

LA CALLAS

A chamber opera in development

Act I Libretto

Elizabeth Coppinger Librettist

Clint Borzoni Composer

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Maria Callas , <i>famous opera singer, Greek American raised in Greece</i>	Lyric Soprano
Aristotle Onassis , <i>Greek shipping magnate</i>	Baritone
Giovanni Battista Meneghini , <i>Italian industrialist, Callas' husband & manager</i>	Tenor
Tina Onassis , <i>English-born socialite, Greek shipping heiress, Aristotle's wife</i>	Soprano
Zeus , <i>the main Greek deity, ruler, protector, and father of all gods and humans</i>	Bass Baritone
Hera , <i>the wife of Zeus and goddess of women, marriage, and family</i>	Mezzo Soprano
Ensemble of 4 singers , <i>minor characters throughout</i>	Soprano, Mezzo, Tenor, Bass

La Callas

Act 1 Scene 1

PRELUDE

A stately couple, clearly long married, are conversing in front of the curtain. They are the Greek gods, Zeus and Hera.

ZEUS

Greece, beloved of the gods,
Center of the world
Her heroes known by all
Where are her heroes today
I long for a Greek of power
Great fortune will be his
His deeds can give me strength
Return my lust for life

HERA

Why a man
A woman can be a hero

ZEUS

Ha! I love women
But none can be a hero

HERA

You have loved mortal women
Lusted for them, seduced them
Forced yourself upon them
You do not know woman
You are blind to her strength
Man's legacy is through his wars
Woman through her creation
Her power makes the world

ZEUS

You found the women I loved
Cursed and destroyed them

HERA

I ensured
You would never love them again
Never dream of them in your bed
Never love them again
Their destruction is yours

They look at each other in anger as if to burst into a battle but regain control of themselves.

ZEUS

We should not argue
Let the mortals decide

I will find a Greek hero
A man of action
A warrior who will change the world

HERA

I will find a Greek hero
A woman who will change the world
A woman of great power
A woman who will change the world

HERA and ZEUS (alternate lines)

Let us place a wager
Each will choose a mortal
Each will choose a mortal
Their lives will settle our wager
Watch their struggles
Their battles
Their victories
Their defeats
Which will change the world
Such enjoyment

The curtain rises on a crowd in the reception room of the Paris Opera following a performance by Maria Callas. Excitement grows in the group, both supporters and detractors, as they await her arrival.

CHORUS

Maria is magnificent
She sings from her soul
Thrilling to hear
She becomes the character
No one is her equal
I prefer Tebaldi
She sings like an angel
Tibaldi has no passion
Callas transports me
She looks like a film star
Her voice was better when she was heavy
She cancels performances
Only when she is sick
She pushes herself too hard
Such a range of roles
Her voice will suffer

It will pay the price

The press attacks her with malice
The impresarios treat her with spite
They dislike strong women
They want divas to do as told

How lucky to see her at her peak
Her concerts sell out in minutes
Paris loves her
London loves her
Italy loves her
The world loves her

The women gather to gossip

She seems so alone
You would want to be alone
If you were married to her husband
So sad she is tied to that old man
There can't be passion in their lives

Their attention turns to a newly arrived couple, Aristotle (Ari) and Tina Onassis. She is almost 20 years younger than Ari, pretty and vibrant.

Look, Aristotle Onassis
His wife, our friend, Tina
The richest man in the world
He has no class
Except what Tina brings
Still so young and beautiful
Born into shipping wealth
Why did she marry him
Why did she marry him
Tina, darling, tell us
Why did you marry him?

