

Once a fat, unhappy child, Maria Callas became one of opera's most magnetic and beautiful sopranos. She was adored by audiences, courted by celebrities, and loved and abandoned by the world's wealthiest man.

By Jo Lennox.

# maria callas



**O**ecilia Sofia Anna Maria Kalogeropoulos was born in New York on December 2, 1923, to Greek parents, George and Evangelia. The couple desperately wanted a boy after their son Vasily died of typhus.

For the first four days of Maria's life, her mother wouldn't see her and her father didn't register her. Around the time of her christening, Maria was given a different surname when her parents made America their permanent home and changed their name to Callas.

A traumatic childhood followed. The Callas's marriage was miserable — Evangelia blamed George, a pharmacist, for their lack of wealth and status, and he had numerous affairs. They also favoured Maria's sister Jackie who was beautiful and charming, while Maria was plain and fat. Jackie enjoyed privileges denied Maria, including music lessons; it was only when she was seven-

years-old that the girl who was to become one of opera's great stars began her musical education.

At the age of 11, Maria won second place in an amateur radio competition, and her mother, who was determined to realise her own dreams of glory through her daughters, ensured that children's shows, radio programmes and contests followed. Maria quickly learnt that singing was the best route to her mother's love and approval. She later explained: "Only when I was singing, did I feel loved."

Food became her chief comfort and the chubby young girl became a plump teenager. Despite her daughter's appearance, however, Evangelia was obsessed with turning her into a star. When Maria was 13, her mother returned to Greece with her daughters in search of teachers for Maria. Her uncle arranged an audition with Maria Trivella, a teacher at the National Conservatory, and Trivella immediately recognised Maria's talent.

In 1938 at the age of 15, Maria made her stage debut in a performance for Conservatory students. Here, she met her teacher, Elvira de Hidalgo, the first person who truly understood her dramatic temperament and extraordinary talent. De Hidalgo taught Maria to control her voice, and Maria's life-long fixation with forcing her voice to obey her at will began.

Maria's professional stage debut was at the National Lyric Theatre in Athens in 1940. She shared her success with De Hidalgo and, finding it increasingly difficult to stifle her resentment towards her mother, she cultivated an icy facade and diverted her emotions into her work. Her dedication to opera was so intense that during the German occupation of Athens she broke the Nazi curfew to walk home from De Hidalgo's house. Thanks to her teacher, she joined the Athens Opera at the age of 17.

The other members of the Opera House met her

appointment with jealousy and hostility; they complained about her unruly top notes and too much metal in her upper register — objections which persisted throughout Maria's career. The insecure young girl did little to increase her popularity, regarding her colleagues as adversaries.

Her first major professional role came in 1942, when she replaced the lead in *Tosca* at the Athens Opera, a move which aroused such vehemence that her ill predecessor sent her husband to block the girl's way to the stage entrance. Callas, "The Tigress", as she was later known, jumped at him and scratched his face.

Maria performed *Tosca* with a black eye, and the critics and audience were electrified. By the end of the performance she was famous and audiences were clamouring for her. And Maria felt ready for challenges. "When you're young and on the threshold of a career, you have all the confidence in the world; there's nothing you feel you

couldn't tackle and do splendidly," she later said.

*Tosca* was followed by the Greek première of Eugen d'Albert's *Tiefland* — and Maria's first standing ovation, as well as international publicity. Her happiness didn't last long, however. In December 1944, the day after her 21st birthday, civil war broke out. Maria and her mother remained in their apartment under siege for 20 days, and by the end of the war, a month later, Greece was in ruins. Maria longed to start again; despite her mother's concerns and her teacher's pleas, she left for America.

Maria settled in New York and reunited with her father. After years of war, she was overwhelmed by the city's glamour. In New York, she saw women who exuded the beauty and style for which she longed, and her insecurities made her gain even more weight. America was also overrun with Italian singers, and competition was fierce. Rejections piled up, but her determination only grew. And after months of refusals, her ambition paid off. The General Manager of the Metropolitan, Edward Johnson, offered her a contract for leading roles in *Fidelio* and *Madame Butterfly*, but she rejected his offer — she didn't want to sing *Fidelio* in English and, at 180 pounds, she refused the role of a fragile 15-year-old Japanese girl.

