

7 Deaths of Maria Callas by Marina Abramović

Antonio Pizzo – Marida Rizzuti

If the event that Marina Abramović presented at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich were an opera piece, we could try to compare the different codes that the artist has put in place, including linguistic offshoots from areas normally less frequented by opera houses. If that hour and a half of music, song, action, and video were decipherable through an aesthetics of production or reception, it would be fascinating to reconstruct the story narrated by the dramaturgy. If the elegance of the scenography could be part of a refined stage writing, we might evaluate the specific effectiveness of a personal approach to the intermediality of the performance.

The hypotheticals are necessary considering that the overall creator is an artist who has established herself in the field of performance art so far from the operatic canon. Yet, all these “ifs” constitute the most interesting and richest elements in Abramović’s project, because they succeed to get to the core of the very notion of opera theater, to the idea of cultural heritage that guides many European productions, and to the traditional audience contract which links spectators with the stage. And Abramović dives into this nucleus with grace and sincere participation, far from iconoclastic or violent rage. The work is constructed in such a way as to seduce the audience with the elements of opera, but at the same time it instills, in those who watch and listen, queries that erode the spectatorial experience itself.

In other words, Abramović fashions an event in real time whose raw material comes entirely from the tradition of opera, but she molds this material in such a way that the final result does not coincide with the horizon of expectation. Back in 2018, the artist had a first experience with musical theater at the Opera Vlaanderen in Antwerp, where she created the visual and conceptual apparatus for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, whose staging was intended as an *opéra-ballet* by choreographers Damien Jalet and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Three years later, the show had a revival at the Grand Théâtre de Genève. It is almost as if someone were using a canvas, colors, brushes, and even the painted subjects or the exhibition space typical of a figurative painting to obtain something that is not a figurative painting, but rather the *enactment* of thoughts on the essence of the painting.

In any case, these metadiscursive reflections can be considered just the seeds that the work plants in the audience and in the history of opera itself. They may be regarded as the effects that this live event produces and therefore it is possible to review the mechanisms it puts in place for such pur-

pose. So, let's proceed step by step and begin with the material organization of the space in which the actions take place.

The orchestra is in the traditional pit, except for the choir which is distributed on two boxes facing the stage. The scenography is articulated in two main scenes: the first sees the entire proscenium covered by a veil (on which various projections of increasingly dark and disturbing clouds appear); placed right behind a platform, it covers the entire length of the stage from one wing to the other, hosting (on the left) an elegant bed—on which Abramović lies motionless—and, from time to time, the singers. Behind it, an equally large rear-projection screen on which various short films appear and illustrate the famous arias performed. At little more than half into the show, and after seven singers have taken turns, the screens and the platform retreat to reveal a luxurious room where, still on the right, we find the bed and Abramović lying down. At the end of the show, the curtain falls to reveal the protagonist on the proscenium for the last, brief scene.

The action has a very clear direction. During an orchestral prelude, clouds appear on the veil while a light frames Abramović, whose recorded voice introduces the theme of the aria that is about to be performed. Meanwhile, the singer who is placed at the center makes her entrance. When the orchestra begins to play the aria, a lighting effect allows the veil to become transparent, while a few videos are projected on the back screen; there, Abramović (for five of them with Willem Dafoe) stages personal reinterpretations of the character portrayed. Within this dramaturgical structure, seven singers alternate on stage to interpret just as many heroines and their respective arias: Violetta Valery, “Addio, del passato” (*La traviata*); Tosca, “Vissi d’arte” (*Tosca*); Desdemona, “Ave Maria” (*Otello*); Cio-Cio-san, “Un bel dì vedremo” (*Madama Butterfly*); Carmen, “L’amour est un oiseau rebelle” (*Carmen*); Lucia, “Il dolce suono” (*Lucia di Lammermoor*); Norma, “Casta diva” (*Norma*). Immediately afterwards the scene darkens and an interlude, in which electronic music is followed by an original composition, favors a change of scene. After a few minutes, the raising of the curtain reveals her apartment's room; this time, the orchestra accompanies Abramović's stage action: her recorded voice marks her awakening, the getting out of bed, the wandering around the room, until she leaves for the boudoir. The singers reenter as a group, armed with various cleaning tools, and start tidying up; at this point, the costumes worn during the arias acquire meaning because they clearly present them as the maids of the house where Maria Callas died. The cleaning ends as they cover the furnishings with black sheets, until one of the maids switches a turntable on. As the orchestra approaches the final

sections of the score, the curtain falls, and from the left enters Abramović wrapped in the same golden lamé dress that Defoe had worn in the video dedicated to *Norma*. As the performer reaches the center of the stage, and we hear a recording of “Casta diva” by Callas, Abramović’s grave gestures reenact Callas’s own ones, avoiding any outward sign of emotion—but darkness cuts off the aria right before the end.

