



Caballé's greatness as an artist

is founded primarily on her purely vocal qualities: one of the most beautiful and versatile voices in recorded history allied to a virtually flawless technique. But, as becomes evident in the course of this interview, there is also the charismatic power of her personality which reaches out and captivates audiences the world over, so that in an age when the term has been debased by over-frequent and indiscriminate use, Caballé remains the authentic embodiment of that all-but-extinct species: the Diva.

Robert Pullen & Stephen Jay-Taylor Montserrat Caballé was born in Barcelona, and her early childhood was inevitably overshadowed by privation caused by the Spanish Civil War.

Author's note: The following article is an amended and slightly expanded version of a documentary interview which was originally broadcast on BBC Radio 3 as the conclusion of a nine-week celebratory season of opera recordings by the great Spanish soprano, Montserrat Caballé. It was conducted in English in Barcelona by R. Pullen and S. Jay-Taylor, authors of her authorised biography (published by Victor Gollancz).

The textile factory which her family owned was requisitioned without compensation, and, with an invalid father, it proved almost impossible to make ends meet.

Caballé It was a very difficult time, I think that all the people who were young at the time have never forgotten. For us there was lots of illness in the family, many problems for everybody, everywhere. Life was so hard. I think it best that I don't remember. But what I do remember is that my musical studies began, really, when I was still a child. They went very well because my mother played the piano and she wanted me to have a musical knowledge too. So she was my first teacher. Then I went to the Conservatorio at a very young age where I started to study piano, *solfège* etc. It was a time of joy in a way because through the music and through my companions we already had the illusion of a musical atmosphere which, at the time, was so important because everything around us was so dry, so... nothing. At least this spirit of musical hope brought us a certain sense of another dimension.

RP & SJT Though the family background was highly cultivated, with Spanish ambassadors to the former court of Cuba on her mother's side, it became a case of genteel poverty, and a rare treat indeed was her trip to the opera, aged 7, to hear *Madame Butterfly*. The family was obliged to move on many occasions, always to somewhere smaller and cheaper, until it became virtually impossible for Caballé to continue attending her classes at the Conservatorio del Liceo without taking part-time employment. She was only 12, and had already been studying music for three years. But rescue came in the shape of the wealthy Bertrand family who undertook to subsidise her musical education and upbringing, thus leaving the shy, awkward teenager free to concentrate on her studies. These had originally taken the form of a broad-based musical education, including, as well as keyboard instruction, theory, composition and harmony. But increasingly her studies began to centre around the voice in an institution which had already nurtured the likes of Conchita Supervia, Victoria de los Angeles and Pilar Lorengar. Whilst at the Conservatorio, Caballé had three principal teachers: Conchita Badia, who taught repertory and languages; Napoleone

Annovazzi, a *repetiteur* who thoroughly taught her a handful of key rôles; and Eugenia Kemeny, a retired Bayreuth Wagnerian, who was responsible primarily for training in vocal technique, but who was, as it transpired, a profound musician with a unique way of drawing out the fundamental musicality of her students, as Caballé vividly remembers.

Caballé She was a really wonderful technician from the point of view of what you have to know about your own body, about your anatomy, the parts you use for singing, what support you need. This way you feel your body rather like a gymnast and you learn exactly how to manage the diaphragm, how to pull it up and push it down. This was a very good basis for developing the sound. Also, she used to do an exercise just playing different simple chords on the piano and we had to produce a vocal line of our own, in accord with the different harmonies she played. We had to feel whether these were sad or happy or brilliant ones. So she made us discover for ourselves how to produce a sound filled with the feeling that the harmonies inspired in us. I remember, one day I was doing an improvisation while Kemeny played a bright passage, but then suddenly I sensed she was playing in the minor, so brilliance was impossible and I began to sing with a sad sound. Kemeny was very happy. She said, "Well, you understood: you begin so bright and end dying." So this way to teach was very important to me and I had this for the first two years of my studies. Of course, at that time I couldn't do it like I can today, but it was the start, and it was a great chance for me of knowing her and having her as a teacher. I think it was the most wonderful thing that could have happened to me. Really.

RP & SJT Few singers, one suspects, have had the benefit of such rigorous and inspired training, including a preliminary eight-month period devoted solely to the singing of scales. And it was this solid technical basis that enabled the prodigiously gifted Caballé to win the Liceo's Gold Medal on graduating. Thereafter, she set off in pursuit of fame and fortune, or at least such auditions as might lead to them. But things did not go entirely her way, as she discovered during a gruelling trip abroad.