Finally, Maria made a breakthrough when she was introduced to the director of the Verona Amphitheatre, Giovanni Zenatello. Zenatello was in New York looking for a soprano for the Verona Festival, and when he heard Maria sing, he immediately offered her the part.

Her private life was also about to change.

When she arrived in Verona, Maria had dinner with representatives of the Verona Arena and the city, including an opera-loving Verona industrialist — Giovanni Battista Meneghini. From that night on, Maria was the exclusive focus of Meneghini's attention and they saw each other every day.

Although she adored being courted for herself and not just her voice, Maria's work came first and she started rehearsing with the famous conductor Tullio Serafin who became her mentor. Veronese audiences wanted beautiful, pure voices, not Maria's unusual imperfections, but as she later explained, "When you interpret a role, you must have a thousand colours to portray happiness, joy, sorrow, fear ... How can you do this with only a beautiful voice?"

It wasn't long before she was attracting rave reviews and fans. Serafin signed her up for two productions, and offers poured in — *Tristan und Isolde*, *Turandot*, *Aida*, *Norma* ... In 1949, she made opera history in Venice when she interpreted two roles just three days apart — an incredible



**Above: Maria's happiest moments were with Greek tycoon Aristotle Onassis. She sacrificed her career for him, but her dream of becoming his wife was never fulfilled. Far left: The soprano and her obsessive husband, Meneghini. He devoted his life to her career, but neglected Maria, the woman.**

vocal shift, which she performed perfectly. Her achievement astonished critics.

As the soprano's career soared, her personal life became increasingly entwined with Meneghini who became her personal manager. In 1949, despite the large age gap between them, she accepted his marriage proposal.

Although the press often reported that Maria lived only for her art and didn't want children, Meneghini claimed in his book *My Wife Maria Callas* that she longed to be a mother. If her longing for a child was unfulfilled, however, she realised a professional dream in 1950: to perform in the Temple of Opera, Milan's La Scala, although La Scala's manager Antonio Ghiringhelli took an instant dislike to her and did his best to delay her conquest of the opera house.

Months later, Maria embarked on her first Mexican visit and her performances in *Norma*, *Aida*, *Tosca* and *Il Trovatore* were widely acclaimed. She also invited her mother to Mexico in order to show off her now famous and rich self. Evangelia was showered with invitations to dinners, embassy parties and receptions, but there was still no real relationship between mother and daughter. Maria made it clear that Evangelia had no claim on her and after the 1950 Mexican season, she never saw her mother again.

The bad relationship between Maria and her mother was great fodder for the press, which insinuated that the famous artist had abandoned her family to poverty. Her father refused to support this, but her mother tearfully told reporters that she couldn't afford a ticket to her daughter's performances. Maria responded: "If she doesn't have money, she can go to work. If she doesn't want to work, she can jump out a window!" She accused her mother of robbing her of her childhood and neglecting her in favour of her older sister.





**Above: Maria resented her mother for her loveless childhood, and the greedy Evangelia constantly demanded financial favours from her famous daughter. Right: Rehearsing for *Norma* in Greece, the diva's unique and passionate interpretation received worldwide recognition.**

Maria befriended the celebrated stage director Luchino Visconti, provider of her first role in comic opera — Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia* — and he became the third great influence in her work. Her schedule was packed with performances, but Milan's famous La Scala was still closed to her. The manager, Ghiringhelli, refused to allow her into the theatre, unless she came as a guest artist, a humiliation which she angrily refused.

On May 26, 1951, Maria opened at the Maggio Musicale in Florence — her greatest Italian triumph and the one which forced Ghiringhelli to welcome her to La Scala. He offered her the opening of the 1951/52 season and she became queen of the world's most important opera house. She appeared there for 160 nights in 26 operas.

