

Maria fails to capture the complex life and vocal tragedy of soprano Maria Callas

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10 January 2025

Maria, the recently released film by Chilean filmmaker Pablo Larrain, is based on the last week in the life of the legendary operatic soprano Maria Callas in 1977. Starring Angelina Jolie as Callas, it is focused largely on the star's psychological and physical decline. Despite some flashbacks of her earlier life and the use of famous musical performances, this effort fails to effectively depict the important and almost unique role of Callas in operatic history over the past century.

Callas was one of the towering figures in the field of opera, even though her career lasted little more than a decade. She debuted in the Italian city of Verona in 1947, when she was less than 24 years old. In the 1950s, with a voice of enormous power and dramatic intensity, she became perhaps the most famous operatic artist in the world, although she always provoked controversy and always had her critics.

Callas was a “singing actress” without peer. During her heyday, there was a rivalry between her and Italian soprano Renata Tebaldi, one that was stoked and exaggerated by the media. They were very different vocal types—Tebaldi the more conventionally beautiful voice, a lyric soprano whose roles, while encompassing a wide repertoire, emphasized Puccini and Verdi. Callas was by far the greater “diva,” the singer who at times made life difficult for opera houses. She was a dramatic soprano whose repertoire was very broad, encompassing the bel canto style of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, but also ranging through the late Romantic period of Verdi, Puccini and others.

By 1958, Callas was already experiencing vocal difficulties and had become increasingly likely to cancel major engagements. By 1959, in retrospect and according to most observers, Callas, though only 35, was nearly finished. Although she attempted a comeback about five years later, her operatic career was over before she was 40. By contrast, most sopranos continue well into their

50s, and the careers of many, including soprano Joan Sutherland and mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, even continued past the age of 60.

As already indicated, there is much gorgeous music in *Maria*. It includes performances of *Casta Diva*, from Bellini's *Norma*, perhaps the aria most famously associated with Callas. There is also the celebrated *Vissi d'arte* from Puccini's *Tosca*, as well as other excerpts from Puccini, from Verdi, Donizetti, Bizet and other famous composers.

The music remains in the background, however. As prominent as it is, it is still incidental to Callas' psychological state in the last week before her death at the age of 53. She is self-medicating and hallucinating at times, surrounded and protected by her devoted butler Ferruccio (Pierfrancesco Favino) and housekeeper Bruna (Alba Rohrwacker)—at least as far as they are able to. Music takes a back seat to psychology and to the personal relationships of the famous artist. Flashbacks are introduced via the device of imagined meetings with a television interviewer. Mostly in black and white, they show Callas when she met and was immediately courted by the fabulously wealthy Greek business and shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis (Haluk Bilginer), even though both Callas and Onassis were married to others at this time.

It is the personality of Callas that is underscored, her diva qualities, her imperiousness and unpredictability. Of course this cannot be ignored in a movie on this singer, who became as well known for her High Society connections as for her vocal career. There is no one quite like Callas on the operatic stage today.

The challenge is to integrate the two elements of her life, and this is a challenge that is not seriously attempted in this film, even though Angelina Jolie trained for the role of Callas for seven months, including vocal training that enabled her to do some of her own singing in the

film.

There is one point in the movie that comes a bit closer to examining the issue of Callas' vocal decline. She is shown leaving her glamorous Paris apartment on a couple of occasions without informing her servants of her plans. She meets with a rehearsal pianist, who works with her and gives her a compassionate but brutally honest diagnosis, as well as advice. He detects a spark of her earlier greatness and tells her that it may be possible for her to sing on stage again, but that it will take a lot of work.

This is basically as far as it goes, however. Furthermore, the film suggests that it was her relationship with Onassis, who discouraged her singing, that led to her decline. Her long affair with Onassis lasted nine years, until 1968, when he abruptly ended it to marry Jacqueline Kennedy, the widow of the assassinated president. This plunged her into depression and a self-imposed isolation from which, it is implied, she never really emerged.

A brief look at the film career of Pablo Larrain sheds some light on the problems with his portrait of Callas in her last days. *Maria* is regarded as the third part of a trilogy on the lives of famous women celebrities. First came *Jackie* (2016), the film on the widow of John F. Kennedy and later the wife of Onassis. The second film was *Spencer* (2021) on the life of Princess Diana. Larrain seems attracted to the stories of female celebrities, and how—at least in the cases of Diana and Callas—celebrity ended with emotional turmoil and early death. The lives depicted are divorced from any broader historical context and understanding of the world in which they lived.

The earlier films dealt with people who were largely famous for being famous. Callas is different, obviously, a giant talent who had an outsized impact on the opera world. But here too, Larrain is drawn to the celebrity aspect. The scenes with Onassis take up a good part of the film, whereas there is little on her early career, her training and her work with others.

A BBC program last year fills in some details and corrects some distortion in Larrain's somewhat sensationalized account. *Maria Callas – The Final Act* features the noted and highly regarded American conductor and musicologist Will Crutchfield, well known for his work in early 19th century bel canto operas, an important part of Callas' repertoire.

Crutchfield makes a persuasive case that the relationship with Onassis was a symptom, the consequence of her vocal decline, and not the other way around. In fact, the record shows that the cancellations

and vocal problems preceded her meeting the shipping multimillionaire. As Crutchfield puts it, the social life came after the vocal decline—it was, whether fully conscious or not, a substitute for the career of opera superstar that was receding into the past. Over the next few years, Callas began hobnobbing with people like the Kennedys, Grace Kelly and her husband Prince Rainier, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, also the odious pro-Nazi Duke of Windsor and his wife the former Wallis Simpson.

Crutchfield discusses the theory that Callas' sudden, intentional weight loss of up to 80 pounds between 1953 and 1954 may have been the cause of her vocal crisis. He explains that such weight loss can mean a shrinkage of fat cells in the larynx and affect vocal power, but he also insists that Callas' problems precede the weight loss, so they must have a different cause.

The likely reason was the way in which Callas was taught to sing, and how she herself developed her “wide vibrato”—a technique where the pitch of a note fluctuates significantly from the original pitch. This can produce a more dramatic and emotional sound, which is precisely what made Callas so distinctive and so famous. But she may have, in the process, sacrificed her voice. She developed a “wobble”—a noticeably wide vibrato that distorts the musical performance in a highly unattractive way. The BBC program shows a brief excerpt of Callas' “farewell” concert at Carnegie Hall in 1974, when, although idolized by a sellout crowd, her voice was a sad echo of its past greatness.

Crutchfield indicates that Callas' self-destructive behavior in the years before her death was because she couldn't go on living when she couldn't sing. *Maria* intimates something similar, but, as already explained, it does not seek to understand why she could no longer sing, or what had gone into the creation of Maria Callas, the soprano whose star shone very brightly, but not for very long.



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