Caballé I was doing some auditions in Italy when an impresario in Rome told me – it is very well known this story – "go home

and marry because you are not the person for an opera life." He said it very nice. And I'm sure that's the impression I gave him because I was very young, I was very shy and I'm sure I was singing like a first-year student, so nervous was I. But, later, he always said to me: "Thank you, you never revealed my name!" I said, "Yes, yes, that's true." And then I went from Rome to Florence, and there Maestro Siciliani liked my voice so much that he made me a contract immediately for the next Maggio Musicale for *La Vida Breve* and gave me a letter to go to Germany to make an audition in Stuttgart for a famous agent of the time. I did this and the agent sent me to Basel and there I had to audition for my first engagement. And they tell me: "Our sopranos are here already; we don't need another one. But your voice is so magnificent, we like your voice, do you need the money?" And I say to them, "No, I don't." And they say to me: "Do you think you can remain as a beginner covering performances, maybe never doing any. But you will have the opportunity to learn and to have rehearsals." And I thought this is wonderful because this is what I want, and so I say, "Yes, yes, I agree." Then they made me a further proposition: "Do you think you can do, besides this, some small parts? Maybe we can pay you something for any parts you do perform." And I say "What?" and they said "We will pay you one hundred francs for each performance." I replied, "Well, fine." So it is in this way that I came to do the First Lady in *Die Zauberflote*, and Aninna in *La Traviata*... It was good, because when it came the time to sing Mimi, I had already been on stage for so many different small parts that the stage was no longer a stranger to me.

RP & SJT Of course, Caballé had lied when saying that she did not need the money, but had felt that she had no alternative if she was to gain even the slenderest of footholds at this, the outset of her career. She scratched around to make a living, even working as a waitress in the opera house's bar, whilst her mother (who had accompanied her to Basel) worked as a seamstress. Even so, this period of getting by, and of singing such minor rôles as were offered – the first lady in *Die Zauberflote*, a nun in *The Fiery Angel*, Marzelline in *Fidelio* – was very brief: she had gone to Basel in September, and less than three months later, Caballé

had her first breakthrough when the soprano set to sing Mimi in *La Bohème* fell ill. A whole army of covers should have been poised to take over, yet, as Caballé explains, she found herself advancing through the list, one by one, as the replacements all proved to be unavailable.

Caballé The first one was in London doing something for the BBC, Irene Salemka. I think she was doing Faust. Then the second one was sick. The third had got permission to sing somewhere else. So I was the only hope for them! They were very worried. But I'd been preparing myself these months and I knew *Bohème* very well because at the end of my career in the Conservatorio I'd studied with Annovazzi and I learned three or four important rôles with him including *Bohème*. And so I sung Mimi and it went so well that immediately after they gave me the rôle of Nedda in *I Pagliacci* which was a little heavy for me at that time. But I was feeling great to do this. Now, Irene Salemka's success in London made her ask the Opera House in Basel to release her. So from being the fourth cover I became the first soprano, which was wonderful. In the same season I sang not only many Mimis and Neddas, but also Tosca – which was too heavy – and Tiegland by d'Albert – which was too low! But I remember this first season in Basel with lots of love and happiness. From everything I did I knew that it wasn't an illusion, it was the feeling of being on stage and feeling the music the way Kemeny had taught me. But also beginning to be alive in the life I always wanted.

RP & SJT Caballé's success at Basel enabled her to bring the entire family to Switzerland, including Carlos, her younger brother, who was shortly to become her manager and agent. As the now undisputed principal soprano, first at Basel for two more years, and then at Bremen for a further three, she took on a punishing schedule.

Caballé Bremen offered me the possibility of singing *Traviata* for the first time, Handel's *Ariodante*, *Trovatore*, Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte*, the Countess in *Figaro*, Lady Godiva, Dvorak's *Armida*. All the rôles I sang there were new for me. So between the two theatres – Basel and Bremen – when I left to come back to Spain in 1962 I had sung 42 different rôles. Which was a lot in

just six years. But it was very important for my future career.

RP & SJT But all this ceaseless activity had taken a toll on her, if not vocally, then at least psychologically. She had grown tired of the treadmill of operatic routine in Bremen. Now in her late 20s, she felt the need to return home and re-establish her Spanish roots. In January 1962, she sang the title rôle of Strauss's *Arabella* – incidentally its Spanish premiere at the Grand Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona. This was her début in the opera house in whose Conservatorio situated above the auditorium she had studied for so many years. Her success in this performance, followed by the Donna Elvira she gave a week later, marked the start of an unbroken – until this year – association with the House.