The diva never failed to provide media fodder. When rivalry broke out between her and Renata Tebaldi, La Scala's reigning diva, their feud made headlines, and the music world divided between Tebaldists and Callasites. When Tebaldi declared that she was abandoning La Scala, Maria said: "Renata Tebaldi is an artist who has no backbone." Tebaldi replied: "Maybe I don't have backbone, but I have what Callas doesn't — a heart."

Maria viewed anyone who stood in her way as an enemy. Her husband/manager, Meneghini, inflamed her resentments and controlled her personal life and career. A superb manager, he also spoke for her, answered her letters, handled the press and isolated her from the outside world.

Maria drove herself more relentlessly than ever. In 1953, she sang *Medea* for the first time and in Chicago she sang *Norma*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *La Traviata*. Critics called her "the world's greatest soprano", but also asked: Does she have to be so big? In reply, Maria applied her characteristic determination to her weight. Choosing the sylph-like Audrey Hepburn as inspiration, she



began an astonishing transformation.

With strict dieting, the passionate Greek diva became a slender, very attractive woman. She lost 28 kilos in two years and became almost more famous for her mysterious weight loss, than her voice. She also intrigued the fashion world's elite who designed clothes especially for her. Her wardrobe soon overflowed; at one point it includ-

attending cocktail parties, lunches, dinners, meeting the press and being photographed.

In 1955, Maria teamed up again with Visconti at La Scala, and a great year followed. To her, Visconti was a magician. The passion between her and her husband had died years ago, and she became obsessed with Visconti who was more interested in a new young tenor. Maria followed

**The passionate diva lost 28 kilos in two years and transformed herself into a slender beauty.**

ed 25 furs, 130 pairs of shoes, 200 suits, 300 hats and 50 evening dresses. The transformation not only changed her appearance, but also opened up a new world of interpretation to her.

After establishing herself at La Scala, Maria wanted to launch her American career and the Chicago Lyric Opera House welcomed her back as a heroine. If she wasn't singing, she was

them around and had jealous outbursts, often in full view of the rest of the cast. Despite this, the Callas-Visconti collaboration was sensational.

Maria wanted to sing at the New York Metropolitan Theatre, but the Met's superintendent, Rudolf Bing, who liked Maria and her work, refused the high rates her husband charged for her performances. But when Meneghini secured a

contract with the Chicago Opera, the public accused Bing of losing the century's greatest singer to another city and forced him to accept her outrageous fees.

Maria was received with open arms as *Norma* in 1956. Despite this, her performances were viciously criticised by the influential socialite and gossip columnist, Elsa Maxwell, who was an ardent fan of Renata Tebaldi. Not to be cowed, Maria decided to conquer Maxwell and charmed the journalist at a party. They became good friends and the 73-year-old Maxwell opened a new world of social grandeur to Maria.

The grand ball in Venice, held in Maria's honour by Maxwell, was where the diva met Greek tycoon, Aristotle Socrates Onassis, the man who was to change her life forever. The party went on for seven days and ended on Onassis's yacht, *Christina*, where he showered the beautiful singer with attention.

This new social world intrigued Maria. She'd always focused exclusively on her work; now she wanted time for herself, although she was bitterly criticised for "betraying" her art when she cancelled performances. When her voice failed at the Rome Opera House, critics were up-in-arms — not because the performance had ended halfway, but because she had attended a party the night before. Maria was enjoying her work less and less — and it showed.

Maria became increasingly unpopular. She clashed with co-workers and directors, and fellow performers revealed her unbearable disposition to the press and accused her of claiming all the glory at the end of performances for herself. When she returned to La Scala, she found the atmosphere hateful and cold, and announced that for her own dignity, she had to leave — this after seven years and 157 performances.

Maria left for London where she received first-rate treatment. Millions of TV viewers watched her perform, and critics loved her. After this triumph, she began a tour of America, but when she

evening, before the performance. "How romantic he is!" Maria exclaimed to her husband.

