Diva: The Life and Death of Maria Callas* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 104, describes Onassis as all about sex, and another includes a particularly crude anecdote, supposedly recounted by Maria’s chauffeur in his biography: “Between them [Maria and Onassis], they’d quaffed an entire bottle of whisky *[sic]* during the drive from Milan. Madame Callas showed him each room in [her and Meneghini’s] house, with Meneghini trailing after them like a frightened servant. Mr. Onassis found fault with everything he saw—the furniture, the drapes, the wallpaper. Then they went outside, and he pointed to the lake and said, ‘I’ve pissed bigger puddles.’ Then Meneghini asked him what he could possibly offer his wife, besides a great deal of money and a good time. At this, Mr. Onassis unbuttoned his flies and took out the biggest member I’d ever seen in my life. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what I can offer your wife.’” David Bret, *Maria Callas: The Tigress and the Lamb* (London: Robson Books, 1997), 177–78.


One of the most popular and stubborn rumors about Callas’s relationship with Onassis is the suspicion that Callas became pregnant with Onassis’s son. Two different outcomes are recounted: one, that she had an abortion, bowing to Onassis’s will on the subject; or two, that she kept the baby but decided for some reason to induce labor early, leading to the death of the child. Meneghini argued against either possibility, claiming that he and Maria had tried for years to have children to no avail, the result of Maria’s early menopause, and that furthermore, Maria never would have had an abortion, regardless of Onassis’s wishes.

While she was romantically interested in men, Renata primarily inhabited a world of women. Her mother, Giuseppina, occupied a central location in her daughter’s life until her death in November 1957. However, she was not the only influential woman in Renata’s life—the other major figure in her day-to-day life was Tina, who was secretary, housekeeper, seamstress, and friend to Renata. She joined their little family in January 1957 and stayed after Renata’s retirement to care for her, the house, the plants, and the poodles. Some authors simply skim over Tina and her central role in Renata’s days. Others name her Renata’s “guardian angel.”

The absence of men is problematic if examined, either leading to a questioning of her interest in men or an emphasis on her career-driven attitude. The fact that Renata and Tina’s

81. The majority view and the one that was repeated in Terrence McNalley, Master Class (New York: Plume, 1995).

82. This view is a definite minority opinion, with only one major source, Gage, Greek Fire, arguing for it and offering “evidence” that supposedly supports this, including photos of an infant and a birth certificate. The other book on the Callas-Onassis relationship, Moutsatsos, The Onassis Women, goes out of its way to reject this hypothesis.

83. Note that there are a variety of bizarre theories about both Meneghini and Callas’s fertility, that she was on medication and “hyper-fertile,” that their problems were the result of his infertility, not hers, etc.

84. Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, 84.
relationship lasted longer than any of her relationships with men, longer than either Callas’s marriage to Meneghini or her affair with Onassis, is never mentioned, let alone examined. Tebaldi’s femininity and heterosexuality were either beyond reproach or off-limits as a topic of discussion. Either way, Tebaldi’s private life provides further evidence for her ambition and drive, her desire to succeed on stage, and her commitment to work, a commitment we see in the first of her serious relationships.

Tebaldi did have three major romantic relationships during her career: those with Antonio Pendretti, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, and Arturo Basile. Though none of the relationships had the same impact on her career that Callas’s did on her own, each relationship’s narrative illuminates a different aspect of her personality: Pendretti proves her devotion to her career, Rossi-Lemeni, her avoidance of drama and commitment to her “simple” lifestyle, and Basile, her “feminine” aspirations.

Her engagement to Pendretti serves as an excellent illustration of her devotion to her (then nascent) career. Pendretti, a medical student, was the son of family friends and a partisan soldier fighting against the fascists during World War II. Though they and their families were endangered by his partisan activities, they all survived the war more or less unscathed. However, Antonio was looking for a wife who would stay at home and bear him children, not a woman who would travel the world for her career. Renata thus ended the engagement and did so

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85. Women like Tina have a history of helping both historical and fictional divas, managing the tasks of everyday life so the diva can do her work. Some fictional accounts highlight the unspoken, perhaps latent, accusations of homosexuality or at the very least, homosociality. This potential diva-izing of Tebaldi, highlighting her participation in this tradition that prioritizes close female relationships was never examined in her biographies. For a fuller exploration of the history of diva helpmates, see Diva’s Mouth, 108–10.
specifically to pursue her career. Casanova argues that one of Tebaldi’s virtues was knowing when to let go (she does, after all, begin her story with a retired Renata), and here she sees Tebaldi exercising that trait. Writing in the 1990s, such a thing was acceptable, though Casanova was careful to word her account in such a way that Renata’s ambition is not emphasized:

The moment arrived when Antonio, the fiancé she had left behind in Parma, confronted Renata with having to make a decision. Now an established physician, Antonio was eager to have her near him, to marry, have children, and live tranquilly amidst all that had been precious and familiar to them since childhood. It was a moment of gentle communication and great sadness which ended with their parting.

Earlier biographers were not so lucky—they had to explain why their perfectly feminine anti-diva wasn’t married and had actually broken off an engagement. Kenn Harris simply omits her romantic involvements during the early portion of her life, while Victor Seroff addresses her relationship, using it to emphasize her bravery, but acknowledging the primacy of her career.

Later in his book, he flippantly dismissed the relationship and suggested Renata was already in love with someone else. Seroff says that onstage, Tebaldi is completely submissive to the conductor, but offstage she has never been dominated—and she wants to marry a “real man,” one

86. I feel reasonably comfortable including emotion and intent here because of the nature of the sources: authorized biographies that have extensive interviews with Tebaldi herself. They either represent her true feelings or the way she wished to be presented to the public. I think the fact that she was willing to openly acknowledge leaving Pendretti for her career is significant.

87. “She has had the strength to pull down the curtain on potentially destructive situations, deciding that she no longer wished to endure the pain, and by detaching herself, she endured.” Casanova, Renata Tebaldi, xiii.


89. During WWII, “[she] bravely walked to the two miles . . . to the mansion of Antonio’s father in Banove, where there was enough room for Antonio to hide safely, and where there was a large garden in which their romance was free from any interference.” Seroff, Renata Tebaldi, 60.

90. Though if her career didn’t work out, “it was clear she would make the lucky man to whom she was then engaged extremely happy.” Ibid., 10.

91. Ibid., 72.
whom she cannot dominate.\textsuperscript{92} Thus in Seroff’s mind, Renata is waiting for the perfect man with whom she can be perfectly feminine; she just hasn’t found him yet.

