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## Présentation de la *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions*

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La *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions* (revue DCLP) est une revue à comité de lecture qui publie des articles rattachés à la thématique principale de l'expression des passions. Elle propose des sujets de réflexion interdisciplinaires de qualité, notamment autour de la voix et des émotions qu'elle suscite, selon des angles d'approche divers et originaux. La revue DCLP publie dans le domaine des sciences humaines et sociales, en format numérique et/ou papier, des articles émanant de chercheurs, d'experts, de spécialistes, d'artistes et de personnalités rayonnant dans une sphère nationale et/ou internationale. La revue DCLP publie des numéros thématiques et également des hors-séries, et une rubrique varia. Cela souligne l'engagement résolu de la revue DCLP en faveur du décroisement des savoirs et la diffusion des connaissances.



# MARIA CALLAS AND THE CRAFT OF EMOTION

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Maria Callas was a consummate singing actress. She was known to be meticulous in the preparation for her operatic roles. Director Franco Zeffirelli said regarding Maria Callas and bass Tito Gobbi, “*They were perfectionists*.”<sup>1</sup> Callas’ performances were transformative, not only for her as she inhabited the roles she sang, but also for the audiences who were transfixed by the drama of the music and her characterizations. Conductor Carlo Maria Giulini said, “*She became the role she was interpreting at any given moment. She transformed into the character and lived the experience intensely*.”<sup>2</sup> The legacy of Maria Callas continues more than half a century after her death, and while no assessment of her craft completely captures the essence of her artistry, it allows the artistic community and her numerous admirers to give full weight to the depth and scope of her genius. What follows is a multidisciplinary analysis of both “Vissi d’arte” and the transition to the duet that follows it as performed by Maria Callas at the Royal Opera House in 1964.<sup>3</sup> The authors will analyze Callas’ performance through a dramatic equation described below and use acoustic analysis to show how dramatic choices impact her vocal acoustics.

The production of *Tosca* at the Royal Opera House in 1964 marked the return of Callas to the stage after a hiatus related to scandals in her personal life. The performances were wildly successful. On opening night on January 21, a national broadcaster made a video recording of the second act which was televised on February 9 as a “*Golden Hour*” on British television.<sup>4</sup> This is the only video available of Callas in a theatrical performance. The *New York Times* review published the day after the premier states,

But it is, of course, her extraordinary sensibility and almost creative sense of character that sets Miss Callas apart among present-day singers. Her *Tosca* is far removed from the conventional grandiloquent primadonna. She is a nervous, highly wrought creature, in whose character jealousy and devotion, heroism, and hatred play with the mercurial quality of flame. Even that old warhorse “Vissi d’Arte” takes on a new meaning when it is sung, as Miss Callas sings it, as an interlude of inward reflection and not as the usual sure-fire aria. It is these gifts of insight and imagination that set her *Tosca* apart from all others<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Tims, Anna. “How We Made: Franco Zeffirelli and John Tooley on *Tosca* (1964).” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jul/23/how-we-made-zeffirelli-callas-tosca>.

<sup>2</sup> Allegri, Renzo, Roberto Allegri, and Maria Callas. *Callas by callas: The secret writings of “La maria.”* New York, NY, NY: Universe, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Warner Classics, “Maria Callas sings Puccini: *Tosca* - 'Vissi d'Arte' at Covent Garden 1964,” July 4, 2017, <https://youtu.be/Nk5KrlxePzI?si=Xeg9CDItnJ-fdTR0>.

<sup>4</sup> Levy, Katelin. “The Magic of Callas ~ About.” PBS, August 15, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/the-magic-of-callas-about/12213/>.

<sup>5</sup> Heyworth, Peter. “CALLAS TRIUMPHS IN LONDON ‘TOSCA’; Soprano at Top of Her Form —Gobbi Sings Scarpia.” *The New York Times*. January 22, 1964.

The basis for all acting techniques lies in the dramatic equation with which the actor is working. A dramatic equation is a concise way of expressing the dramatic tension of a character operating in a given storyline. An example of a dramatic equation is *objective* vs. *obstacle*. The acting equation is made up of the following elements: *objectives*, *obstacles*, *tactics*, and *acting beats*. An objective is defined as what the character wants or their goal, and an obstacle is whatever is keeping the character from what they want. Out of the tension between the objective and the obstacle grows the tactics, which are the actions the character takes to overcome the obstacle and achieve their objective. Decisions about the perceived objective, obstacle, and tactics require speculations on the part of the interpreter and are supported by research, analysis, and improvisation. An acting beat is the smallest unit of action within a dramatic performance. Following the objective, characters change their tactics to persuade the character presenting an obstacle. A change of tactics is known as a *beat change*. Once the actor understands the dramatic beats in each scene throughout the play or opera, the dramatic equations are put to the test to see if they inspire and transform the actor into the character they are playing. The goal of all good actors and singing actors is to find the motivation that inspires their characters—the actors' portrayal of that motivation is what transforms the performer into the character. For singers, the ideal motivation will be so powerful that the singing actor no longer feels as if they are singing, but rather the character is singing through them. This is the kind of transformation seen in the work of Maria Callas.

Although there is no intended implication that Callas formally used the dramatic method outlined above, it provides a framework for considering her dramatic choices. Understanding how to play dramatic beats is an essential skill for an actor, and Callas maps out Tosca's dramatic journey brilliantly. Callas' performance will be broken down into objectives, obstacles, and tactics to allow the structures that underlie her seamless characterization to be better appreciated. Callas' dramatic beats will be outlined. With every changing beat, Callas is transformed anew. With every choice she makes, her voice, her gestures, and all manner of her expressions respond truthfully and authentically to the moment.

