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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Tragic Actress and Human Voice. Maria Callas in *Ifigenia in Tauride* Directed by Luchino Visconti

Abstract

This article examines Maria Callas's role as Iphigenia in Christoph W. Gluck's opera *Iphigénie en Tauride* (*Iphigenia in Tauris*), which was performed at the Teatro alla Scala in 1957 as *Ifigenia in Tauride*. This eighteenth-century opera serves as a significant testament to Maria's prowess as a singer and "grande attrice", as noted by Visconti, who directed the production. The artistic collaboration between Callas and Visconti commenced with Gaspare Spontini's *La vestale* (*The Vestal Virgin*) in 1954 at the same venue and reached remarkable heights with *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) in 1955-1956. Maria Callas's portrayal of Iphigenia thus marks the culmination of an extraordinary journey, prompting a reflection on several critical aspects of her legacy: her unique identity as a singer-actress and "menschliche Stimme", a phrase coined by Ingeborg Bachmann, who was profoundly moved by Callas's interpretation of Violetta; the professional, artistic, and personal relationship with Luchino Visconti, which contributed to one of the most memorable seasons in twentieth-century opera, acting, and directing, along with the theatrical insights that emerged from this collaboration; and Callas's own connection to her Greek origin and to Greek tragic myths. In exploring the life and impact of Maria Callas, it is essential to acknowledge the diverse dimensions of her legacy. The concluding section of this article discusses a poetic tribute to Callas and her collaboration with Visconti: *Hommage à Maria Callas* (*Homage to Maria Callas*) by Ingeborg Bachmann, along with Mario Martone's installation and film showcased in the exhibition *Fantasmagoria Callas* at the Teatro alla Scala in 2023-2024.

KEYWORDS: Maria Callas; Luchino Visconti; *Iphigénie en Tauride* by Christoph W. Gluck; opera singer-actor; Ingeborg Bachmann

1. Callas: "grande attrice" and "menschliche Stimme"

On May 28, 1955, at Teatro alla Scala, Maria Callas delivered an unforgettable performance of *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) under the direction of Luchino Visconti.¹ Visconti recognised the opera's potential to become

¹ Callas and Visconti's collaboration began at La Scala in 1954 with *La vestale* (*The Vestal Virgin*) by Gaspare Spontini (December 7, conductor Antonino Votto) and ended in 1957 with *Ifigenia in Tauride* (*Iphigenia in Tauris*) by Christoph Willibald

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a ‘classic’ and expressed this belief on both public and private occasions. In a letter dated August 13, 1956, addressed to Maria Callas’s husband, Giovanni Battista Meneghini, he remarked that “*Traviata* will endure . . . and will endure because that ‘certain revision’ has now become an artistic fact, achieved through the art of a *grande attrice* (great actress) like Maria” (Meneghini 1981, 193, emphasis added).² Visconti not only regarded the 1955 production of *La traviata* as indisputable in its significance but also praised Callas’s exceptional acting artistry. The opera was revived in January of the subsequent year, during which Ingeborg Bachmann attended the dress rehearsal (see Boella 2022, 51-62), remaining indifferent until

a movement, a voice, a being, all at once, brought about this jolt within me, which can be suddenly triggered by a physical collision or a vehement understanding, a mental accomplishment. A creature was on this stage, a human. I suddenly knew: this is her, the lost one, the new Violetta . . . She was ten or more times great, in every gesture, in every step, in every movement, she was what . . . makes one think of Duse: *ecco un artista*. (Bachmann 2005, 408-11)³

In the article titled “Indimenticabile Callas/Unforgettable Callas”, featured in the Catalogue of the exhibition *Fantasmagoria Callas* (Museo Teatrale alla Scala, 2023-24), Laura Boella reflects on the remarks made by the Austrian poet and writer in the following manner:

On the stage, Bachmann saw Callas who was the incarnation of the artist and the creature, a body and a voice. What had appeared on the stage was not simply an extraordinary theatrical and vocal phenomenon, but the fragility of a human being who gave voice to the most profound emotions, resonated joys and pains that came from afar, from fables, but also from close by, from the desire for joy and beauty, for a rebirth that characterized the Fifties in a world that had just emerged from war and totalitarianism. On the stage of La Scala a *human voice* had resonated . . . (Boella 2023, 92)⁴

Gluck (June 1, conductor Nino Sanzogno); between 1954 and 1957 Callas performed also other operas: *La sonnambula* (*The Sleep-Walker*) by Vincenzo Bellini (March 3, 1955, conductor Leonard Bernstein), *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) by Giuseppe Verdi (May 28, 1955, conductor Carlo Maria Giulini), and *Anna Bolena* (*Anne Boleyn*) by Gaetano Donizetti (April 14, 1957, conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni). For more on this unforgettable period and the individual operas, see: Gastel Chiarelli 1981; Crespi Morbio 2019, 53-9; Bentoglio 2022, 256-63; Bentoglio 2023, 73-87; Mazzocchi forthcoming; Viccei forthcoming. Additionally, see Mazzocchi 2023.