Caballé You know, looking at the House, everybody screaming so wild, I thought "How wonderful! They've at last discovered me!" I was remembering when I was eight years old at a performance there of *Madama Butterfly*, and then how many times when I was at the Conservatorio I had passed through a small door which they used to open for me so that I could see the performances. And I was remembering the *Aida* with Del Monaco, the *Traviata* and *Manon Lescaut* with Tebaldi, a wonderful *Andrea Chénier* with Mario Filippeschi and Maria Caniglia in which they had to repeat the final duet twice. I was looking out at the auditorium thinking to myself: "So many years waiting to be here. I have to work through all Europe to come down. It was so close – from the top of the House to the bottom, just a few stairs. Yet I have had to go such a long way." But it was worth it and I was very, very happy.

RP & SJT Montserrat had even more reason for happiness the following year when she sang her first Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly* opposite a young tenor from Aragon.

Caballé We met shortly before when I was singing in the many European premières of Pablo Casals' *El Pessebre*, in Florence, in Assisi, in Geneva and Paris and it was there I first met Bernabé [Martí]. Then later in Barcelona we sang together in *Madama Butterfly*. Six months later we were married. Bernabé says, "I have a rival as your lover. It's your music, and this I can never approach." And I say "You're crazy!" But somehow it's true, I recognise it.

RP & SJT After her marriage (appropriately enough at the mountain monastery of Montserrat), Caballé entrusted her career to her twenty-one year old younger brother, Carlos, who secured for his sister numerous engagements on the Spanish speaking operatic circuit – Mexico, Puerto Rico, Buenos Aires and Rio. His aim was to further his sister's career to the point where the dreamt-of international breakthrough became inevitable. The year was 1965: she was scheduled to spend most of the summer making her British début at Glyndebourne singing the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* and the Countess in *Nozze di Figaro*, and later that year she was already contracted to make her North American début singing *Traviata* in Dallas – scene of so many of Maria Callas's triumphs. But in this well-planned year of important débuts, something entirely unexpected happened.

Caballé A proposition suddenly arose to make my début in New York in the rôle of Donizetti's Lucrezia Borgia, and I thought to myself, "Aha, that's good, but..." Carlos, my brother, said to me, "No 'Buts.' You're going to do it." I said, "But I don't know the part, I don't think I can do it." "Nonsense!", he said, "You are going to do it." So I learned it very quickly, in less than one month. I went to New York with my score of *Der Rosenkavalier* because this is what came next after New York. The situation was very funny because I was working with a *repetiteur* on Borgia, but I said to Alan Oxenburg, who was the Director of the American Opera Society: "Well, I'm here, but please can I have one or two hours a day with the *repetiteur* for my own purposes?" And he said, "Of course, when do you want him? My piano, my room, my music, everything is at your disposal." Marilyn Horne was having a baby, I was saving the performance, so he made everything very easy for me. The second day I was rehearsing at his house when he came in the room. I was rehearsing the Marschallin's Act One monologue. "What are you doing!?", he cried. I said, "Rehearsing." "Evidently, but what?" I said "Rosenkavalier." He said, "Yes, yes, I know what it is. But why?" "Because my next engagement is in Glyndebourne, and I want to arrive knowing the part well. I've only just begun to learn it." "The Marschallin!! You cannot rehearse the Marschallin that lies so low when you are going to sing the

Borgia which is so high." I said, "Yes I can, I know I can, otherwise I would not do it." "Do you permit me to sit here and listen?" he asked. "Yes, yes." So I went on with my two hours of Marschallin after the rehearsal of *Lucrezia Borgia* during the day. And at the end Alan Oxenburg said, "I am astonished. You know, I never thought that you could do this." And I told him, "Well, you were wrong. I never thought I could do *Lucrezia Borgia*. I was wrong too."

RP & SJT Just how wrong is the very stuff of operatic legend. At the concert performance on the 29th April 1965, Caballé received a twenty-minute ovation after her first aria, and pandemonium broke out at the very end. The managements of both RCA and the Metropolitan Opera House were immediately to be found backstage waving blank contracts, and the following morning Caballé was front page news. As the New York Herald Tribune reported: "No amount of publicity could have foretold the extraordinary impact that this stately Goya-esque woman would have on an audience already spoiled by the likes of Callas and Sutherland. When Caballé began her first aria there was a perceptible change in the atmosphere. It seemed for a moment that everyone had stopped breathing. What emanates from Caballé's throat could best be described as total purity. If Callas has been dubbed *La Divina* and Sutherland *La Stupenda*, then Montserrat Caballé must henceforth be known as *La Superba*." It was one of those spectacular overnight successes such as can only happen in New York. Nevertheless, despite all this heady acclaim, and the obvious temptation to remain in America to cash in on it, Caballé boarded a plane bound for London in order to honour her pre-existing contract with Glyndebourne. Voluntarily, she exchanged a world of neon-lit showbiz for the more sedate pleasures of the Sussex downs. Rather more unexpectedly, she progressed within twenty-four hours from being idolised as the new star to being admonished as a new recruit.