After leaving Antonio to pursue a career on the stage, her next significant romance was with Nicola Rossi-Lemeni. Depending on the source, he was either the closest she ever got to her ideal man: tall, smart, patient, musical, dominant, and Italian (Seroff’s interpretation)\textsuperscript{93} or a rebound relationship (Casanova’s).\textsuperscript{94} Either way, the relationship did not last. Seroff described their relationship as a happy and loving one, the two singers very well suited for each other; problems arose, however, as a result of Rossi-Lemeni’s overbearing mother and rumors of a relationship with Vittoria Serafin.\textsuperscript{95} After the break, Seroff describes Renata as realizing the virtue of her mother and her humble upbringing, as compared to pettiness and superficiality of the upper class: “Renata had no reason to think her mother loved her less than Xenia [Rossi-Lemeni] did her son, but Giuseppina was not as selfish as Xenia was. She seemed to Renata far wiser—if there is such a thing as happiness Giuseppina probably understood it better than the bel mondo.”\textsuperscript{96} Casanova is much less approving of their relationship than Seroff, as signalled early on by her description of him almost preying on her vulnerability. According to Casanova, he pursued Renata despite the disapproval of his mother, but married Vittoria Serafin, before leaving

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{93} Seroff, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 79, 82–84.
\textsuperscript{94} According to Casanova, their relationship began because she was “vulnerable because of her recent painful break with Antonio.” Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 30–31.
\textsuperscript{95} Seroff, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 72–75. In a rather patronizing fashion, he describes Renata as “much too proud” to share a man with anyone. Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 77–79.
\end{flushright}
Vittoria for another soprano. Renata befriended Serafin, and she confided in her at the end of their marriage.\textsuperscript{97}

As she had hoped as a younger woman, Renata Tebaldi did find her indomitable man, which led to her experiencing power-imbalanced relationship much like Callas’s with Onassis. She started a relationship with a conductor by the name of Basile, who was legally separated from his wife at the time.\textsuperscript{98} Like Onassis, he consistently denied any relationship with his chosen diva in public and kept promising to marry her but never followed through.\textsuperscript{99} He also cheated on her, though she kept returning to him.\textsuperscript{100} According to Casanova:

\begin{quote}
That Renata Tebaldi had finally fallen in love was something that excited her fans. In their eyes she was now even more human, so very vulnerable, so feminine. However, just as the goldminers in \textit{Fanciulla del West} found it difficult to accept Minnie’s choice (Johnson, the bandit) Renata’s choice of a man who was not free wasn’t very pleasing. But her public forgave her. In fact, everyone felt that fate was hard on their darling who had already suffered so much, and it was feared that she would be facing further heartache. This fear united them in a fervent desire for her happiness.

How different the attitude of the world and the press towards “the other one” who was facing similar heartache. Maria Callas had talked too much, made too many declarations, been to conspicuously self-assured to arouse much sympathy for her ambiguous love affair—a love affair which reeked of worldliness and millions. People weren’t willing to accept it as the real thing. Ironically, these two women, Renata and Maria, so different in every way, were both badly treated by the men they loved most.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

Strikingly, this passage is one of the few that acknowledges the double standard applied to the two women, recognizing that the world reacted very differently to very similar situations.

However, Casanova does not maintain this attitude for very long, and at the end of the paragraph,

\textsuperscript{97} Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi}, 30–32.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 135.

\textsuperscript{99} Though there were rumors of a wedding in the United States. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 147.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 136.
she must reassert the separation between the two. The parallels are again ignored, reinforcing the divide between them, when Casanova asserts why Renata wanted to continue this relationship: “Her whole existence had been devoted to her voice, which she considered sacred and for which she had sacrificed fun, comfort, and almost all her freedom. Now Renata wanted to live her life fully.”\textsuperscript{102} To deny the similarity to the narrative of Callas’s relationship with her voice and Onassis would be deliberately ignoring the painfully obvious.

Thus, in their personal as well as in their professional lives, Callas and Tebaldi demonstrate both differences and similarities. While the former were common knowledge, the latter are often minimized in their fans’ and biographers’ narratives: Tebaldi’s diva-like characteristics are minimized or dismissed, while Callas’s traditionally feminine actions are similarly belittled or overlooked. While the two women certainly had their differences, particularly in their family life, their choice in men and even in dogs demonstrate that they were not so dissimilar as their fans and detractors would like to believe. Their actions and choices are interpreted to fit their assigned narrative, ultimately promulgating a vast divide between them in the minds of the public..

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 147.
CHAPTER 4: DIVA REPORTS

All of the information in the preceding chapters has been filtered: through interviewers, translators, reporters, observers; this is an inescapable fact, and I have tried my best to clarify what appears to have happened and what was reported as happening, as well as considering why the two differ. Tebaldi controlled media access to herself, limiting what the press could publish before her careers and authorizing only a few biographies. Callas’s image, in contrast, quickly escaped her control, and the resulting plurality of facts and stories renders her almost unknowable. As chapters 2 and 3 illustrate, the “truth” about Callas, even for things as seemingly straightforward as her birth date, is often frustratingly difficult to find. The result is a diva who differs depending on the telling, from simple exaggerations and omissions to the most extreme form of media depiction—staging the diva herself, with an actress performing the role of the performer on stage and in film.

It is difficult to make any categorical statements about Callas biographies, as there are so many. Some are composed almost exclusively of primary sources, while others offer little but unsubstantiated pablum and tabloid fodder. Her voice is faint in many of her biographies, and even those that intend to compile sources must resort all too often to a voice filtered through others. Many quotes (including many of the best known, such as “Renata Tebaldi is not like

1. In fact, Callas herself was somewhat unsure of her birth date; in her essay “My First Thirty Years,” she acknowledged that her legal documents said December 2, 1923, while her mother claimed her birthday was on the fourth of December. She said that she preferred to believe her mother and claimed the fourth as her birthday. Some authors simply split the difference and give her birthday as December 3. See John Ardoin, Callas: The Art and the Life (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 26; Time, Music: “The Prima Donna,” October 29, 1956.

Callas; she lacks backbone”\(^3\) are at least unverifiable and at most misattributed. While a few authors approach Callas and her life in a fairly scholarly fashion, the majority simply accepts quotations at face value.

Many of these biographers claimed a privileged relationship to the diva: as her spouse,\(^4\) mother,\(^5\) sibling,\(^6\) friend,\(^7\) confidante,\(^8\) or cousin.\(^9\) Each contends that its portrait is of the “true” Callas, the “real” Maria behind the myths and misconceptions. Each author presumably claims prestige from positions so close to the diva, something which Litza certainly did.\(^10\) Some of these authors are clearly exaggerating their closeness to Maria: Linakis, for instance, claimed to be a cousin who grew up in the Callas household and whom Maria turned to when her mother’s book was published.\(^11\) No other author mentions a boy living in their household, and Jackie specifically contradicted his claims, denying that he had even met Maria.\(^12\) In other cases, the relationship stated is verifiable (Litza was certainly Maria’s mother), but it does not provide any

\(^3\) This quote Callas singles out to exemplify the frequent attribution of nasty quotes to her, unequivocally stating “It is not true that when interviewed by the Time correspondent, I told him: ‘Renata Tebaldi is not like Callas; she lacks backbone.’” Maria Callas, “My First Thirty Years,” in Lowe, Callas As They Saw Her, 148.