² All English translations of the German, Italian, French quotations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

³ See Dusini 2009, 31-44.

⁴ See also Boella 2022, especially 51-66. On the exhibition, see Stocchi 2023-2024.

We know what Bachmann means by ‘menschliche Stimme’ from an essay she wrote a few years after her striking encounter with Callas, titled “Musik und Dichtung” (1959):

. . . this voice of a captive creature, which is not entirely capable of saying what it suffers, not entirely capable of singing what there is to measure in highs and lows. There is only this organ, without ultimate precision, without ultimate trustworthiness, with its small volume, the threshold above and below – far from being a device, a reliable instrument, a successful apparatus. But there is something unrestrained about youth in it, or the chafing of age, warmth and cold, sweetness and hardness, every virtue of the living . . . who would not suddenly realise – when it sounds again, when it sounds for him – what this is: *Eine menschliche Stimme* (a human voice). (Bachmann 1978, 62; emphasis added)

This article examines Maria Callas’s role as the protagonist in Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride* (*Iphigenia in Tauris*), which was performed at the Teatro alla Scala on June 1, 1957 as *Ifigenia in Tauride*. This eighteenth-century opera serves as a final testament to Callas’s identity as a singer-“grande attrice” (Visconti) and a “menschliche Stimme” (Bachmann), under the direction of Luchino Visconti. The artistic partnership between Callas and Visconti at La Scala, which commenced with Gaspare Spontini’s *La vestale* (*The Vestal Virgin*) in 1954 (see Viccei forthcoming) and reached a climax with *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) in 1955-1956, ends with *Ifigenia*. Prior to engaging with the main topic, it is essential to offer some introductory observations on the ‘singer-actress’ pair. It is a well-established notion that an opera singer also embodies the role of an actor; however, this has frequently been neglected in numerous studies of the ‘divina’ on stage, leading to a simplification of Callas’s artistry reduced to merely a lyrical voice.⁵ In recent years, the exploration of Callas’s acting praxis has emerged as a distinct area of study.⁶ Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge another fact: Maria Callas performed in the opera theatre, that is to say, a kind of theatre requiring a specific musical use of the voice-body. Nicola Pasqualicchio has made a significant contribution to the accurate understanding of this topic in an article whose title aptly asks whether the singer is an actor:

The fundamental theatrical challenge for the opera singer lies not merely in the ability to move, but rather in the necessity of embracing the role of an actor and developing an understanding of this responsibility. In essence, the

⁵ Regarding the vocal polymorphism of Callas, see Beghelli forthcoming.

⁶ See in particular Guccini 2019, 1-47, and 2020, 1-75; Bentoglio 2023. On the debated and thorny issue of opera singers-actors, see Ostwald 2005 (new edition forthcoming); Hicks 2011; Brunetti and Pasqualicchio 2015; and Viccei forthcoming.

primary issue is not centred on the skills of mimicry and gesture, but rather on an awareness of dramaturgy. It is from this awareness that the singer can derive the comprehensive value of their vocal and gestural performance. Similar to prose actors, opera singers utilise both voice and body, as the voice and body they bring to the stage are those of the characters they embody. From the outset, both elements are inextricably linked to the role that the character plays within the drama. (2015, 23)

Ifgenia in Tauride holds significant relevance to the current discussion, particularly due to its association with the notable reforms introduced by Gluck and Ranieri de' Calzabigi which brought about "dramatic consequences of the reformed melodrama" (ibid.). The opera performer, previously referred to merely as a 'singer', also takes on the role of an 'actor' within a "musical theatre that seeks to restore the dramaturgical significance of the sung word" (ibid.). Another aspect to consider is Visconti's impact on Callas as an actress. This influence has been highlighted by some critics and scholars, while others have minimised its importance. In my view, the directorial contributions of one of the most prominent figures in twentieth-century opera direction were crucial to Callas's development as a singer-actress, particularly as this collaboration unfolded within a broader and more profound professional, artistic,⁷ and personal partnership. While the inspiration provided by Visconti was undeniably significant, Callas's own journey was also deeply influenced by other directors both prior to and during her work with Visconti⁸ and by other artistic experiences.