Caballé I arrived at Glyndebourne and had my first rehearsal. John Pritchard says to me "Madame, you are not prepared". I replied "No sir, you know I was having to learn *Lucrezia Borgia* in the month I was supposed to learn Marschallin." "But the

première is in seventeen days!" "Yes, yes, I know." "We have to postpone." I asked, "What do you mean? Postpone the performance?" Pritchard said, "No, not the performance: postpone you!" "Postpone me!?" "Yes, because for the Marschallin you need two or three years to have the rôle inside you." I was so angry, and said, "No sir. Not me. I'll have it much sooner. Please be kind: give me one week, only one week, I don't ask very much. Just seven days. I will go home, and after seven days if I don't know the part you can replace me." He accepted this, but looked at me and I'm sure that he was thinking "She's crazy." So on the eighth day I went back. I was sitting without the score. We began to rehearse and I think I made two or three mistakes, but this was nothing because the other singers were making many more than me. And afterwards Pritchard came to me and said, "You lied to me. You knew the part!" "No! it was like I told you." He said, "You were just too tired, that's why." I think that he never believed that I didn't know the part when I arrived at Glyndebourne. But it's true: I knew it very little. I had learned it day and night that week, sleeping with the cassette, the score, everything. After the première the reviews were magnificent and the satisfaction immense. Because, though *Lucrezia Borgia* launched me to the international career and all the recordings etc., which was wonderful - my first appearance at Carnegie Hall (the right time, the right place, the right opera), - the contract at Glyndebourne for me was the most important at the time and I so wanted to have a success. I know the reviews in New York had been great but, to me, Glyndebourne was immense.

RP & SJT But the success Caballé enjoyed at Glyndebourne that summer, at the outset of her international career, also in some ways transpired to be a sad farewell. For this was the last time she would ever be engaged as an exponent of the German lyric repertory on which her career, to that date, had been founded. Thereafter, it was only possible on special occasions for her to return to Mozart and Strauss – the two composers who have always been closest to her heart. Mozart, of course, had been with her from the very beginning...

Caballé Remember that when I was in Basel my first rôle was

in *Die Zauberflöte*. I was also covering Papagena, which I never sang. Then later I sang two performances of the Queen of the Night! and later, still in Basel, I sang Pamina. And then in *Don Giovanni*, my first rôle was Zerlina which I'd already covered. I then passed on to Elvira – a rôle which, in the whole of my career, I have sung more than 350 times! And later still, I sang Donna Anna. It was just the same with *Figaro*: first I sang Susanna and then the Countess. So really in these years in Basel and Bremen, I sang all the Mozart rôles. Well, not Don Giovanni, but I could have sung him as well after singing all three women's rôles so many times. So, you see, I was very familiar with Mozart, and to me it was a little sad when, going into Bel Canto, I began to see that everyone was asking for Bel Canto – which I do love – but my background was there, sleeping: my Mozart and my beloved Strauss; my *Rosenkavalier*, my *Salome*, my *Chrysothemis*, my *Arabella* they were there you know. And then my *Fiordiligi* – I am so glad to have had the chance to record at least one Mozart work in my career. [RP & SJT: Caballé's only commercial Mozart recording is *Così fan Tutte* conducted by Sir Colin Davis for Philips.]

RP & SJT While she is prepared to acknowledge her musical preferences, Caballé has a profound commitment to the overriding human importance of music, and to the expansion of the repertory.

Caballé Conchita Badia taught me repertory when I was at the Conservatorio: all the Italian classical composers, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, Wolf, all the French melodies, and the Spanish – Granados, Turina, de Falla. Finally I could develop all these into a *leiderabend* which I first got to perform when I toured Mexico and South America in 1963. The audiences were so thrilled and I decided therefore to do this always throughout my career, never devoting myself only to the one thing. Conchita always said to me: "You have to love all the music, all of it, like you love all human races. You don't make a discrimination between this race and the other, and music is the same. You love it all – modern, old, all the composers. Music is... everything." I knew then that she was right and I have always followed her advice.

RP & SJT Even so, there must be practical problems in learning such a diversity of rôles from so many different periods and in so many different languages. How does she deal with these?