\(^7\) Robert Sutherland, Maria Callas: Diaries of a Friendship (London: Constable, 1999).

\(^8\) Anne Edwards, Maria Callas: An Intimate Biography (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001).


\(^10\) Jackie notes how her position as mother to La Callas gave her a certain status in her community. “She seemed to have been absorbed back into the Greek community in New Jersey where, as mother of the most famous Greek of our time, she enjoyed a certain celebrity. She had a lot of invitations to the sort of family celebrations, weddings, anniversaries, baptisms that were the lifeblood of the community and by and large she seemed to get some satisfaction out of being a sort of permanent guest of honour.” Jackie Callas, Sisters, 153.

\(^11\) Linakis, Diva, 6 and 13.

\(^12\) Quoted in Nicholas Petsalis-Diomidis, The Unknown Callas: The Greek Years (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001), 607, n. 2.
sort of proof that the story they are telling is in any way closer to the “truth.”\textsuperscript{13} The high level of emotional involvement in these biographies may instead lead to a more skewed and less “true” account, and the books often respond (sometimes angrily) to other biographies that disagree with their telling or present “facts” at odds with their narratives. Meneghini vehemently repudiated Stassinopoulos’s claim that Maria had had an abortion,\textsuperscript{14} while Nicholas Gage, who claimed Maria had actually given birth to a son who died,\textsuperscript{15} wrote that Maria herself had created the story for a number of reasons, including refuting Meneghini’s claims of her sterility.\textsuperscript{16}

The resulting web of claims and counter-claims, coupled with the authors’ natural inclination to paint themselves in the best possible light and Callas’s own revisionary work,\textsuperscript{17} makes it virtually impossible to find identify the “true” version of some events. Some authors seem to get closer, documenting sources and (perhaps) focusing on stories whose accretions are fewer or perhaps more obvious; these authors also acknowledge the impossibility of ever knowing the “whole truth.”\textsuperscript{18}

At some level, however, the “truth” doesn’t matter. So much of the “feud” was the result of fans, who knew about the divas through media and performances. While it is certainly important to correct falsehoods, such as the “walkouts” in Rome and Edinburgh, it is also

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 618, n. 17.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Meneghini and Allegri, \textit{My Wife Maria Callas}, 4–6.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Nicholas Gage, \textit{Greek Fire: The Story of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis} (New York: Knopf, 2000), 199.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 213–14.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Which was then commented on, of course, in many other sources, as in Petsalis-Diomidis, \textit{Unknown Callas}, 465.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Such as Petsalis-Diomidis, \textit{Unknown Callas}, which focuses on a period of her life about which less has been written and which scrupulously footnotes its sources, which are largely interviews and original documents, and which also notes when stories have changed. A study like this of her life and career after she left Greece would be virtually impossible, due to the corruption of memories.
\end{itemize}
important to recognize what the general public would have known and/or believed, be it “true” or not. Even though Callas herself worked to disprove many misconceptions, many still follow her.  

The result is a Callas who is all things to all people: loving and feminine, fiery and tempestuous, professional, glamorous, dowdy, and the list goes on. I often refer to the “Callas mythos,” initially because of the stories of varying degree of veracity that surround her, obscuring her “true” story, but I see her now as a mythic figure, whose many facets and stories (some created by herself, some by others) reflect us, the observers, and the entire public. Perhaps this is some lingering magic from her performances, where she was said to portray both the heights and the depths of human emotional potential. For those who believe her to be a monster and those who believe her to be a vestal, enough stories exist to support those narratives; it is harder, infinitely so, to convey her humanity, shrouded as it is in myth, split into infinite dualities, paradoxes, unknowns. Voiceless, as in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film Medea, she presents a mythic figure.

Callas is not always silent, as some sources do feature her own words. John Ardoin’s film documentary, Callas, features interviews with friends and colleagues, but it also includes recorded interviews with the woman herself. Ardoin’s books also include Callas’s voice.


20. In this filmed version of the Greek myth, Callas appears as Medea but without her music: it is a speaking role. Maria Callas, Medea, DVD, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini (Italy: San Marco, 1969).


22. Both figuratively and literally: many of his works include interviews with her, and many also consider her repertoire and discography.
particularly his transcription of her Juilliard master classes where she clearly states her artistic principles, both in word and example.\(^{23}\) Her voice is further foregrounded in the book’s introduction, which consists primarily of her own words, part of an interview with Ardoin.\(^{24}\) Her essay, “My First Thirty Years,” appears in multiple sources, and Lowe’s *Callas as They Saw Her* also includes additional excerpts of her own writing.\(^{25}\) The Allegris’ *Callas by Callas* suggests an authorial intent to allow Callas’s own words on her life to speak for themselves, but in practice, the book repeats many common falsehoods and perpetuates the “ugly duckling” narrative of her youth.\(^{26}\) One of the authors appears to have been the translator of Meneghini’s biography, a connection that could explain the emphasis on her terrible childhood.\(^{27}\)

Like Tebaldi, many of her biographers were her fans, and a logical result was that many defended her in their works, primarily from the most pernicious misconceptions. This is most notable in Lowe’s *Callas as They Saw Her* which collects much of the material written about her into one convenient book. It, even more so than John Ardoin’s work, seems to be intended as a defense or apologetic work, as Lowe compiles primarily source materials vindicating Callas from much of her reputation. Lowe has done an admirable job combing through sources and culling the irrelevant material. In presenting these snippets, though, he raises the possibility that other, less pithy and positive, comments may have been excluded.


\(^{24}\) Ardoin interviewed her extensively, but significant portions appear to have never been released or published.


\(^{26}\) Allegri and Allegri, *Callas by Callas*, 10, 13, 16, 17, 21.

\(^{27}\) No one could read Meneghini’s biography and believe he and Litza were close friends; furthermore, the “ugly duckling” narrative strengthens his role in transforming her into a glamorous diva. Supporting this connection is the fact that *Callas by Callas* takes many of Meneghini’s statements at face value.
Fedele d’Amico, speaking in “The Callas Debate” of 1969, stated an often overlooked truth, that, “It would not be a bad thing to realize once and for all that Maria Callas’s existence does not prejudice Tebaldi’s, or vice versa.”\footnote{28} Many of the biographies of both women forget this, apparently believing that defending one woman necessitates attacking the other. John Ardoin, who states (rightly, I think) that the conflict is one of operatic philosophy, particularly in regards to the intense disagreements between the divas’ intensely loyal fans, falls into this trap despite his awareness of the deeper issues, clearly thinking little of Tebaldi’s vocal training.\footnote{29}

Callas’s defenders often integrate their barbs against Tebaldi into the general narrative of “Callas against the world,” although Renata is almost always singled out by name. She serves multiple functions at various points in the narrative: she is unlike Callas, having had an (supposedly) easy road to the top—a step-sister to Callas-as-Cinderella; she represents the conservative voice-above-all world that Callas undermines; and, at the end, she embodies the world of opera that Callas gave up for love after Callas had lost Onassis. Some, including Callas herself, claim that the two were friends before they were rivals, a relationship Tebaldi denied.\footnote{30} Others name the rivalry personal, with Callas respecting Tebaldi professionally; still others confidently state that it was the opposite. Virtually every narrative provides words from Callas to support itself.