Therefore, much of the staging relies on the video’s narrative quality, both when dark clouds seem to foresee the heroines’ tragic destinies, and also when their most famous arias act as a background to the cinematic staging of what Abramović considers their main themes. Violetta is motionless on her raw deathbed while Alfredo regrets his choices; Tosca falls from a skyscraper and crashes onto a car; Desdemona is strangled by Otello/Jago with pythons; Butterfly gives up her son and lets herself die in a nuclear disaster setting; Carmen, depicted as a bullfighter, is roped by Don José; Lucia rages against the mirrors reflecting her dressed as a bride; Norma and Pollione (en travesti) approach a blazing fire in an ecstasy of flames.

These slow-motion videos—whose formal beauty is reminiscent of Bill Viola’s installations—are integrated on the stage in a way that is by now widely accepted and understood in the context of multimedia performances: here, the arias are performed at the front of the stage, coupled with a few actions and marked by the motionless presence of Abramović, while the background video elaborates on the arias’ themes. It matters little whether this is Abramović’s personal critical interpretation of those characters, or Callas’s dreams as she sleeps in her bed; the whole system works as a continuous restaging of the same content, which thus enters a loop of narrative references between Abramović, Callas, and the tragic heroines. The hierarchy of these three elements is constantly and wittingly put into question: Which one is first? Callas’s hypothetical dreams? Abramović’s homage to a much-admired artist? the heroines’ tragic love haunting the lives of both? The conceptual scheme is made even more effective by the technical solution of having the platform and the lighting slightly raising from the floor the bodies of the individual singers and of Abramović, leaving them almost afloat in front of the projections.

The second part comments on these conceptual networks by highlighting the overlapping of performer and singer. We do not know if the actions on stage are part of a performance by Abramović or the depiction of Callas’s last hours—it could be both. The codes used are the ones we can recognize both in Abramović’s artistic career and in the history of performance art (i.e., actions performed according to a predetermined, carefully ordered set

of instructions; the exposure of the body for a closer connection with the audience; the artist's own life on stage (a photo of Paolo Canevari and Abramović emerges among those kept in a drawer). The language in which these codes are set, however, is that of representation, opera, narration, and so on—until the end, when Abramović seems to take on herself Maria Callas's persona, embodying the recorded voice through a series of carefully measured gestures.

It reads, therefore, as a dramaturgy which aims to fill the gap between the two women but also, interestingly, to juxtapose performance and representation to unveil the gaze towards a different status of opera and its present-day status.

The music by Marko Nikodijević also moves in this direction; it is necessary to distinguish Nikodijević's original interventions from the use of the famous arias. Therefore it is legitimate to argue that the use of pre-existing operatic pieces in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* strongly recalls the universe of the compilation, of the *greatest hits* of the author. In any case, the composer creates a space for himself within the transitions from one aria to another, and most importantly in the introduction and in the second part (Callas' death). He treats them almost as a live DJ-set. For the transitions, Nikodijević has created fluid and undaunted musical spaces that sound like the opposite of arias—just listen to their register: the arias, here, sound like they are lingering mostly on the middle register, whereas the instrumental interludes open up to the high and low extremes. By contrast, for the introduction and the second part, the composer ties together small motifs from each aria and blends them to create new ones. Here, he is re-arranging the operatic repertoire by combining musical motives and creating a modern texture where memories of the past can resurface. This technique is easily discernible in the opening overture with the curtain closed, when the incipit of "Addio, del passato" (*La traviata*) emerges from the orchestra. The transition between the first part (the seven arias performances) and the second (Callas's death) is accompanied by an orchestral interlude with electronic music inserts and remixed voices from the choir.

What is interesting is precisely that for this show we can identify a more traditional dramaturgy, that is to say a specific arrangement of the stage movements according to a narrative project. The production strategies can be traced back to the design of a meaning identifiable through the codes of theatrical language. Such reading would be more of a stretch—if not downright untenable—for the celebrated performances of *Lips of Thomas* (1975) or *Imponderabilia* of 1977, in which the aesthetics were completely performative and centered around the feedback loop with the audience.

Thus, once the representational component (even partially mimetic) of the live event has been established, it remains to be seen whether the narrative project—the story told—can be traced back to the making of (some) sense.

If the meta-narration, as we have seen, aims to construct a framework of juxtapositions (between celebrated women, or performance codes), the story that emerges from the staged dramaturgy narrates the “divinity” of Maria Callas. Indeed, it seems peculiar that the heroines are also the maids who cold-bloodedly rearrange the dead artist’s room. Without her, their only purpose is cleaning; their existence is entirely dependent on the greatness of the performer, not the other way around. In such a context exuding autobiographical flavor, Abramović creates an opera where the artist (herself, but also Callas) is the true dramatic protagonist, and where she can tell without hesitation that the performer comes before the character.

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