Shortly afterwards, Onassis saw the diva again at a ball in Venice. Again, he couldn't take his eyes off her and seated himself and his wife, Tina, next to Maria and Meneghini. Onassis detested opera, but immediately accepted Maria's invitation to *Medea* at Covent Garden. Afterwards, at his own party for Maria, he invited the couple aboard his yacht. Meneghini could hardly refuse.

After flying to Monte Carlo, they joined Winston Churchill and Maria entered a luxurious fantasy world. Onassis swept her off her feet and it was soon clear that the Greek tycoon was also in love — not with a diva, but with Maria, the woman.

It was deeply painful for Maria to leave Meneghini who had devoted his life to her, but she announced that she loved Aristotle. Meneghini's threats and pleas were in vain. Maria and Onassis separated from their spouses.

Onassis was Maria's first true love, although the role of mistress didn't come easily to her. The times aboard the *Christina* were some of her happiest; she changed from the aggressive, icy tigress into a soft charmer, a part of a duo who were hailed as the world's two most powerful Greeks. Her recordings and performances fell, but now her private life came first.

During the productions which followed, it was evident that Maria was losing the fight for her voice. "But I don't want to sing anymore," she said. "I want to live, just like a normal woman, with children, a home, a dog."

Despite Onassis's predilection for affairs, Maria waited patiently for a proposal and the couple stayed together for nine years. But marriage never came. And since it was impossible to combine a full-scale career with Onassis's lifestyle, Maria chose her lover who offered her everything but the commitment for which she longed.

Then, after inviting US President John F. Kennedy's widow, Jackie, aboard the *Christina*, Onassis started to pursue Jackie. Maria found it

increasingly difficult to compete for Ari's attention. She also felt her voice's decay despite successes at Covent Garden and the Paris Opera.

After a seven-year struggle, Maria finally divorced Meneghini and discovered that she was pregnant at 43. Onassis warned that having a child would end their relationship; she had an abortion and sadly watched his growing interest in Jackie. Then, in 1968, Jackie became the second



**Maria and her close friend, opera singer Giuseppe di Stefano. They starred in many performances together, but rumours of a relationship were never confirmed.**

Mrs Onassis — a dream denied Maria.

Maria's world was shattered. She lived in Paris and tried to focus on work, but Onassis didn't stay away for long. He once again became a regular feature in Maria's life, and they briefly resumed their affair. When Onassis abandoned her for Jackie the second time, however, she suffered a nervous breakdown. No sooner had she recovered than he returned, and although the ritual was humiliating and heartbreaking, it was still the most important thing in Maria's life.

During the early 70s, the lonely Maria taught students at the Juilliard School and prepared for a re-entry into opera with her old friend, the tenor Giuseppe di Stefano. Their world concert tour was a flop. Her voice had deteriorated and the world watched in horror as Maria Callas destroyed her own legend. She received yet another devastating blow when Onassis died of heart and liver failure in 1975.

On April 11, 1977, Maria swore never to sing again. Her powerful voice diminished and during her last years, she could only utter a barely audible whisper. She shut herself off more and more and the loneliness became unbearable. She had lost everyone and everything she'd lived for. On December 16, 1977, she died alone at the age of 53 in her home at Avenue Georges Mandel; officially she suffered a heart attack. A butler and midwife were the only people present during the last moments of the star who had once been adored by millions.

Maria's ashes were taken to Greece with full honours, and scattered in the Aegean Sea during a storm. Her legend, however, has never died, for as she once explained: "Singing for me is not an act of pride, but an effort to elevate towards those heavens where everything is harmony." mc

The seven-day party ended on Onassis's yacht, where the tycoon showered Maria with attention.

couldn't decide whether to return to the Met, Rudolf Bing cancelled her contract and she created another enemy — the Met chief.

In December, she debuted in Paris at a charity gala with a high-profile guest list — among them Charlie Chaplin, Brigitte Bardot, the Windsors and Aristotle Onassis. On the morning of the gala, she received a huge bunch of roses from Onassis. This was repeated at lunch time and in the