TINA

I was very young
Only seventeen
He pursued me, charmed me
I was the only woman in his world
His boyish ways
Made me forget his age
A man so full of life
Like a sun that brings light
Into every room

He is a beautiful animal
Strong and fearless
He is a seducer
Knows how to please a woman
But now he pleases too many

Our love is gone
Our marriage is a show
We each have our roles
He needs me on his stage
A part of his beautiful life
Mother of his children
I have my own revenge
A lover who adores me

Maria sweeps into the room with great flourish and all rush to her, effusive over her performance, all criticism forgotten. Next to her is her elderly husband, Giovanni Battista Meneghini. The crowd flocks around Maria calling her name and terms of endearment,

MARIA

Do not praise Maria
Praise the music
The music is vast.
I listen with my heart.
Emotion takes hold
Every gesture is there
The character comes alive

I have something inside of me
I give it all to you
And you understand me
All of me is in my singing
The only language I know
To sing is my world.
I try to reach the heavens
Reach the heavens
Where all is perfect harmony.
A gift from the gods
To touch truest beauty

The crowd applauds and begins to gather in small conversational groups. Some position themselves to speak with Callas. Everyone ignores Meneghini, even elbowing him aside if he is in their way. While the others engage with Callas, Ari and Tina remain separate, discussing the others in the room.

ARI

These pampered types
Think they're better than me
They should welcome me

TINA.

If you want to be esteemed
You should pretend to be civilized.
You are capable of conquering the world.
But cannot resist a pleasure.
They think you crude, or worse, a fool

ARI

I am Odysseus,
A man of the sea,
I roam the world
To fight my battles
Business is my blood sport.
Not bound by petty
Legalities and moralities.
There is no right or wrong.
Only what is possible.

A glorious battlefield
I plan my attack
Opponents think me
Uneducated, uncivilized
Laughing at me
I study him
See his weakness
I risk it all
I never give up
I fight to the end
I move in for the kill
I show no mercy
It is war
A battle to the death

I started with nothing
Now richer than those Greeks
I use to admire
I need a bigger world to conquer
I need to be known
To be admired
To be celebrated

These men have no substance
They have never fought
The war of business
They will learn
They will learn
I am better than them

I will do what it takes
They will beg to be with me.
They will beg
I will be a legend
I will be a legend.

As the crowd thins, Onassis and Tina move to speak with Callas and Meneghini. Ari is solely focused on Callas, completely ignoring Meneghini. Tina interacts with Meneghini, solely to be polite.

ARI

I will not repeat the praises
Of these great people
I am of humbler beginnings
I have not their sweet words

MARIA

My childhood was most humble
Raised in Greece at war
We had nothing
I sang to feed my family
No one was hungrier than me.
My mother made me sing for the Nazis
They paid with food that kept us alive
A difficult role for a loyal Greek

ARI

We survived the fires of Smyrna
Left with nothing
The man of the family
I was their support
With only wit and will
I built an empire

Ari and Maria

We came from the horrors of war.

ARI

Now the most famous
Greeks in the world
With riches and extraordinary fame
Surrounded by luxury
We enjoy the fruits of our work

MARIA

My work does not stop
Training, rehearsing, performing
There is no time for play

In the life I lead

ARI

Play feeds our Greek souls
None are more joyful
The fire of life burns high
We exude the energy of the earth
Rejoice to be alive

All that is beautiful in life
Is gone too soon
Delight in life while you can
Live dangerously

Come and see Greece with me
Cruise the islands on my yacht
We will see its wonders and delights
The golden light
The pure blue water
Its rugged splendor

Feel life's little pleasures
To eat with friends
Drink wine, talk, dance,
You have the flame of genius
A great spirit
Experience the love of life
Touch what is immortal

MARIA

I yearn for such joy
The excitement of life
To exult in its beauty
Thrill in the fullness
To love life as a Greek

While Maria and Ari are speaking, Meneghini has been kissing Tina's hand and does not let it go. He is trying to look into her eyes as if trying to seduce her. She is clearly repulsed but too polite to push him away.

MENEGHINI

You like older men?

TINA

I like powerful men.

MENEGHINI

What kind of man is your husband?

TINA

In business
He is a fighter
With people
He is a seducer
He thrives on challenges
Needs new worlds to conquer
Without a challenge
He damages
All around him
Even those he loves

Seeing the interaction between Callas and Ari, Meneghini is clearly alarmed,

MENEGHINI

Maria we must go
It's getting late

MARIA

I am enjoying myself

MENEGHINI

There is no time for this
You must rest
Your voice will suffer

MARIA (turning to Ari)

Sadly I must leave
My voice must be protected
From the joys of life

ARI

Consider my invitation
You won't be sorry.

