

Books



Robert Pullen and Stephen Taylor *Montserrat Caballé - Casta Diva* Victor Gollancz, London 1994, 464pp

Unlike Maria Callas, Montserrat Caballé was neither a cult figure, nor a popular icon. But her career was much longer, she sang and recorded far more operas, and also took part in re-exhumations of many more nineteenth century works, especially by Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini. Many of these unusual operas, such as *Parisina*, *Gemma di Vergy*, and *Caterina Cornaro*, have been recorded. As a result, many fans of bel canto opera may well view her as having left even more of a mark on the world of opera than her more famous Greek predecessor. There is no doubt that her recorded legacy covers a much wider and more interesting repertory than that of Callas. Generally,

where both prima donnas recorded the same work, Caballé's version is more complete. She is recognised as one of the great sopranos of the twentieth century.

There have been a number of relatively short books (virtually pamphlets) on Caballé published in France and Spain in the past few years, but the book by Pullen and Taylor is certainly the first full length volume, and the first in English. The textual portion, which comprises the bulk of the book, is very well written, very scholarly, and very thoroughly researched. It tells almost everything anyone might want to know about this fabulous soprano. In fact, it is hard for me to pick up the book, check a few facts, and not keep on turning the pages. This textual portion compares favourably with just about any book on a singer who was active in the 1970's and 80's.

But the documentation, in the form of appendices, is quite inadequate. There is a "critical discography", but it is highly selective, and, as a result, unsatisfactory. There is no chronology as such, although many details of her performances are given in the text.

It seems almost sacrilegious to deal at greater length with the faults of this book than the good points. This being done because the faults need a greater amount of discussion. We are told in the preface that she had a repertory of some 88 operas, and that she sang some 3800 performances. Where do these figures come from? Is the 3800 simply 100 performances each for 38 years, or does it represent a reasonable estimate of total appearances based on a chronology prepared by the authors, but not included? If she sang 88 different works, why not provide a brief two or three page listing of her repertory, perhaps even adding the date and site of her first performance of each opera?

In recent years, the inclusion of a formatted chronology has become a widely accepted practice in singer biographies. True, Caballé had a long career - but so did many other singers on which biographies with chronologies were recently published. To name a few: Enrico Caruso, Fernando De Lucia, Beniamino Gigli, Adelina Patti, Titta Ruffo, Tito Schipa, Luisa Tetrazzini. None of these singers could be interviewed for career details as Caballé could, and was. A formatted chronology makes it possible for a reader to check a career at a glance, and, if it includes some indication of density, also makes it possible to arrive at a real number of performances, as well as an accurate and complete repertory. Even more important, it serves to show who the co-artists were, something that could be done only clumsily in the textual part. And I found it quite frustrating, to give an example, to be unable to identify the other artists in the Vienna *Saffo* in June 1989 - a performance that was reviewed in neither *Opera* nor *Opéra International*. Yet this was the first performance of Pacini's masterpiece in a German-speaking country this century.

I did find the "critical discography" interesting, but would have preferred it to have included recordings of many more of her roles. This certainly should have entailed those not on CD at the time the book was written, since more and more operas are being transferred from one medium to another. If space was the problem, some could have been saved by omitting the plot summaries of many of the rarer works which can be found in the New Grove Dictionary of Opera and elsewhere. But this does not take the place of a formal (and complete - or as complete-as-possible) discography. The fact that many of the older recordings would be hard to find is no excuse. There is no need to locate a recording to list it - and there is a great need to name the other participants. Yet, unless some of these other singers were mentioned in passing (which they sometimes are in the text), their identities are not disclosed. And it does make a difference whether Caballé's partners were a Pavarotti, Carreras or Merritt, or some other lesser singer who was found just for the purpose of completing a cast. Even Caballé's most fervent fans might also have their preferences in tenors, baritones and basses - and would like to know who they were and how they sang.

Apparently the authors, and perhaps the publisher, have an aversion to the mere listing of "mind-numbing catalogues of figures and letters", but these "catalogues" (and the term also applies to the missing chronology) play a major role in the documentation of a career, and are especially essential to future generations who did not attend any of these performances, who might not own any of the recordings, and who might not have ready access to the same other sources for career details (a complete run of *Opera*, to give an example) as we do.

I certainly can recommend this book to anyone interested in Caballé, or the many operas that she helped bring back to life. But it is only half the job, and I must express the hope that its existence will not deter some other writer from doing the whole job.

Tom Kaufman

¹ The author's own words, in the introduction to the discography, p. 365.