Caballé You have not only to sing, but to know which style is Strauss, which style is Bel Canto, or Verdi, or Puccini. Every one of them is different. And for this reason you need to have a deep knowledge of music history in your background. The approach of the different composers needs an approach of knowledge, of their style, and not just of the era they composed in but also the styles of that time. So it's not that you sing, for example, Pacini à la Rossini. You sing in that period of time all the musicians according to their own style. All this repertoire I bring back from the ground where it lay forgotten, I think that it has taught me a lot, how to know the line of the centuries with all the composers going through them. That brings a sense then of why they write the way they do and how they developed. If I only sang Bel Canto and something from a hundred years later, there would be an empty thing in the middle. So you have to know. It's like a chain, or like stairs: each step has to be taken one by one so as to go from one floor to another. You cannot go from the first floor to the seventh without knowing how many stairs are in between. It's the same with music.

RP & SJT Strangely enough, few singers in our time have exhibited this level of stylistic awareness, and even fewer the kind of curiosity and adventurousness with regard to repertory that Caballé herself has shown. There are, however, two singers whom she regards as having been her mentors.

Caballé I was not the first one. Maria was the first. She was wonderful and so was Leyla Gencer. In our time, she was the first Lucrezia, she was the first Maria Stuarda, as far as I remember. I recognise that she was a great singer and did so much for that music, though I don't think people have always realised that. I would therefore very much like to thank Leyla for her efforts. As for the memory of Maria Callas, this serves itself. But the admiration and respect for her is something I will always keep in my heart. She will never die; she is always with me. And I think that she opens another dimension of interpretation. There will never be another one like Maria; she opened the way for all of us

who have followed after her. As for me personally, I have served the music, not my name.

RP & SJT Caballé, like Callas and Gencer, has always been active in the resuscitation of long-forgotten works by Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti and their contemporaries. Indeed, she has taken this process further than any other soprano, which accounts for the unparalleled number of operatic rôles she has performed both on stage and in concert. At the last count this exceeded 140 – a figure which no other major singer this century can rival. Nor can any, at present, rival her recorded repertoire, which includes nearly 40 complete studio-made operas and almost twice that number in live pirates. Inevitably, many of these enshrine performances of rare repertory, none perhaps rarer than the recital discs she made for RCA in the late 1960s devoted to Verdi, Rossini and Donizetti, all of which are perposterously overdue for reissue on CD. On any of these, we can hear not only unjustly neglected pieces of music, but also perfectly sung demonstrations of the bel canto ideals to which the whole of Caballé's vocal training was dedicated. Hers is an art which has no essential need for words: the drama and the feeling which underpin it is realised through the simple emotional power of the voice itself – its colour, its intensity, its warmth, its strength. If Maria Callas rediscovered bel canto as drama, it was left to Caballé to rediscover it as music. (...) As a singer who, in her time, has sung *Turandot* and *La Gioconda*, Caballé has never been afraid of a vocal challenge. Has this affected her voice or choice of repertory?

Caballé It's a wonderful thing that my voice has developed in the centre. This is a natural thing, it happens when you get older – and I am older! It's a ravishing thing to sing Isolde; it was really my dream, but I never thought I could approach it. But then, I never thought I could approach Norma. Finally, though, I have sung all the rôles that I always wanted to – Violetta in *Traviata*, Norma, Semiramide, Salome and Isolde. So I think that I have done all of these big rôles, and many others, which fulfil me. Maybe it fulfils my ego. Well... if that is the case... viva ego!

RP & SJT As her legions of fans and admirers are only too well aware, whilst there has been a welcome stream of reissues from

the back-catalogues of all the major recording companies, Caballé has been absent from the recording studio in terms of new, large-scale projects for over six years. This coincides with a period of very stressful ill-health which had also been leading to a progressive reduction in her international commitments.

Happily, however, this has now been resolved: years seem to have been shed, and the offers of future engagements – which never stopped pouring in – are now being accepted. Due for release soon is a CD of operatic duets with José Carreras, made for Philips in 1990, and this will be followed by a further disc for the same company of Spanish songs and zarzuela with Caballé again partnering Carreras. Furthermore and very fittingly, she has signed a contract with RCA, her first recording company, one fruit of which will be an elaborate celebratory CD box. So after so many years, so many performances – more than 5,000 in fact – so many composers, so many rôles, what keeps Montserrat going?

Caballé The style of the composers, their work, need love, not demonstration, not exhibition, only to serve them, every one of them. And that line, that tradition, through the centuries is what makes music so special and so great. You feel all this inside and you try to bring it through your sound to the audience. But not for them, forgive me, but for the composer. It is a wonderful feeling, the emotion, the fulfilment when you sing the simple lines the composer has written without any ornamentation and also to feel that, through me, the audience has contact with the music. This is something that... really, no fee can pay... no applause can pay.

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