In 1951, Callas had the opportunity to engage with members of the Roman cultural circle known as Anfiparnaso, where discussions also centred around musical theatre and the art of acting. The Teatro alla Scala played a pivotal role for Maria Callas, serving as a centre for exploration and an endless reservoir of inspiration, where she experienced the most significant years of her professional career (1950-1961). Additionally, her time at the Museo Teatrale alla Scala was of great importance, as it allowed her to appreciate the painted and sculpted representations of artists such as Eleonora Duse and Giuditta Pasta, analysing their postures, gestures and expressions.⁹ Finally, Callas possessed an undeniable talent for performing on stage with

⁷ Visconti played a significant role in shaping Maria's artistic interests. In this regard, see Agosti 2022, 276.

⁸ The scenic and musical magisterium exercised by Elvira de Hidalgo, Renato Mordo, Tullio Serafin, Margherita Wallmann, Herbert von Karajan, and Tatiana Pavlova was fundamental for Callas. For contributions from these and other directors, see Guccini 2019, 26-32, and 2020, 15-17; Bentoglio 2022, 256-63, and 2023, 10-4, 17-71, 89-93, and forthcoming.

⁹ See Crespi Morbio 2007, 11-28; Guccini 2019, 21-6; and the documentary videos made available by the Media Library of the Museo Teatrale alla Scala.

both intelligence and awareness, creating a distinctive and memorable style. Visconti remarked that “Her gestures thrilled you”, and expressed a blend of admiration and disbelief by asking where she learned them and concluding that they were simply her own: “Today, some famous singers try to imitate what Maria did, but they only make fools of themselves. Maria looked a certain way with her long neck, body, arms, and fingers. She can never be copied” (qtd in Ardoin and Fitzgerald 1974, 90).

In response to Visconti’s question, an issue that has been echoed by numerous critics and audiences, Callas herself provided an inadvertent yet comprehensive answer in writings that serve as a theoretical overview of her identity as a singer-actress and, more broadly, the role of opera singer-actors (see Viccei forthcoming). Specifically, Callas observed:

Even though my acting springs from the music, instinct does play a part. It must be the Greek in me that speaks, as I have done nothing outside the operatic stage. I was quite surprised when once I watched the Greek actor-producer Minotis rehearse the Greek chorus in Cherubini’s *Medea* that I was appearing in. Suddenly I realized they were performing the same movements I did as Alceste a few years before. I had never seen Greek tragedy performed. When I was in Greece it was mostly during the war and I was studying singing. I did not have much time or money for anything else and yet my movements as the Greek Alceste were similar to those of the Greek chorus in *Medea*. It must be instinct. (Galatopoulos 1998, 430-1)

Callas’s considerations are essential for an understanding of her work as opera actress, also regarding *Iphigenia in Tauris*. However, the insights provided by Visconti concerning the singer-actor dynamic and Callas as one are also significant. In “La Callas e la recitazione nel melodramma” (Callas and the recitation of melodrama),¹⁰ Visconti addresses the “reform of the method of identification” and lyrical performance. He notes that this approach is “different; . . . it is an emphatic acting style, in which certain elements must be emphasised. It is directed using a method distinct from that employed in prose”. He subsequently highlights Callas, stressing her extraordinary qualities:

Certainly, there are cases such as that of Maria Callas, for example. Given that Maria Callas possesses a remarkable acting temperament in addition to her exceptional singing ability, that she possesses a profound tragic temperament, in that case, a depth of work is required, akin to that of a dramatic actor . . . It is well understood that melodrama necessitates a certain expansion of emotions, gestures, and attitudes, among other elements. With Callas, achieving this is remarkably effortless, as she is naturally inclined towards it; however, she does so with extraordinary control, finesse, and taste

¹⁰ In D’Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 24. See Quazzolo 2020, 13-36.