\footnote{28} Quoted in Lowe, \textit{Callas As They Saw Her}, 205.  
Both divas appeared in media outside the operatic world; *Time* magazine featured both women on its cover.\(^{31}\) Particularly after her weight loss,\(^{32}\) Callas became a glamorous fashion icon, appearing in all sorts of media, including women’s magazines. The media’s depictions of her were often outside of her control, however, and they frequently contributed to her image as an out-of-control prima donna. Tebaldi, in contrast, kept a tight rein on her public image. There were no embarrassing exposés, no accusations of unprofessional conduct.

The media’s role in shaping Callas’s reputation should not be understated. Meneghini recounts how frequently the papers would publicize her “scandals” and quietly note her exonerations,\(^{33}\) leading to “fans” smearing the Callas-Meneghini home with feces after the Rome “walkout.”\(^{34}\) Elsa Maxwell’s fawning account of Callas’s presence at her birthday party when La Scala was accusing her of walking out on Edinburgh fanned the angry flames.\(^{35}\) The infamous photograph of her nearly snarling in full Butterfly regalia and makeup (having just been surprised backstage with a rude summons) provided an image for the haughty, angry diva stereotype, and her mother’s interview in *Time*, complete with nasty letters supposedly sent by Maria to her supposedly destitute mother, contributed to the image of Callas as a self-centered, nearly sociopathic, and certainly ungrateful woman and daughter.\(^{36}\)

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32. For more on her weight loss, please see chapter 3, p. 62, n. 6.


34. Ibid., 268.

35. Gage quotes Maxwell as stating, “I have had many presents in my life, beautiful gifts from rich and important people, but I have never had any star give up a performance in an opera house because she felt she was breaking her world to a friend.” Gage, *Greek Fire*, 12.

36. It should be noted that the original copies of the letters no longer exist (Litza claims to have ripped them up), and some authors doubt their existence at all, especially considering that the quotes in Litza’s book (Evangelia Callas, *My Daughter Maria Callas*) and those in the *Time* (Music: “The Prima Donna,” October 29, 1956) article differ from one another.
The infamous cover story interviewing her mother, came out the week before her debut at the Met. While Tebaldi’s pre-debut press gave out only verifiable facts and flattering anecdotes, the *Time* article included inaccurate information (for instance, listing her birth date as December 3, 1923), repeated myths (the *Tosca* fight in Greece),\(^{37}\) and portrayed her as greedy, aggressive, and ungrateful to her mother and her patron Serafin.\(^{38}\) While there are a few admissions of her virtues (she’s apparently easy to deal with between rehearsals), her weaknesses and missteps were the focus of the article: her vocal flaws, her attitude and actions toward Tebaldi,\(^{39}\) and her lust for glory.\(^{40}\) In a later article, *Time* argues that her life was all about the money: Litza’s requests for more, Meneghini’s expensive gifts, Onassis’s millions.\(^{41}\)

In her essay “I Am Not Guilty of All Those Callas Scandals,” Maria specified the worst of the inaccurate reporting that surrounded her career and made her out to be a monstrous diva, excoriating Ghiringhelli and Bing in particular for their refusal to set the story straight for fear of tarnishing the names of their opera houses.\(^{42}\) She further criticizes people who treat artists and voices as machines: the Met, the management of the Teatro dell’Opera in Rome and the San Francisco Opera House, and fans who believe she must do nothing that is not art. She concludes her essay with an appeal for a fair judgment: “I am not an angel and I do not pretend to be. That

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37. Discussed in chapter 2, pp. 42–43.

38. This accusation of ungratefulness is echoed at the close of the September 21, 1959 column on her and Onassis, where Litza supplies a nasty one-liner about the way Maria treated Meneghini: “Meneghini was a father and a mother to Maria. Now she no longer needs him. But Maria will never be happy, my soul says it. Women like Maria can never know real love.” *Time*, Music: “Love and Money,” September 21, 1959.

39. Callas specifically denied the antagonism toward Tebaldi in Callas, “My First Thirty Years.”

40. Di Stefano is quoted as resolving never to sing with her again. Ironically, it was he who invited her to do that fateful concert tour after her career was effectively over.


42. La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera House, respectively.
is not one of my roles. But I am not a devil, either. I am a woman and a serious artist, and I 
would like to be so judged.\textsuperscript{43}

Her colleagues spoke about how the media portrayed her, sometimes blaming the allure 
of “diva” for media and fans alike. George London wrote:

I realized that Callas, the prima donna reincarnate, fires not only the imagination of her 
audiences but also of the press. They want her to be “tempestuous” and “fiery,” and 
that is the way it’s going to be. . . . There is nothing that can fire operagoers \textit{[sic]}—and 
send them to opera box offices—so surely as the desire to see a genuine member of that 
sublime species, the prima donna.\textsuperscript{44}

Her (ex-)husband, Meneghini, defended her against the media’s depictions throughout his 
biography: “That my wife was submissive and had a sweet temperament is something no 
one will claim, but the little tales spread by her colleagues to slander her, tales which were 
subsequently denied by the press, were inventions.”\textsuperscript{45} Callas herself denied them:

Callas is sweet and does not have claws. She does her duty, works, and is never satisfied 
with what she does. . . . They judge me without knowing me. I am too proud to defend 
myself and I let them say what they want. But then I am upset about all the false things 
they say about me, passing me off as an avaricious and ambitious woman.\textsuperscript{46}

In the American articles reporting on her presence and performances, Tebaldi’s general 
characterization as angelic continued. In contrast to Callas’s (sometimes fiery) divinity, 
Tebaldi was dubbed “La Serena” (“the serene one”). While she was certainly no pushover 
(we ought not forget her “iron dimples”),\textsuperscript{47} she maintained a far less adversarial relationship

\textsuperscript{43} Maria Callas, “I Am Not Guilty of All Those Callas Scandals,” \textit{Life}, May 25, 1959, 134.

\textsuperscript{44} Quoted in Lowe, \textit{Callas As They Saw Her}, 199–200.

\textsuperscript{45} Meneghini and Allegri, \textit{My Wife Maria Callas}, 198. His defenses also strengthened his claims of her 
ultimate femininity.