ARI

Maria Magnificent
You deserve to be adored
Prima donna, Diva, Divina
You sing
The world holds its breath

Magnificent
You deserve to live a greater life
That silly fool
Leads you around
Holds you back

From life
It can't go on
It insults the gods

Magnificent
You deserve a man worthy of your gifts
You need a man
As powerful as you
I will see your eyes
Blazing with passion
Your lips trembling in love
I have that power

Magnificent
You deserve a man as Magnificent as you.
You deserve a man as Magnificent as you.

Zeus and Hera come to the fore. The mortals fade from view.

ZEUS

He has the spirit to fight
He will not be defeated
He will build great fortunes
He will be envied by all
Throughout the world
I have found my hero

HERA

She is greatly honored
Her talent is deep
Her power is from passion
Her strength will defeat any challenge
Known throughout the world
All will fall at her feet
I have found my hero

ZEUS and HERA

To our wager
To these two mortals
To this worthy battle
They show the power of the Greeks
Which will be stronger?
Which will endure?
Which will change the world?
Which will be remembered
By generations to come?

ACT 1 Scene 2

On the Onassis' yacht, Christina, sailing in the Greek Islands on a beautiful summer day. Ari has assembled a glittering array of guests on his yacht. Zeus and Hera are also there, not as guests, but as unobtrusive and ever-present servants. Meneghini is alone on the deck, strutting about as if it is his yacht. Two young women enter.

Young woman 1

What a perfect day
The sun, the sea, the islands
The most beautiful
Yacht in the world

Young woman 2

Ari shows off his wealth
No expense is spared
Such luxury
The guests

Young woman 1

Have you seen Maria Callas
She is like a goddess
Ari hangs on her every word
They are captivated

Young woman 2

How could a woman
Of such elegance and class
Have such a boring husband.

Young woman 1

He is the only one
Who doesn't see their attraction
He better watch out

Young woman 2

Noticing Meneghini for the first time
Speaking of the boring husband...

Young woman 1

Quiet,
He might hear

Young woman 2

He can't hear us
Tina calls him meningitis
He flirts at dinner
Rubbing his leg on mine

I have bruises to prove it

Meneghini

Belle donne

Andiamo

A passeggiare

Young woman 2

He wants to walk with us

Let's have some fun

Taking his arm in a flirtatious way

You are so handsome

So strong

Young woman 1

Taking his other arm

You know yachts.

Show us around

It is our first time

Meneghini

Excited by the attention

I take care of you

We go

The three leave the deck. Meneghini still preening with the young women. Zeus and Hera remain unobtrusively on deck.

Maria and Ari enter together, entwined, deeply enamored with each other.

Maria

With you I forget the past

Now I know the thrill

Of love and being loved

You are the first

To make me feel beautiful,

Feel loved, feel like a woman

Our night of passion

Our night of surrender

You brought my body to life

Our hands touch

I thrill at the feel of you

Your heartbeat

It is my own

I see the world with new eyes

I see the world with new eyes

The water, the sky, your face

My passion was on the stage

Now it is in all of me

Now I give it all to you
I desire you to madness
I need no one

Ari

This is life as it should be
You are a magnificent woman
You cannot live only on the stage
You must grab a hold of life and
Live it to the fullest

Maria

On the stage
The world loved me
But I was alone
In my heart I was dying
My life, a desert
I am so tired
I want to rest
Too much performing
There was no money
So I must go on
No matter my health
The state of the theater
The manager's arrogance
There is not money to stop
No money to rest
My foolish husband
Squandered it all

Ari

You must leave your fool of a husband
He is beneath you
You must be with a real man
You must be with me
I will take care of you
I will build you
An opera house
In Monte Carlo
A testament to you
You will only perform
when you want
Only the best singers and directors
The world will flock to you
Luxury everywhere
The world will see you
In splendor

No more borrow jewels
I will dress you in
Diamonds and rubies.
Royalty, rulers, the rich
All at your feet
There to hear you
There to see us
There to see us

Maria

With you the future is
Full of beauty
Full of perfection
Full of love
We will be a family
We will be a family

Maria

Will you leave your wife and children?