... This stands in stark contrast to many other singers, for whom performing an opera is often limited to a few clichéd gestures that they repeat throughout the performance. (Qtd in D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 24)

In conclusion, Callas and Visconti shared a profound elective affinity that positioned them ideally to express their talents. Their collaboration revealed a remarkable alignment in their artistic philosophies and a shared theatrical vision, particularly emphasising the importance of listening to the music in both directing and acting.¹¹ They engaged in specific preparatory practices, maintained a keen dramaturgical awareness of character, and approached character development through a physical transformation that effectively communicated psychological and emotional depth.¹²

However, it is essential to acknowledge the distinctions between Callas and Visconti, largely stemming from their differing roles in the performance and their varied educational backgrounds. In the context of *Ifigenia in Tauride*, it is noteworthy to highlight Visconti's practice of reading the libretto while also considering the original literary or theatrical texts whenever feasible (Gastel Chiarelli 1997, 28). This comparative analysis allowed him to explore the nuances between the texts, fostering a rich and eclectic imaginative framework¹³ from which he could draw, while consciously avoiding superficial overlaps or hybridisations.

2. Greek Reflections in the Visconti-Callas *Ifigenia in Tauride* (Gluck – Guillard)

Ifigenia in Tauride, composed by Gluck with a libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard, draws inspiration from Euripides's tragedy and provides an opportunity to explore the distinctive qualities of Callas's performance within the context we have seen. It also invites reflection on the shared sensibilities of Callas and Visconti regarding a tragic realm that harks back to ancient Greece. This classical tragic landscape was profoundly significant

¹¹ For both, table rehearsals and participation in piano rehearsals were fundamental: see D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 87-9; Celletti et al. 1978, 19, 21-2; Crespi Morbio 2019, 16-17.

¹² Callas, speaking about her interpretation of *Lucia di Lammermoor* (conductor and director Herbert von Karajan, 1954), reveals a Stanislavskian approach. The Stanislavski method, which Callas further explored with Tatiana Pavlova, was not unfamiliar to Visconti: see Bentoglio 2023, 51, 54-7; Meldolesi 2008, 259-69; Mazzocchi 2008, 271-3. See also Stanislavski and Rumyantsev 1975.

¹³ For a discussion of this imaginary, linked to Visconti's artistic vision and education, see De Grassi 2020, 127-77.

to Maria Callas, who felt a deep connection to her Greek heritage – she used to say “the Greek in me that speaks”. Luchino Visconti acknowledged this connection, stating in a 1969 French television programme, the same year Callas portrayed Medea in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film, that “Maria Callas est grecque” (Maria Callas is Greek).¹⁴ He further remarked that “[s]he possesses the essence of tragedy within her, along with the ability to convey it. I would greatly appreciate witnessing Maria Callas perform at Epidaurus in a tragedy by Euripides or Sophocles”.¹⁵ When Maria Callas took on the role of Iphigenia in June 1957, she was already familiar with the female characters of Greek tragic mythology. Earlier, she had portrayed Euridice in *L’anima del filosofo ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* (*The Soul of the Philosopher, or Orpheus and Euridice*) by Franz Joseph Haydn in 1951, under the direction of Guido Salvini, who was also a director of Greek tragedies. In 1953, she played Medea in Luigi Cherubini’s homonymous opera, directed by André Barsacq (at XIV Maggio Musicale Fiorentino), and Margherita Wallmann at Teatro alla Scala. The following year, she assumed the lead role in Gluck’s *Alceste*, once again directed by Wallmann at La Scala (see Crespi Morbio 2007b, 16-7, 97-9; Bentoglio 2023, 33-5, 62-8).

In an interview with Visconti the day prior to the premiere of *Ifigenia in Tauride*,¹⁶ he was asked whether his inspiration stemmed from the Greek world of Euripides or the modern world of Gluck. Visconti replied: “The staging was designed as if it were an eighteenth-century court performance. Within this framework, the elements of Greek tragedy serve merely as a pretext, as they have already been somewhat overlooked in Gluck’s work” (1957a).¹⁷ This artistic choice was well-received by Rossana Rossanda, who noted in her review in *Il Contemporaneo* (June 29, 1957): “It now seems positive to us, first and foremost, that he [Visconti] rejected the misunderstanding of treating the libretto as one would the Euripidean prototype: that he, in essence, criticised Gluck’s classicist ideal” (D’Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, II: 126, 128). When it comes to the ‘Greekness’ of *Iphigenia*, Visconti and Callas held markedly different perspectives. For Visconti, Gluck’s *Iphigenia* was intended to evoke those *tableaux vivants* inspired by Tiepolo’s frescoes

¹⁴ See Franco Serpa, Franco Ruffini, Stefania Parigi, in Aversano and Pellegrini 2023, 255-89; Fusillo 2022. See also Katsantonis 2023.