\textsuperscript{46} Callas to Dacia Maraini, quoted in Allegri and Allegri, \textit{Callas by Callas}, 152.

\textsuperscript{47} As Bing referred to them. Carlamaria Casanova, \textit{Renata Tebaldi: The Voice of an Angel} (Dallas, TX: 
Baskerville, 1995), 42.
with administrations and colleagues. Elsa Maxwell was originally a member of the Tebaldiani, and she, like many other members of the press, was happy to announce Tebaldi’s successes, forgive mishaps, and offer condolences at the death of her mother. Renata’s fans took on the responsibility of attacking Callas, allowing Tebaldi’s own comments regarding the other soprano to be generally calm, measured, and polite. Unlike some of Callas’s fans, who were apparently willing to turn on her if her voice failed to perform adequately, Tebaldi’s organized a rather fan club and behaved sympathetically when vocal or health problems forced her to cancel a performance. Even their attitude towards her less-than-ideal choice of lover was one of acceptance as it made Renata happy.

Tebaldi’s control over her public persona extended to her biographies. In all three, she is a strong voice, as the authors’ interviews enable her to shape her own image. All are officially recognized, and her verbal presence in all three reinforces her approval of their contents. Tebaldi’s biographers, few as they are, are forthright in their attacks on Callas, as they paint Tebaldi as a woman to nice to say such things, so they must do it for her. In some books, this feels particularly paternalistic both towards Tebaldi (who is too noble and feminine to do so herself) and Callas (who appears needs an authority figure’s guidance): “I have tried to present [the story of the rivalry] impartially, but I cannot help but feel that if Madame Callas would do

48. See chapter 3, pp. 72–73.

49. It should be emphasized that many, if not most, of her fans were fiercely loyal, attending her painful concerts with di Stefano.

50. See chapter 2, pp. 48–49.

51. See chapter 3, pp. 83–84.

52. Kenn Harris’s biography is subtitled “An Authorized Biography.” Kenn Harris, Renata Tebaldi: An Authorized Biography (New York: Drake, 1974). Seroff states that “Not until she agreed to let me write her life story did I really learn to know her more intimately.” Seroff, Renata Tebaldi, 11. Casanova’s is also authorized, as proclaimed from the front flap, before the reader even reaches the title page. Casanova, Renata Tebaldi.
more singing and less talking she would resolve more than one of her problems. And I sincerely hope that somebody will explain to her the difference between ‘fame’ and ‘notoriety.’”

The media helped create the image of Callas the fiery diva, and they aided and abetted the “feud” between the two sopranos they treated as diametric opposites. The precise moment when the conflict sprang to life is impossible to pinpoint, as much of its impetus derived from intense fan sentiments, encouraged by the media’s reporting on the two women and their actions. This seems to have occasionally spilled out onto the divas themselves, but as many, including Tebaldi herself, noted, the feud was more outside the divas than in, and it was certainly profitable for everyone involved: it sold issues, tickets, and recordings!

While Tebaldi’s voice appeared in films, it was either as part of a recording of an operatic performance or as part of a soundtrack; while she may be physically onstage, Tebaldi is not present as herself but as a character. Callas, too, appeared in soundtracks, and recordings of her performances are the subject of Terrence McNalley’s 1989 play *The Lisbon Traviata*, but she also appeared as an actress in Pasolini’s *Medea*, bereft of her voice, and the complicated woman behind the voice is herself the subject of multiple dramas, including Franco Zeffirelli’s


54. Though Meneghini believed the feud to be real enough, he recognized that “Even more than the two singers, the rivalry involved their fans, who allowed themselves to go to the limits of fanaticism at times.” Meneghini, *My Wife Maria Callas*, 149.

55. “Tebaldi also notes that, whatever the cost to either ‘rival’ in terms of nervous energy, the so-called feud had many practical benefits: ‘After all, it brought both Maria and me a great deal of publicity. She sold many recordings and so did I!’” Harris, *Renata Tebaldi*, 33.


film *Callas Forever* and McNalley’s play *Master Class*. Neither is a documentary; both are dramatic explorations of Callas and, perhaps, the concept of diva, and as such, both manipulate her life story in the service of dramatic truth, a practice Maria herself engaged in during her life.

Zeffirelli was an Italian filmmaker as well as a director of both spoken drama and opera. He and Callas worked together on several productions, including the extant 1964 *Tosca* excerpt, but his failure to film Callas meant that his career was not complete. In his autobiography, he reminisces about the first time he heard her sing: “She was extraordinary: plump and unattractive, but with a voice such as I had never heard before.”

His wonder at her artistic transformation from dowdy woman to diva was palpable:

> . . . as soon as she stood up to go onstage, a flash of lightning appeared in her eyes and she became pervaded with a potent energy: Maria became a goddess, an angel, a demon, a higher being, perfect, capable of dominating everything with her determination and her art.

For me, Maria is always a miracle. You cannot understand or explain her. You can explain everything [Laurence] Olivier does because it is all part of a professional genius. But Maria can switch from nothing to everything, from earth to heaven. What is it this woman has? I don’t know, but when that miracle happens, she is a new soul, a new entity.

His great respect for her art led to his desire to capture it on film for posterity, a desire that went unfulfilled. He tried multiple times to convince her to make a film, but each time failed before it had even begun. In 1957, he directed her in a performance of *La Traviata* in Dallas, TX, and he claims that a rich Texas oilman offered him $2.5 million to fund a movie of the

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opera, but Callas refused, supposedly on the basis of Zeffirelli’s inexperience.\textsuperscript{64} He tried again in 1966, vowing “I was not prepared to let the greatest stage talent I have ever known slip through my fingers,” but the \textit{Tosca} film also foundered. Herbert von Karajan held the film rights to the opera, and Zeffirelli felt that Karajan’s ensemble would not mesh with the 1964 Covent Garden production he and Callas had created and hoped to use.\textsuperscript{65} Onassis jumped into the discussion with the suggestion they buy von Karajan out, but in the end, Onassis only offered $10,000. Zeffirelli viewed this as “a sign of how he [Onassis] viewed the project. The pre-production costs of a film run to the hundreds of thousands of dollars: by giving so little, he could appear to be promoting Maria, while actually ensuring that nothing happened.”\textsuperscript{66}

This money ultimately provoked the end of the friendship between Callas and Zeffirelli. Von Karajan would not part with the film rights, and Maria demanded her money back, saying that Onassis had made her pay it herself. When he could not repay her, Zeffirelli said he was confronted with “the other Maria, the woman who had hoarded cash with [her husband Giovanni Battista] Meneghini . . . My attempts to help save her for her art had ended in acrimony and estrangement.”\textsuperscript{67}

His regret at never capturing the artist he adored on film seems to be one of the major motivators for creating \textit{Callas Forever} (2002), rectifying an unfulfilled artistic desire. In Zeffirelli’s mind,

[The] real loser [of his failure to film Callas] was the audience, because what remains? When we see something such as the Mona Lisa of Leonardo, we don’t ask what was the agony, or what happened behind the making of the painting. We just look at it.