Ari

Tina has a lover
She wants a divorce
I am the richest man in the world.
No one will keep my children from me
They are my legacy

Maria

Meneghini has nothing
He lives his life through me
He lives to protect me

Ari

He protects your voice
It is your voice that he loves
It is that voice that brings him wealth
It is the voice that gives him a life.

Maria

He will be crushed
I cannot hide my feelings
I must tell him the truth

Callas and Ari embrace as Meneghini enter the stage and sees them together. Meneghini is shocked.

Meneghini

Maria!

We must leave now
We will forget what happened here

Maria

I cannot leave
It is over between us
Aristo is the one my soul has been searching for.

Meneghini

No!
I am your husband
You love me,
I make you happy

Maria

You are my jailor
Aristo has set me free
You keep me safe
He has set me on fire.

Meneghini I am the one who found you So shy, so plain, so full of doubt	Maria You are the one who found me So shy, so plain, so full of doubt
Meneghini You were alone	Maria I was so alone.
Meneghini I nurtured your talent I protected your voice	Maria You nurtured my talent You protected my voice,
Meneghini I made you famous	Maria I made myself famous.
Meneghini You cannot survive without me My shelter keeps you alive.	Maria I cannot survive with you. Your shelter is killing me.
Meneghini This glamor and passion. You cannot live such a life.	Maria I must have this passion. I cannot live without this life.
Meneghini You are destroying me You will break my heart	Maria You are destroying me I know I will break your heart
Meneghini Without you I will die	Maria Finally I will be alive

Meneghini (desperately)

You cannot leave me!

Maria (looking at Aristotle adoringly)

I must be with Aristo.
He cannot live without me
I will not live without him
I have given him my heart.

Meneghini

Be careful
Be careful
Such love will destroy you

Meneghini walks past Ari as he leaves the deck and stops to confront him

Meneghini

You will burn in hell for this

Onassis

Do not fight with me.
I never lose
The gods are on my side

I am not a good person
I do what I want
I take what I want.
I am richer than you will ever be
A better lover than you could ever be
You stood in her light
And thought it was your own
You lived off her money
A weak old man who basked in her glory

Meneghini

(to himself)

This man is gutting me
What can I do
I cannot win
Against a Hercules

(to Onassis)

You will be cursed
For what you have done
You will end your days
With deep pain in your soul
Far greater than my own

Meneghini exits, walking like an old man. Maria walks across the stage to Ari. It is the first movement of her new life. He takes her hands and looks into her eyes.

Maria

Do you truly love me
Will you love me forever
Like Norma,
You found me a chaste priestess
Untouched by love
You set me aflame
Thus I burn
Your Irresistible power
Let me breath your air
My beloved

Ari and Maria

Let me breath your air
I am yours forever
Our love is meant to be
We are the same
We are Greeks
The same Olympian race
Always apart from others
We are meant to be together
May the gods bless our union

Zeus and Hera watch with pleasure. They make time stop and the rest of the world vanishes. They give these two the gods' most precious gift – true love - and bind them together for life

Zeus and Hera

True love is our greatest gift
Joining two spirits,
Two lives
Two souls

We bind you
In a sacred
Mystical union
We give you a
Foretaste of
Heavenly bliss
You are joined
Forevermore
One mind, one spirit, one heart
You pledge all that you are
Your passion your fire
Your souls' deepest love
Treasure your love
Guard it well
It's value is
Beyond measure

Ari and Maria

You are a gift of the Divine
I will stand beside always
I will cherish you,
And join my life with yours

Each part of the other's soul
The same desires
The same passions
Love undying
Through good and ill

Our love is not a choice
It is our fate
We have been
Brought together by the gods
Our love is holy
We are united forever

Maria, Ari, Zeus, Hera

We will stand above all
The world will be in wonder
At our splendor
We will fight fierce battles
Our victories will be sweet

Maria and Ari

Oh my beloved
Oh my beloved
Are you truly mine?
We will be together, always.

Maria

I have Aristo,

Maria and Ari

I want nothing more