¹⁵ Pasolini 1969: “Maria Callas discusses her intention to participate in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Medea* as an actress and expresses her desire to engage in cinema. Luchino Visconti praises Maria Callas for her acting abilities but believes that she should not have opted to make her debut film with Pasolini, who does not typically work with prominent actors”.

¹⁶ The opera is presented in a shortened form: two parts instead of four acts; unique scene; abridged text. See Visconti 1957a and Gastel Chiarelli 1997, 31.

¹⁷ See also Gastel Chiarelli 1997, 30-1.

at Villa Valmarana, which Visconti had interpreted during his youth in the House of Savoy, as well as Veronese's paintings.¹⁸

In relation to the project envisioned by Visconti, Callas expressed incomprehension, doubts, and reservations, all stemming from one and the same origin. She believed that since Iphigenia was a figure from Greek mythology, her story was inherently tied to the Greek world. As a Greek herself, Callas felt that the portrayal of Iphigenia on stage required a 'Greek' Maria Callas,¹⁹ embodying a tragic persona that encapsulated the *ethos* and *pathos* of Greek tragedy, complete with Grecian-style attire. It is challenging to disregard the possibility that Maria's perspective was shaped by her previous performances as Euridice, and particularly as Medea and Alcestis, during the 1950s, along with her collaboration with Salvini, who, as previously noted, directed Greek tragedies, some of which were presented in renowned venues such as the ancient theatre of Siracusa and the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza.

3. Maria Callas-Iphigenia

During the premiere of *Ifigenia in Tauride*,²⁰ Callas entered on stage finally fully embracing the director's guidance (D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 1.87). She portrayed Iphigenia as the central figure in the *tableaux vivants* designed by Visconti in the spirit of the eighteenth-century *tragédie lyrique* (Gastel Chiarelli 1997, 29-31).²¹

Maria executed precisely what I requested of her. When the curtain rose, a tempest erupted, compelling her to dash across the stage in a frenzy. She was adorned in a magnificent gown, richly pleated with sumptuous silk brocade, complemented by an enormous train, over which she wore a striking crimson cloak. Her hair was adorned with large pearls, and her neck was graced with pearl necklaces that embraced her décolletage. At

¹⁸ See Agosti 2022, 367-8; Bentoglio 2023, 85; Crespi Morbio 2007a, 26.

¹⁹ Visconti in Ardoin and Fitzgerald 1974, 162: "As a matter of fact, we really didn't agree about Ifigenia . . . she didn't understand my idea at all. 'Why are you doing it like this?' she asked. 'It's a Greek story and I'm a Greek woman, so I want to look Greek onstage!' I said, 'My dear, the Greece you are talking about is too far off. This opera must look like a Tiepolo fresco come to life'. But still she fussed, wanting to look Greek".

²⁰ There are no video recordings of the *Ifigenia in Tauride*, but only photos. See Visconti 1957b, 1957c, 1957d, 1957e, 1957f, 1957g, 1957h.

²¹ Visconti-Benois's production sparked lively discussions among the public and critics, which can be summarised by the unfavorable views of Massimo Mila and the favourable ones of Rossana Rossanda (see D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 2.124-34, for these and other reviews).

one moment, she ascended a tall ladder, only to swiftly descend the steep steps, her cloak billowing wildly in the wind. Each evening, she hit the high note on the eighth step, so perfectly synchronized were the music and her movements. She resembled a circus horse, trained to perform any theatrical act she was taught. Regardless of Maria's thoughts on our Iphigenia, I believe *it was the most exquisite production we created together*. Subsequently, I staged numerous works without her in Spoleto, London, Rome, and Vienna. However, what I accomplished with Maria always stood apart, uniquely crafted solely for her. (Crespi Morbio 2007a, 26; emphasis added)²²

The opera opened with a storm – made possible through the use of a wind machine, sound effects, and projections – that raged over a fixed scene, characterised by the imposing colonnade of the Temple of Artemis in Tauris. Maria had to match the storm with her body and a fast, tempestuous way of walking while singing “*O Dei! Propiziate il destino... La calma rinascea, ma, in fondo al mio cor*” (1957), in dialogue with the chorus of Priestesses.

