

Callas Books: ‘Prima Donna – The Psychology of Maria Callas’ by Paul Wink

Prima Donna – The Psychology of Maria Callas

By Paul Wink

Hard cover; size book: 13.5 x 18.5 cm

Pages: 294

Small sized photographs in black/white: 14

Language: English

Publisher: Oxford University Press, New York, 2021

www.oup.com

ISBN 978-0-19-085773-8

Price \$34.95

A few hundred books, and many other publications, have during the years become available for fans, opera lovers and other people interested in Maria Callas, be it for her exceptional art of singing and acting, her fascinating and tragic life, for both, or for other aspects. There is no other female (and probably male) singer about whom so many books have been written, in many (translated) languages, and still new books about her are being published.

These books can be divided into a number of categories: biographies, life and/or art, photo albums, auction and exhibition catalogues, plays, reviews, recordings, etc. Recently a new book (which constitutes in itself a new category) has been published which for the first (and probably the last) time deals in detail with Callas' psychology. Of course, many books have dealt with her ‘psychology’ as shown during her exceptional artistic and personal life, a number of strange habits, reactions, utterances and peculiar character traits, sometimes nice and positive, sometimes strange, contradictory and (very) unpleasant. There are reasons enough for these: her childhood, her time in Greece during the war, her relationships with Meneghini and Onassis, and others.

The new, small sized, book, *Prima Donna – The Psychology of Maria Callas*, was recently published by Oxford University Press, New York, in their series ‘Inner Lives’. Paul Wink is a psychol-

Karl H. van Zoggel

ogy professor in this branch, working at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, USA, and is a leading researcher in the area of adult development, with numerous publications on narcissism, aging, religion and spirituality.

I have read this book, which is based on the present state of the science of



psychology, with increasing interest as it solved many of the questions I always had when reading and dealing with Callas' life and art. The scientific approach by Wink in tackling her personality and artistry leads logically and inescapable to Wink's conclusions.

What is the book about? Wink writes: “How did Callas’s vulnerabilities contribute to making her the great artist that she was? Why did she have such a polarizing effect on her audience, with some loving her, some hating her, and, perhaps most surprisingly, some flipping from love to hate and then back again? And, most insistently, why did the greatest diva of her time, who died at the age of fifty-three, spend the last four years of her life secluded in despair in her Paris apartment? These psycho-

logical mysteries constitute the subject of this psychobiography. In contrast to a biography that provides a detailed account of someone’s life from beginning to end, psychobiography aims to understand a life through the systematic application of psychological theory. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive as biographies inevitably rely on psychology and psychobiography interprets facts from its subject’s life. The difference is one of emphasis: A good biography skillfully narrates a comprehensive life story while psychobiography focuses on interpreting selected life episodes using methods and insights from the field of scientific psychology.”

As psychology is not really my cup of tea, I had some difficulty in understanding what exactly what Wink meant. I’m glad that Guy Glass, a psychiatrist, wrote a detailed review of the book which is reproduced hereafter. His review is followed by a discussion that took place on Opera-L and TalkClassical forums on the Internet during January and February 2021.

The book has a number of chapters that reflect Callas’ important life stages: her childhood, her mother, years in Athens, Meneghini, being a prima donna, Onassis and her last years. Further there is an introduction, epilogue and (a not perfect) index.

Wink’s knowledge about Callas was acquired from many publications and a number of books, such as: Gage, Ardoine/Fitzgerald, Remy, Jellinek, Lowe, Sutherland, Meneghini, Jackie, Evangelia, Galatopoulos, Petsalis-Diomidis, Stancioff, Scott, Allegri and Stassinopoulos (Huffington). It should be noted that all the literature he consulted is from English, or translated into English, sources.

So far, so good. But there are some negative comments to make. The book contains some typing and factual mistakes. The photographs are small and a number of captions are not correct.

The greatest mistake however is that the fact of Callas’ and Onassis’ one-day-

baby, Omero Lengrini, on 30 March 1960, is not mentioned at all. This is all the more remarkable as one of the books consulted is by Nicholas Gage, who in 2000 published for the first time, information about the boy, so Wink must have known about it. Moreover, after my further investigations about this matter, in 2006 in Milan, (published in *Maria Callas Magazine* No. 49, and published on our Club's website) a more thorough review of the literature by Wink would doubtless have put this matter, which in my opinion is essential for the subject of this book, in the picture. In later magazines the existence of the baby boy was confirmed by others, including Bruna. In the book Wink writes about an abortion, for which there is no evidence at all: "Although Meneghini has claimed Callas was not capable of becoming pregnant, it seems that in 1966 she accidentally conceived a child with Onassis and, following his insistence, underwent an abortion. 'I don't want a baby by you!' Callas recalled Onassis declaring after she told him of her pregnancy. 'What would I do with another child? I already have two.' Callas obeyed, even though she had moral reservations about abortion and also deeply desired to marry Aristo and have children with him."