\textsuperscript{64} Zeffirelli, \textit{Zeffirelli}, 145–46.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 211.
What matters is that we have it. We don’t have such a painting of Maria. We missed the historical opportunity of preserving this woman’s art.68

Another, more personal, reason that seems to have motivated him to make Callas Forever was the guilt from abandoning Maria at the end of her life. While Zeffirelli adored Callas as an artist, he found her boring as a person:

Maria was incredibly petty in private. An evening with Maria was an evening talking about Maria; how good she looked; how nice her hair, her dress; how she really must make a comeback, etc., etc., etc. Frankly, it was frequently very boring, and only my memories of La Divina on stage, when she was transformed by her art, were enough to get me through it.69

Maria was not a happy woman after the end of her career, living as a shut-in at her apartment on Georges Mandel with her maid, Bruna. This sad existence was in many ways a fulfillment of a statement she made earlier:

I am a passionate artist and a passionate human being. . . . To live in a way you can tolerate for yourself, you must work. Work very hard. I do not believe with Descartes: “I think, therefore I am.” With me it is “I work, therefore I am.”70

At the end of her life, she was no longer working, and so she collapsed inward, alienating many of her friends. Zeffirelli believed that “she was drifting into a world of shadows” after the death of Onassis,71 and later stated that “Today, I often regret not having guessed what was happening to her,” though he immediately excused himself on the basis of his demanding work.72 In Callas Forever, we find attempts to make amends both to the friend he gave up on and the artist whose work he failed to preserve.

69. Zeffirelli, Zeffirelli, 296.
70. Quoted in Petsalis-Diomidis, Unknown Callas, 529.
71. Zeffirelli, Zeffirelli, 288.
72. Ibid., 296.
Callas Forever has a hypothetical plot centered around the idea of Maria Callas creating a film of an opera by lip-syncing to her own recordings. The film presents an image of an actress portraying Callas miming Callas for the film within the film. The movie is set in 1977, the year of Maria’s death, and her former manager, Larry (played by Jeremy Irons), serves as Zeffirelli’s avatar, though what one can presume are Zeffirelli’s words find their way into multiple mouths.

Larry is in Paris managing a punk band, but his desire to make a film of Callas is rekindled when one of his employees calls her “an old has-been” and says that she was “before [his] time.” After firing the fellow for disrespecting “the greatest opera singer in the world” (for so does Larry name her), he resolves to go see her and persuade her to take part in his new project, a film named Callas Forever. Zeffirelli’s Callas rejects Larry’s idea, but Bruna invites him back to see her singing along to her old recordings, and through some sneaking about and a quick display of the technology that would enable her to embody her earlier recordings, Maria commits.

She suggests Carmen, an opera she recorded but never performed on stage, as their first film, and production begins in earnest: auditions, rehearsals, romance, spats, and the creation of art. Carmen is a success, but Maria feels that it is inauthentic—a “fraud” or a “fake.” She next wants to create a Tosca with her “real” voice in 1977, not her earlier recordings, but the funding is unavailable. She resigns herself to the end of her career and asks Larry to destroy Carmen in order to leave her legacy intact.

Like everything related to Callas, Zeffirelli’s film must be taken with a grain of salt. He acknowledges the fact of biases and misremembered details in his autobiography, and this work must certainly be affected by the 25 years that passed between Maria’s death and its creation.

73. Zeffirelli, Callas Forever, chapter 3. To aid in locating scenes, chapter numbers for DVDs will be given when possible.

74. To borrow Zeffirelli’s Callas’s words.
Several facets of Maria’s personality appear throughout the film, including her perfectionism and her grief for her lost voice, but the most important recurring theme in Callas Forever is Maria’s intense artistic integrity. This aspect of the real Maria Callas’s personality is well documented, with Callas herself stating “The minute you make concessions or compromises, you’ve sold yourself to the Devil. It’s the beginning of the end, because you then start making one concession, then the other, and then you are finished!” Zeffirelli was clearly frustrated by Maria’s strict approach to her work, bewailing the fact that “Maria is a stupid woman, so professional that if she cannot cope with all the notes written or expected, she will not do a piece. This is a crime. She could have done so many more Normas if she had cheated a bit; but she couldn’t accept the principle.” Zeffirelli’s regret for never filming Callas and his exasperation at her integrity find voice in two major characters who speak with Callas and respond to her arguments. In the film, Callas’s passion for the project does not preclude her integrity, and her concern about the artistic worth and honesty of her Carmen emerges in two major scenes: at the film’s private premiere and at the film’s conclusion. The two scenes are linked by more than just the theme of honesty: the final scene of Carmen is interrupted in the former only to resume in the latter, foreshadowing Larry’s final decision.

The first instance highlighting this integrity occurs during the screening of the film. Maria weeps as she watches herself mime the final scene of Carmen, and her distress grows until she leaves the theater. With the audience’s applause overflowing into her dressing room, she enunciates her dismay to journalist and friend Sarah, who retorts with what must have been

75. Quoted in Petsalis-Diomidis, The Unknown Callas, 564–66.
Zeffirelli’s words in her mouth, exploding with frustration at Maria’s unwillingness to see the truth in *Carmen*:

MARIA: It was a triumph, wasn’t it!

SARAH: It was magnificent.

MARIA: A triumph is the worst kind of failure!

SARAH: What?

MARIA: If the price is too high.

SARAH: What are you on about now?

MARIA: It is like Faust, isn’t it? You know Faust. He won back his youth—so did I, the sound of my youth!

SARAH: Oh, come on Maria. You only know Faust because he’s a character in an opera. He’s fiction, not real.

MARIA: It was a fraud. *Carmen* was a fraud!

SARAH: Yeah, all right! Yes! But only in the way all performance art is a fraud. I mean, when you were giving those great performances before, weren’t you standing in front of painted scenery?

MARIA: Yes, bu—

SARAH: [interrupting] And when you played Medea, when you were deciding to murder your children, weren’t you also looking at a man standing in front of you with a stick in his hand conducting an orchestra? I mean, what’s real about that? It’s all a fake! But you gave it its own truth, Maria, and it’s the same thing with *Carmen*.

MARIA: No!

SARAH: And what does it matter if it’s the young voice, if it works? And it does work. And it’s given you a second chance and you should damn well take hold of it and stop all this bloody nonsense!

This outburst of film-Callas’s anxiety over the artistic truth of the Carmen project resonates with the real Callas’s criticism of her work:

I have an obsession for perfection: if I allowed my instinct to work without reflection, I believe it would be creative. But at the same time my intelligence criticizes. And destroys. My last recording, for instance, had sent everyone at the studio into raptures—the artistic directors, the technicians, everyone. But I demolished it piece by piece, band by band. . . . It’s mad! I destroy myself.  

