

For those wishing to hear Maria Callas singing one of her greatest roles, that of Norma in Bellini's opera of the same name, and one of the first major roles to bring her to international attention, there are two options in her catalogue of studio recordings: the present recording, made in Milan in 1954 with Serafin at the podium, and the 1960 remake with the same conductor and venue, but a different supporting cast.

Each has its adherents, and each has both its big pluses and its big minuses. In the case of the later recording (Pristine PACO 215), the recording was made in stereo, the support cast is much stronger, but the Callas voice is generally regarded as some way past its best.

For the present, 1954 recording, we have Callas at her very peak, but in a stodgy mono recording with a cast which often leaves plenty to be desired. In a review which expressed overall disappointment with the recording, The Gramophone's Phillip Hope-Wallace, in November 1954, wrote: "So, finally what about Callas, which some people would say, and perhaps rightly, is all that really matters in considering *Norma*? As I have suggested, where it is a question of musicianship and of dramatic interpretation and coloration of the voice she is quite magnificent, her phrasing has an etched quality, she is at once a great dramatic artist and great singer in the way that Frida Leider was. The musicianship of her *Casta Diva* leaves most of the versions I know as non-starters, the *glissando* passages in the cabaletta "Deh bello a me ritorna" shortly afterwards are breathtaking, Norma's anguish when she finds out that she is betrayed, the reproachful dignity and biting scorn of her scenes with the wretched Pollione and her hieratic magnanimity in dealing with her rival—all these are truly wonderful. She also makes you hear the music for the first time (an overworked description no doubt, but a quality not otherwise easy to describe)."

Nearly half a century later, in 2002, the verdict is similar from Gramophone's John Steane: "The first [Norma], from 1954, comes to life only when Callas sings. Serafin disappoints in this ... Nicola Rossi-Lemeni as Oroveso is allowed to sing off-pitch, and Mario Filippeschi as Pollione sings his role from start to finish as though marked *senza espressione*. Then comes Callas, and the effect is immediate.

The fascination of this intensely personal, affectionate 'Casta diva' is coupled with admiration for a technique which makes her able to do the right thing - the reiterated high As, for example, are not achieved by means of a 'lift' and are also not smoothed out (as often happens) into a single continuous note. The *fioriture* are exquisite - but not so the last note of all, the sustained high F which is perilous in the extreme. Wonders abound in the cabaletta; she leaves, and on comes Ebe Stignani, the Adalgisa. At Covent Garden, as I remember, the sheer beauty of her voice (after Callas's) was enough to make everybody sit up; on record, the immediate gratitude gives way very quickly to the realisation that we are back in the realm of the blandly inexpressive. And so it continues until Callas's next appearance, and so on throughout the opera. If the last disc in this set (Act 2) could be issued separately it would perhaps constitute the prime recommendation of all, for here is the great role sung by the great artist at a time when the voice still matched the art."

The only respite thus far would come in 2014 with this aside, again in Gramophone: "Hearing afresh that 1954 Norma in 'Maria Callas Remastered' I can't help thinking that it was the frailty of the LP format that was 80 per cent of the problem".

While I'm not sure that this Pristine Ambient XR remaster - or any other - will ever be able to work sufficient magic on certain aspects of this recording, for those whose primary interest is in the remarkable instrument that Maria Callas had at her disposal, it has to surely be an essential release. Multiple sonic veils have been lifted from the original recording, and if there is regret that the source material is what it is, there is delight in being able to shine a brighter, warmer light on it than perhaps ever before.

Andrew Rose



disc one
(62:08)

1. Sinfonia (5:56)

Act One, Scene One

2. Ite sul colle... dell'aura tua profetica (10:01)

3. Svanir le voci! (2:49)

4. Meco all'altar di Venere (2:32)

5. Odi?... I suoi riti a compiere (1:32)

6. Me protegge, me difende (1:31)

7. Norma viene (4:42)

8. Sediziose voci (4:22)

9. Casta Diva (7:19)

10. Fine al rito, e il sacro bosco (1:37)

11. Ah! bello a me ritorna (3:28)

12. Sgombra è la sacra selva (6:03)

13. Eccola - va, mi lascia (1:30)

14. Va, crudele (5:24)

15. Vieni in Roma (3:20)

disc two
(27:52)

Act one, Scene two

1. Vanne, e li cela entrambi (4:46)

2. Adalgisa! Alma, costanza (3:24)

3. Oh, rimembranza! (5:25)

4. Ah si, fa core, abbracciami (3:07)

5. Ma di' ... l'amato giovine (3:02)

6. Oh, di qual sei tu vittima (4:14)

7. Perfido! ... Or basti! (1:24)

8. Vanne, si, mi lascia, indegno (2:37)

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bellini

norma

CAST

Norma - Maria Callas
Adalgisa - Ebe Stignani
Pollione - Mario Filippeschi
Oroveso - Nicola Rossi-Lemoni
Clotilde - Rina Cavallari
Flavio - Paolo Caroli

Chorus and Orchestra of Teatro alla Scala, Milan
conducted by Tullio Serafin

Recorded 23 April - 3 May 1954, Milan

Ambient Stereo XR remastering by: Andrew Rose
Cover artwork: Maria Callas as Norma in 1954

Total duration: 2hr 40:22



disc three
(70:17)

Act two, Scene one

1. Introduzione (3:56)
2. Dormono entrambi! (4:34)
3. Olà! Clotilde! (0:50)
4. Mi chiami, o Norma? (2:34)
5. Deh! con te, con te li prendi (4:15)
6. Mira, o Norma (4:00)
7. Cedi ... deh cedi! (1:07)
8. Sì, fino all'ore estreme (2:08)

Act two, Scene two

9. Non parti? (5:34)
10. Guerrieri! a voi venirne (1:51)
11. Ah! del Tebro al giogo indegno (3:03)

Act two, Scene two

12. Ei tornerà. Sì! (4:33)
13. Squila il bronzo del Dio! (1:30)
14. Guerra! guerra! (2:14)
15. Né compi il rito, o Norma? (4:13)
16. In mia man alfin tu sei (5:45)
17. Già mi pasco ne' tuoi sguardi (2:29)
18. Dammi quel ferro! (3:26)
19. Qual cor tradisti (4:46)
20. Norma! deh! Norma, scòlpatì! (2:37)
21. Deh! Non voleri vittime (4:54)

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