On a stage that was a magnificent example of allusive art to the eighteenth-century scenographies and architectures of Bibiena and the paintings of Tiepolo, amidst lights that interacted with this scenic space and with the bodies of the performers, creating games of surprising theatricality,²³ Maria re-born from the music rising from the orchestra (conductor Nino Sanzogno) and became Iphigenia. In recalling, on another occasion (Celletti et al. 1978), the famous beginning of Gluck's opera, Visconti made other important observations about art of acting by Callas:

She entered the stage, ascended a towering staircase that seemed almost suspended in mid-air, and then rushed down during the famous storm, making her entrance and launching into her performance. I had merely instructed her: ascend, remain in the wind, descend, and arrive at the precise moment to start singing at the front of the stage. That was all. I had not provided her with specific timings, yet Maria possesses an innate sense of timing; everything comes to her instinctively. Nevertheless, we are all aware of her myopia... I stood backstage, filled with anxiety, for witnessing her run under such conditions, adorned in a twenty-meter-long cloak and facing a fan, ascending and descending with perfect timing, and having enough breath to deliver a powerful performance upon arrival... Such feats can only be entrusted to an artist in whom one has complete confidence,

²² It is noteworthy that Visconti's metaphor of the horse for the actor is quite frequent (for example, D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 1.87-9). See Agosti 2022, 82-9, 216-27.

²³ As is well known, Visconti had a formidable care for the spaces and atmospheres in which the characters acted and reacted.-

for one understands her sense of timing, her musical instinct, and her instinctual embodiment of the role of dramatic and tragic actress. (Qtd in Celletti et al. 1978, 20-1; emphasis added)

The rapid and dizzying movements of Maria-Iphigenia were interspersed with brief moments where her body was still, and her voice was enveloped in silence: this contrast can only be partially reconstructed based on a few photographs (see Visconti 1957i). These pictures, however, allow us to grasp the dramaturgical awareness with which Callas brought to life the beginning of the tragic conflict within Iphigenia's soul. Maria seemed "to want to explore and foresee in her character and in her encounter with the forces of nature her own destiny". As if "driven by the anxiety of a dream, guided by the powers of the heavens", Maria-Iphigenia then animated the contrasting motion of ascending and descending the majestic staircase in the manner remembered by Visconti. "The storm returns to the sea, rejected by her song and her magical presence; the sky and the stage clear up, but now all the shadow has gathered in her rich and assured voice and in the dream that unsettles Iphigenia" (Gastel Chiarelli 1997, 29-30): the horrific dream of blood and vengeance, in which her murdered father Agamemnon, the assassin Clytemnestra and Orestes appear; the dream that Maria-Iphigenia recalls to the Priestesses with a sense of nostalgia for the distant home, terror and melancholy.

In the captivating opening of *Ifigenia in Tauride*, Maria-Iphigenia's body was intricately linked to the eighteenth-century silk brocade costume along with a striking bright red cloak, crafted by Nicola Benois, who also designed the scenes. The attire of Iphigenia, along with her cloak, resonated with the tumultuous nature of the storm and the disquiet of the dream's memories, acting in concert with Callas. This principle extended to the other costumes, whose transformations paralleled the character's metamorphosis. The costume, which "symbolises the sacrificial victim, is embellished with gold arabesques in the initial scenes and later transitions to white, featuring a broad, radiating collar reminiscent of Cleopatra as depicted by Tiepolo in the Venetian Palazzo Labia", as noted by Cristina Gastel Chiarelli. In the second act, the costume is entirely gold, representing the royalty of Iphigenia, who has now become a priestess of the goddess Artemis in the foreign land of Tauris (Gastel Chiarelli 1997, 30).

King Thoas assigned Iphigenia the dreadful duty of sacrificing foreigners who had arrived in Tauris, a measure taken to avert the prophecy that foretold the king's demise at the hands of a stranger. Scythian warriors enter, declaring the capture of two strangers who, having weathered the storm, have just reached the shore: they are Greeks, specifically Orestes and Pylades. It is noteworthy that Iphigenia does not immediately recognise her

brother Orestes and his companion, a detail consistent with both Euripides's narrative and Guillard's libretto. The revelation must be awaited until nearly the conclusion of the opera. In the recognition scene with Orestes (Dino Dondi), which starkly contrasts the emotional tone of the opera's opening, Maria Callas again exemplified her exceptional talent as a singer-actress and showcased the qualities of the human voice. Through the utterance of the word "fratello" (brother), her embrace, and the glances exchanged with her brother (see Visconti 1957j; D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 2.130-1), she masterfully conveyed a complex array of emotions: the love of a sister, the joy of reunion, the sorrow of prolonged separation and the dread of the impending death of the 'stranger' Orestes.