I am never satisfied. At least, I am never satisfied with my work. I am personally incapable of enjoying what I have done well because I see so magnified the things I could have done better.

However, Sarah (and thus Zeffirelli) have a chance to counter her despair and self-criticism, arguing that her art gives it truth, regardless of the age difference between her body and her voice. It is easy to imagine Zeffirelli wishing he had said this to the real Callas before her death: to the Callas who could have made so many Normas had she just cheated a bit and to the Callas with whom he could have made this film.

The theme of Maria’s self-destruction mirrors the climax of the movie, film-Maria’s calm reaction to the news that they have no backers for the Tosca film. Larry tries to bolster her hopes (and his) with the suggestion of other backers, but film-Callas does something that seems to have eluded the real Maria: she accepts the end of her career and the loss of her voice. Larry tries to convince her that her voice doesn’t matter, but she insists that it does, “Because once there was a voice; there was such a voice.” She has one more thing to say, but Larry has to draw it out of her; she is reticent, but she finally asks him to destroy Carmen—it is beautiful, it is magnificent, but it is not real:

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78. Interview with Elle, April 28, 1969, quoted in Lowe, Callas as They Saw Her, 152.
79. Interview with Kenneth Harris, 1970, quoted in Ibid., 153.
MARIA: [calmly] . . . It’s a fake. I’m willing to admit a magnificent fake, but still fake. And maybe no one watching it would realize that, but I know. I understand that technology can create the most extraordinary illusions, but what I had was never an illusion. If it was nothing else, it was honest. Even on a bad night, on a really awful night when you wanted to close your ears and hide your eyes, it was honest. But now, you are asking me to end my career by announcing that Maria Callas was, after all, a fraud? You want my legacy to be the opposite of everything I ever stood for. 81

Larry is shocked, arguing that Carmen will live on after her, and the film cuts to the end of the scene that was interrupted during Callas’s last episode of artistic anxiety: the final scene of Carmen. As Larry struggles with Maria’s request, we see Carmen die, and while this music is diegetic, it also functions metadiegetically—we know before Larry what he will do, for despite his love for the film and his desire to capture Maria’s art for the future, he capitulates to her wish and destroys their creation.

Thus, in Callas Forever, Zeffirelli rectifies some of his regrets: his project leads to a new creative spark for Maria, the creation of that long-desired film, and eventually a sense of peace about the end of her career. It also ends with no concrete evidence of the film, as it has been destroyed at Maria’s behest. Zeffirelli is excused of his failure to create the film in life, as he has explored (film-)Maria’s reaction to it and found that she would not have permitted it to exist, so making it would have been futile. He has given her some happiness and peace at the end of her days, and he can let her go and forgive himself.

Unlike Callas Forever, Terrance McNalley’s play Master Class is based on historical events: a series of master classes that Callas gave at Juilliard after her de facto retirement from the operatic stage. While John Ardoin has edited a transcription of these classes, McNalley takes them as a point of departure for a dramatic exploration of the nature of diva and art. Each session with a student provides an opportunity for Callas to reflect on her life and career, culminating

81. Ibid.
with one of the most contentious “facts” of her life—her contested abortion. The truth of her pregnancy with Onassis’s child is uncertain: several authors claim it as fact, while Meneghini declares it an impossibility due to early menopause.\(^{82}\) Meneghini further asserts that had a child been conceived, she never would have aborted it, citing her longing for a child (expressed in her letters to him) and strong Orthodox faith. Gage proffers a unique account, that Callas was instead hyper-fertile, and while Onassis asked her to get an abortion, she refused.\(^{83}\) Instead, the baby (named Omero in Gage’s book) died after an elective early Caesarian section.\(^{84}\)

Callas’s pregnancy, whether “real” or not, provides McNalley with an opportunity to count the cost of art, the culmination of an entire play considering the price the diva pays. Even if she was never pregnant, Callas paid a high price for her devotion to music, forsaking the pleasures of life in favor of hard work and giving so much that she perhaps shortened her career.\(^{85}\) However, the way McNalley depicts Callas opposes much of what she believed in as an artist: beyond the abundant depiction of her as a petty diva,\(^{86}\) the character’s dramatic dialogues occur during her students’ arias, a time when the historical Callas was an intensely focused listener. \emph{Master Class} is thus in some ways the furthest extension of the media’s depiction of Callas as diva—in it, McNalley nearly completely severs the myth of Callas from her life, casting an actress to embody the diva and focusing not on the devotion to art that drove her

\(^{82}\) Meneghini and Allegri, \textit{My Wife Maria Callas}, 6.

\(^{83}\) Gage, \textit{Greek Fire}, 201.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 204.

\(^{85}\) Callas herself seemed to believe that happiness and success, home and career were opposing pairs. In her own essay, “My First 30 Years,” she comments on how every success had a price, often a toothache, illness, or other physical malady. Maria Callas, “My First Thirty Years,” in \textit{Callas As They Saw Her}, ed. Lowe, 116.

\(^{86}\) McNalley devotes a substantial amount of dialogue to her demands for a cushion.
but on her hotly contested, deeply personal relationships and reproductive choices which so fascinated the media and public.

Callas’s vocal, artistic, and narrative persists. One article’s title neatly summed it up: “A Voice and a Legend that Still Fascinate.”87 Interest ranges from the beginning of her life (The Young Maria Callas, edited by Bruno Tosi, was published in 2010)88 to the very end (two Italian vocal researchers, Franco Fussi and Nico Paolilo, presented new evidence that supported a 1975 diagnosis of dermatomyositis in December 2010).89

The way these two women were depicted illustrates many of the preconceptions surrounding the diva: she must be clearly “good” (feminine, like Tebaldi) or “bad” (masculine, like Callas) in the popular narrative, and everything must be interpreted to support these categorizations. The media’s reports energized fans and irritated the divas themselves, and media and fans alike contributed, along with the aesthetic conflict between the two, to the growing perception of a rivalry. These stereotypes, stretching back to the eighteenth century, continue to this day, as singers following Tebaldi’s model, such as Renée Fleming, emphasize their humbleness and accessibility (“good diva” traits), implicitly assuming that their opposite, the “conventional” or “bad” diva would be aloof, elitist, ambitious—in a word, Callas.


88. Tosi, The Young Maria Callas.

CONCLUSION

Having reached the most extreme media, the works that literally turn Callas into a role performed, into Callas-as-diva-as-character, we can reflect on how the narratives reached this point. We have seen the tradition of divahood to which both Callas and Tebaldi belonged. Like their predecessors, both their public and private lives were scrutinized and interpreted according to the narrative of “good” or “bad” diva to which each was assigned. Considering the events and relationships of their lives, we sought the nebulous “truth.” We then turned to the modern-day story tellers who perpetuated or challenged these narratives: biographers, journalists, and playwrights.