From
<https://medium.med.nyu.edu/view/19013>
5 February 2021
By Guy Glass

continue to be best-sellers, and her life has inspired dozens of biographies. *Prima Donna: The Psychology of Maria Callas* appears in Oxford University Press's 'Inner Lives' series, which consists of psycho-biographies of artists that make use of

current psychological theory and research. The focus of author Paul Wink, a psychology professor at Wellesley College, is adult development and narcissism.

The facts of Callas's life are well known. She is born in New York City to an ill-matched Greek immigrant couple. Her father is barely able to keep a roof over their heads. Her mother Litza struggles to get over the death of an infant son, requiring hospitalization for a suicide attempt. As the story goes, Litza cannot bring herself to look at her new daughter for the first four days of her life. Litza, who imagines herself in a lofty social class, disdains their neighbors, and thus Maria is discouraged from playing with other children. When Maria is discovered to have tal-



*Kavouri, Beach, summer 1939, with conservatory students.
 Above: Zoe Vlachopoulou, Apostolos Hadzioannou and Pepi Andreadou;
 below Manolis Hadzis and Arda Mandikian*

Maria Callas, the most famous opera singer of the second half of the 20th century, continues to exert a fascination. Critical consensus is that Callas fused a technically flawed voice with an extraordinary stage presence to create something unique. More than forty years after her death, Callas's recordings

ent, Litza exploits her.

As Litza's marriage deteriorates, she brings Maria back to Greece. With the onset of World War II, they endure hardships. Yet, improbably, the overweight and awkward Maria shows a streak of brilliance. She is the hardest working student at the conservatory, quickly out-

pacing her peers. On Maria's first day in Italy, where she gets her first big break, she meets a businessman who is more than twice her age. Within weeks they are a couple. For a time, she allows Litza to share in her success, even buying her a fur coat. But soon, in response to a request for money, she tells her mother to "jump out of the window or drown yourself" (p. 78), and then never speaks to her again.

Maria loses weight and transforms into the operatic counterpart to Audrey Hep-

Paris with her two poodles, develops an addiction to sleeping pills, and dies a decade later, alone.

Commentary

The overall thesis of the author is that Callas had a narcissistic disorder whose origins may be traced to a lack of parental empathy, including her mother's authoritarianism and her father's inadequacy. This narcissism was manifested in both grandiose and vulnerable aspects. The grandiosity resulted in a sense of en-

ages to calm her down again" [p. 137]), and then, just as suddenly, dispose of him. It explains why she felt more alive than ever when with her powerful and charismatic lover, and how, once abandoned, became utterly deflated and never bounced back.

The author also applies this framework to an understanding of his subject's artistic ability. He concludes that the narcissism that proved maladaptive in relationships fueled Callas's relentless work ethic and pursuit



Milan, Hotel Cavalieri, early April 1950, rehearsing for Aida, with Giovanni Battista Meneghini

burn. She enjoys one operatic triumph after another. Nevertheless, she becomes as famous for her bellicose and imperious behavior as for her singing. She kicks a colleague in the shin after a performance so she can take a solo bow. She is publicly fired from the Metropolitan Opera. She incurs scandal by suddenly canceling a performance at which the president of Italy is present.

When the fabulously wealthy Aristotle Onassis courts her, Callas unceremoniously rids herself of her husband. Soon, her technical flaws catch up with her, and her career dwindles away. Meanwhile, Onassis goes for a bigger trophy: Jacqueline Kennedy, and Callas is humiliated in the press. Voiceless, she exiles herself to

titlement, contempt for others, and rage in response to any perceived slight. The vulnerability resulted in a sense of feeling perennially exploited for her talent and unappreciated for her innate qualities. The lack of integration or split between these two aspects led to a tendency to see the world in black and white terms. It necessitated the use of others to prop up Callas's fragility and deal with her unmet emotional needs.

The above psychological framework sheds light on seemingly contradictory elements of Callas's life. It explains, for example, how she could so suddenly latch onto her husband (it was said she was so dependent on him that if he went out to buy a newspaper "it would take

of excellence. It led, as well, to an uncanny ability to merge with operatic characters that heightened the effectiveness of her performances.

Prima Donna does not purport to be a comprehensive biography. The emphasis of this book is Maria Callas's psychology. Her admirers might fear that something ineffable about her magical gift has been reduced here to psychopathology. On the other hand, the author's conclusions are logical, well thought out and clear. This is a useful contribution to exploring the unconscious conflicts that underlie art, and to our appreciation of a performer with enduring appeal.