Visconti regarded *Iphigenia in Tauris* as the most exquisite opera among the five he collaborated on with Maria Callas. Even in the face of the most unfavourable critiques, which primarily focused on the direction and set design, Maria Callas as Iphigenia triumphed. Notably, Massimo Mila's review stands out. He pondered what ultimately remained of this lacklustre Iphigenia: "There remained the voice of Callas, who sings so well and acts with such tragic nobility" (qtd in D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 2.126). However, he further remarked: "but we remember . . . her humanity in *La Traviata*, and we know that this excellent artist could be something more than a diva" (ibid.).

4. A Tragic Actress and the "umano mitologico"

The tragic disposition of Maria Callas was widely acknowledged. She proposed that her natural attitude for tragic performance stemmed from her Greek heritage, a notion that Visconti affirmed in his portrayal of her. Particularly in her interpretation of female tragic figures such as Iphigenia, all variously linked to ancient Greece, Callas embarked on a vibrant quest for echoes of classical antiquity to resonate on stage. This pursuit, which was never naively antiquarian, drew its strength and significance from Maria's remarkable capacity to observe and absorb insights from figures such as Visconti, subsequently reinterpreting them with exceptional creativity based on her artistic experiences and knowledge. Consequently, it is not surprising that this "complete theatrical phenomenon: musical and dramatic" (D'Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 2.358) could be described as "a thousand and one Callas" (Aversano and Pellegrini 2023) and could be likened to a range of such diverse artists as Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran, Ettore Petrolini, and Eleonora Duse.

Callas belongs to that rare breed of actors, even in the realm of prose theatre, who manage to become physically different according to the character they

embody . . . Such was Petrolini, for example; and so was Callas. I remember how much this impression struck me the first time I had the opportunity to see her again, in quick succession, in three different operas. It was in the 1954-1955 season at La Scala, the one in which Visconti did his first opera directions, all three with her. Giulia in *La Vestale*, Amina in *La Sonnambula*, and Violetta were three completely different people, in every sense, from the moment they appeared on stage.²⁴

Maria Callas possessed the remarkable ability to comprehend and to feel which gestures, postures, movements, and voices were envisioned by artists of the past, such as Gluck, for their heroines, drawing upon ancient influences. She adeptly rendered these gestures, postures, movements, and voices memorable across various times and contexts, for Maria possessed the gift of crossing the arts. As a Greek woman who had journeyed across the globe, she embodied the legacy of Greece, a formidable source of tragic myths that could be revived endlessly in diverse settings. Furthermore, as a pioneer of a new artistic expression, redefining what it meant to be a singer, actress, myth, and diva. Maria Callas successfully personified “the rare, the extravagant, the exceptional”.²⁵ Consequently, her strength is also rooted in the vast legacy she has left behind. Another exceptional director in cinema, theatre, and opera, Mario Martone has crafted a poetic evocation of Callas. A particularly moving portion of the *Fantasmagoria Callas* exhibition is the installation and film directed by Martone, titled *Hommage à Maria Callas* by Ingeborg Bachmann, which showcases Sonia Bergamasco in the role of Bachmann.²⁶ In a captivating interview conducted by Martone regarding this work, he engaged in a discussion with Mattia Palma about the exceptional qualities of Maria Callas in both her singing and acting:

[Maria] was a great actress. It is no coincidence that Pier Paolo Pasolini also wanted her for the film on Medea. He was attracted to her from the perspective of a *umano mitologico*, if it can be called that. After all, where does myth originate if not from the human? All Greek mythology has its roots in the observation and expression of the human. In this sense, Maria Callas is a timeless force. (Qtd in Martone and Palma 2024, 59; emphasis added)

²⁴ Also referenced is another great musicologist, music and theatre critic, Fedele D’Amico, in Celletti et al. 1978, 18-19.

²⁵ Visconti in an interview from 1958, in D’Amico de Carvalho and Renzi 1979, 2.8.

²⁶ Martone 2023, 63-9; Martone and Palma 2024, 58-61. See also Boella 2023, 87-93.

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