

# Maria Callas and Tullio Serafin

*Two opera superstars join their forces to create something special*

We hear little these days of Tullio Serafin (\* Rottanova di Cavarzere, 8 December 1878 – † Rome, 2 February 1968), a distressing matter for someone who decided to focus her research on the great conductor. His name is rarely mentioned in the

context of Maria Callas, particularly during her first few years in Italy, and there are hardly any references at all to Serafin the man, a brilliant man: what do we hear of his supreme skills as a conductor, his infallibility when it came to casting, and everything else that he did to make a production memorable in every way?

Forty years on from his death and over a century since this outstanding conductor gave his first performance, far too often people seem to go looking for some sort of justification – some see it as necessary confirmation – of his greatness, and run off lists of the famous singers he has conducted and the famous people who corresponded with him so frequently, or laud the quality of the professional relationships he had with the most influential figures not only in the world of music, but also in international political circles and in high society in Europe and America.

But who was Tullio Serafin? What was his personal and artistic story: where he

*Nicola Sguotti*

started off and, more importantly, where he got to – and with results with which

range of lyrical drama: we are indebted to Serafin for the first modern production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in Rome in December 1934; he repeatedly performed new works throughout his career; and he conducted more than 60 premières and numerous

first nights in Italy, and other performances that took Italian opera to the rest of Europe, the United States and South America.

However, this is not a matter of number-crunching – even though the number of performances he conducted (and the works he suggested) is apparently endless – but of interpretative choices that have lived long in the memory, partly thanks to the precious testimonies of those who worked with him. Whether it was a major opera house or the smallest town, Serafin placed the music, and particularly the singing, at the centre of every performance. He was sustained by the belief that every element should do no more than venerate what the composer had put to paper.

Serafin was a hard task-master – from the orchestra, he demanded perfection – yet he was the conductor that singers loved most, providing them with the conditions in which they could express their potential most effectively by guid-



*Florence, Teatro Comunale, 30 November 1948: Norma, with Mirto Picchi*

few concern themselves these days. They are, in all probability, the same few people who are aware of what Serafin represented for the world of international opera. His repertoire is probably unique for its richness and its variety across the

ing them and supporting them from the podium. And through his extraordinary skill in seeing the potential in each voice, he became known as the conductor who, more than anyone else, had the ability to 'discover' operatic talent, giving them well-judged débuts and launching them on their careers. From Enrico Caruso to Renata Tebaldi, Joan Sutherland to Carlo Bergonzi

– and we must not forget artists such as Rosa Ponselle, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Leyla Gencer, Giulietta Simionato, Fedora Barbieri and Luciano Pavarotti – all the great singers of the first 60 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sang with him at least once. His name conjures up the golden age of international opera houses where



*Florence, Teatro Comunale, 14 January 1951: La traviata, with Giuseppina Angelini*

as many as 40 operas, all performed many times, were put on in a season.

From the moment he first stepped onto the podium and throughout an illustrious international career of more than 60 years, Serafin was the starting-point for anyone wanting to find out about

the world of opera – particularly the Italian repertoire, but also German opera (and mainly Wagner). His work on defining and disseminating the correct traditions and conventions of Italian opera led him to write, in collaboration with Alceo Toni, an accurate and thoroughgoing catalogue of good vocal practice. The authors' intention was to provide a comprehensive manual that conductors, players and singers could draw on. Serafin

himself always felt compelled to make his own contribution to the interpretation of singing by a perception that the world of music in the theatre was changing, and moving an opera season that was totally different from the world in which they had been participants.

*Florence, Teatro Comunale, January/February 1953: during recording sessions of Lucia di Lammermoor*





For a number of significant reasons – the central position he occupied in the opera world, his performances in the world's major houses, and his work on re-discovering long-forgotten masterpieces and performing them – Serafin has, through his art, prompted many detailed studies and monographs. And it accordingly it is to him that I dedicate my research, which has now been published in book form, *Tullio Serafin, il custode del bel canto* (*Tullio Serafin, the guardian of bel canto*), published by Armelin Musica in 2014. The

and the Rome Opera, overseeing seasons in South America, and conducting at the Paris Opéra, Covent Garden and wherever people were making good music.

Serafin met Callas quite by chance. Perhaps it was written in the 'Book of Destiny'. At all events, it was the beginning of what it would be no exaggeration to say was one of the most important associations in the history of opera. Serafin was so struck by Callas' extraordinary vocal and interpretative ability that he immediately took her under his wing, determined

to transport the listener through Serafin and Callas' astonishing music-making.

Serafin was indeed, as Carlo Bergonzi put it, "a rarity, the master conductor"; a great, yet humble, man, capable of showing the world that "you can do good things everywhere", to quote Nello Santi, who remembered Serafin opening the Festival at the Arena di Verona on 10 August 1913. It all started in Rottanova, a small town in the Veneto countryside which Serafin left as a boy to study in Milan, and where he asked to be buried. He had always



*Epidaurus, Ancient Theatre, 24 August 1960: Norma, with Alexis Minotis, Tullio Serafin and Kiki Morfoniou*

aim of my work is to provide a starting point for the re-discovery of a great conductor. Only by studying his intense artistic activity is it possible to return him to life – a complete musician, a peerless musician, one that stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. Let's just call him 'the conductor who discovered Callas'! When Serafin conducted Callas in *La Gioconda* in the Arena in August 1947, he had already been a conductor for a good 45 years. And not in provincial houses or in second-rate productions, but as chief conductor at La Scala, the Metropolitan

to turn her into a complete artist with the potential to do exceptional things – and also giving her advice on how to correct small diction problems. Of all Callas' memorable first nights under Serafin, we might pick out *Norma* (Florence, Teatro Comunale, 30 November 1948), an opera for which her performances have become, and remain, the reference point. There were so many significant moments when these two opera superstars were able to join forces and create something special. It is our good fortune that we have the testimony of recordings that are still able

dreamed of returning, and at least those who came after him could offer him the praise that his contemporaries failed to give him, probably obscured by a fading memory. Even today, he could be waiting there – his kindly smile, inevitably wearing a hat, his slow gait. We can see him waiting there now, just as he used to wait, rather impatiently before walking into the orchestra pit to tumultuous applause from an ecstatic audience.

(Translation: Michael Cunningham)