Chapter 1 demonstrated that diva stereotypes have existed as long as there have been women in opera. Despite being considered unimportant by music historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, divas were remembered in books written by opera lovers, collections of diva histories. The divas included and the stories told about them prove that there has always been diversity in divas and fan preferences: some sopranos have lovelier voices, while others make great art out of imperfections, and both have always found fans and a place in opera. Disagreement among these fans is also old, with feuds and comparisons between prime donne dating back to the eighteenth century.

A diva’s reputation was made up of more than just her onstage performances—her personal life was also the subject of scrutiny. The basic divide between “good” and “bad” diva was the perception of her personality and conformity to contemporary expectations of femininity. “Good” divas, like Faustina Bordoni, Jenny Lind, and Renata Tebaldi were perceived as demure, humble, and conventionally feminine, while “bad” divas are just the opposite: demanding,
ambitious, and masculine. When “diva” is used as a pejorative, it is attached to women such as Francesca Cuzzoni and Maria Callas, who were seen as capricious, willful, and perhaps even dangerous. Women from throughout operatic history had their life stories understood through the lens of their assigned narratives.

Categorizations and expectations clearly influenced how events in both diva’s careers were received and interpreted. The first element of common knowledge, that they were constantly competing for roles, is rendered problematic by the fact that their voices and training were very different, which led to repertoires with little overlap. Callas was a Kunstdiva, sacrificing beauty for drama, while Tebaldi was Stimmdiva, drama contained within voice. Callas’s voice and her studies under de Hidalgo led to a repertoire focused on the bel canto tradition, though she also performed works by Wagner and Mozart. Tebaldi, in contrast, had many of her greatest success with Puccini and Verdi, her work under Melis preparing her for a career in the verismo school of opera. Thus, while they might have been competing in a general sense for the prestige of an opening night or a new production, they shared very few roles.

More reliant on their categorization is the interpretation of specific events in their career. Callas was well known for her supposed capriciousness, with her “walkouts” acting as the prime examples. Contrary to popular imagination, Callas’s walkouts were not her fault—in both Rome and Edinburgh, the management failed in their duties and allowed the blame to fall on the diva. Though she officially won both arguments, she lost in the court of public opinion. In contrast, Tebaldi canceled an entire run of a production created specifically at her request—she refused to return to the Metropolitan without guarantee that Adriana Lecouvreur would be staged—and there was barely a murmur of protest recorded. In many ways, Tebaldi’s cancellation, the result of an active choice, appears worse than Callas’s; Tebaldi contended with vocal issues that
prompted her cancellations, but Callas was ill for the Rome *Norma* and had no contract for the Edinburgh *Sonnambula*. The expectation that Callas was willing to cancel at the drop of a hat and Tebaldi’s reputation for being tireless certainly contributed to the way these actions were perceived.

The ways each diva ascended and later left the stage are also read according to their narratives: Callas’s was a fight, a struggle from the beginning to the end as she contended with an intransigent voice and even worse management. Even leaving the stage was difficult, as she returned to it as a director, educator, and recitalist. Though fans still flocked to hear her, her artistry was eventually difficult to perceive through the ruins of her voice. Tebaldi ascended the world stage with relative ease, her success ensured by a fateful audition for Toscanini. She made many friends and few enemies over her long career, and when it was over, she faced it with bravery and a little sadness. Per the “bad” diva story, Callas died alone and virtually friendless, much as Cuzzoni did centuries before; like the “good” divas before her, Tebaldi lived a long and happy life with many friends. This convenient wrap-up to the story neglects many elements of their personal lives which also contradicted the narratives to which they were assigned, the topic of the third chapter.

The diva’s private life is part of her public persona to one degree or another. Tebaldi’s mostly happy personal life, held together by a mother who adored her and a helpmate to support her, was largely protected by the media, treated respectfully when brought up at all. Callas’s tempestuous family life, particularly her relationship with her abusive mother, was reported by biographers and magazines as a scandal, bringing negative attention to Maria shortly before her debut at the Metropolitan Opera. Her mother, sister, and husband all published biographies arguing their side of the story: Evangelia claimed to be a loving mother, abandoned by a
monstrous daughter; Jackie resented her sister’s success, claiming that she could have been just as good; and Meneghini argued that Maria truly loved him.

Their romantic relationships were treated similarly: while Tebaldi’s were largely treated with respect, Callas’s were depicted as worldly and greedy, the very point Meneghini set out to disprove. She supposedly married Meneghini to further her career, and Onassis was always discussed in light of his wealth. Even though conventional femininity expected that a woman would be married, the fact that Renata never wed and had, indeed, broken off an engagement for the sake of her career, was not seen as a strike against her. Conversely, Callas’s decade-long marriage did not contribute to any perception of her as appropriately feminine. Even today, Tebaldi’s relationships are treated with respect, while Callas’s provide rumors.

The media recur through the entire thesis, as the women and those who speak about them must do so in books, magazines, films, articles, and documentaries. Chapter 4 examines these sources specifically, considering the way both were portrayed in magazines and newspapers, the number and content of their biographies, and the way Callas in particular became a role to be performed on stage and on film. Tebaldi kept a tight rein on both the press and her biographers, limiting what the press could publish and authorizing three biographies, which form the body of literature about her. They are consistent and almost always portray her in a positive light, as befits the “good” diva. Callas, on the other hand, was the subject of many articles and biographies, and their contents were much more varied. Many, particularly the articles published in American magazines such as *Time*, deal with the more scandalous episodes of her life, often exaggerating the drama in pursuit of sales. Others are written from an apologetic perspective, attempting to correct misconceptions about Callas that plague her to this day. Few are scholarly, and there is no single authoritative story of her life. That life story, embellished as it was by both
Callas herself and everyone around her, formed the basis of dramatic works which sacrificed some factual truth for dramatic truth.

In conclusion, the rivalry between Callas and Tebaldi involves more than just the two women themselves or even the divas and their fans. The musical world has always been interested in virtuosi, whether instrumental or vocal, and the private lives behind the performer are invariably the subject of fan curiosity. The narratives are old, and the events are tailored to suit them. I have dealt here specifically with the operatic stage and Callas and Tebaldi; there are many additional avenues for research. For instance, an examination of tenors and the reasons why they are not held to the same exacting standards of behavior would be both fascinating and revealing of gendered expectations of behavior on stage and off. The “bad” diva category in general is also promising, with its many stories of women who refused to conform to social norms in one way or another. Finally, there is much left to be done about these two divas: Tebaldi’s biographies are primarily written for opera fans, not scholars, and a scholarly treatment of Callas’s mature career would be difficult but valuable. The ability, dedication, and ineffable spark that led these divas to the top of the operatic world continues to fascinate to this day.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