At the beginning of "*Vissi d'arte*," Tosca finds herself in dire circumstances. Her lover, Cavaradossi, has been captured by Scarpia, who is planning his execution unless Tosca is willing to give herself sexually to Scarpia. Tosca's objective is clear and urgent; she desires rescue for both herself and Cavaradossi from Scarpia. This objective remains throughout the aria and transition. She turns urgently to God in prayer. Time stands still as Tosca enters into a deep meditation. Tosca, being very religious and well-practiced in prayer, bows her head, clasps her hands, and settles into deep contemplation as the first dramatic beat of the aria (AB1) begins. This is a moment of existential crisis as Tosca tries to make sense of her circumstances.

Tosca's first tactic is to complain to God. Deep in prayer, she lays out her case: "*Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*" [I lived for art, I lived for love]. Tosca exclaims, "Why is this happening when I have tried to live well?" "*Non feci mai male ad anima viva!*" [I never harmed a living soul!]. "*Con man furtiva quante miserie conobbi aiutai.*" [I have always been sincere in my efforts to help the misfortunate among us]. She casts her gaze inward and clutches her breast, slowly writhing.



Acoustically, the classical soprano voice is characterized by a strong fundamental frequency (the frequency that defines the pitch), especially in the higher part of the range<sup>6</sup>. This gives the voice its characteristic sound and helps the voice to carry without stridency. When most of the power of the voice is collected at the frequency of the fundamental, the voice has a pure, crystalline quality. If in addition to a strong fundamental, there is an increase of intensity in higher harmonics, the voice quality will become more intense and more complex. If the singer goes too far, the voice could become strident. This mirrors the dramatic equation that must be balanced in the aria. Just as the singer must find a dynamic relationship between ease and intensity, the actress must find a dynamic relationship between their objective and obstacle. In the dramatic equation, if the obstacle dominates, then the character will devolve into pathos and lose dramatic tension. It is within the objective and the working out of tactics that the character retains their agency and thus the dramatic tension is retained.

Power spectrum in the acoustic software VoceVista Video Pro allows observation of the way the sound energy is distributed in the frequency realm. This energy distribution is impacted by many things such as fundamental frequency, vowel, and overall intensity, but it is also a reflection of the dramatic choices of the singer. The specific areas of frequency intensity have a direct impact on vocal timbre, and higher frequency intensity is correlated to a perception of higher emotional arousal<sup>7</sup>. In a smoothed long-term averaged spectrum (LTAS), the acoustic energy of the selected section is averaged and smoothed to get an overall picture of where in the frequency realm the energy is collected. When the LTAS is used for a single note and vowel such as in Figures 1-3, it minimizes the impact of vibrato and shows the energy distribution for that pitch and vowel. When LTAS is used for a phase that includes more than one vowel and pitch, it provides information about the acoustic energy of the voice more generally. For each power spectrum figure, the x-axis displays a frequency range from one to 5000 Hertz. The y-axis shows the relative intensity of different frequencies in decibels. Using an LTAS, the following singing analysis will compare the intensity of harmonics above the fundamental with the intensity of the fundamental and use waveform to observe the intensity contour. Both the relationship between the fundamental and the higher harmonics and the intensity contour are impacted by Callas' tactics as she engages with her dramatic obstacle.

Tosca's voice is centered and clear as she begins her hymn-like prayer to the Almighty. The repeated [i] vowels of "viss" sung on Eb5 and Db5 ring in the ear like a bell because of Callas' well-tuned vocal resonances that activate the fundamental and third harmonic of the power spectrum (Figure 1a arrows). Delicately and with great clarity, she articulates her complaints until her voice soars, railing against God. Tosca questions her relationship with God, like a child who, in a moment of anger and frustration, blames her father for not helping her. As she sings the first syllable of the word "quante," Callas again balances the intensity of the fundamental and the third harmonic, but this time on a much higher pitch of Ab5 (Figure 1b arrows). The repeated acoustic pattern echoes the opening but with far more intensity.

<sup>6</sup> Joliveau, Elodie, John Smith, and Joe Wolfe. "Vocal Tract Resonances in Singing: The Soprano Voice." *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 116, no. 4 (October 1, 2004): 2434-39. <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.1791717>.

<sup>7</sup> Scherer, Klaus R. "Expression of Emotion in Voice and Music." *Journal of Voice* 9, no. 3 (September 1995): 235-48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0892-1997\(05\)80231-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0892-1997(05)80231-0).

Even though the acoustic pattern is similar, by repeating it at a higher frequency, the impact is far more desperate. God has moved from being a potential source of help to being an obstacle to Tosca's objective.

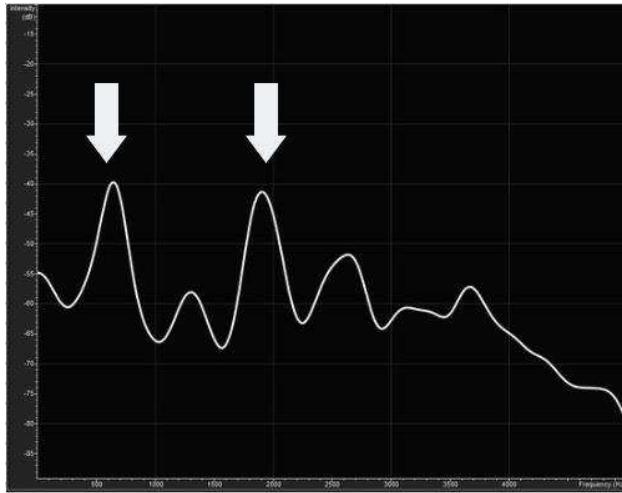


Figure 1a – LTAS of the first syllable of "vissi" on Eb5

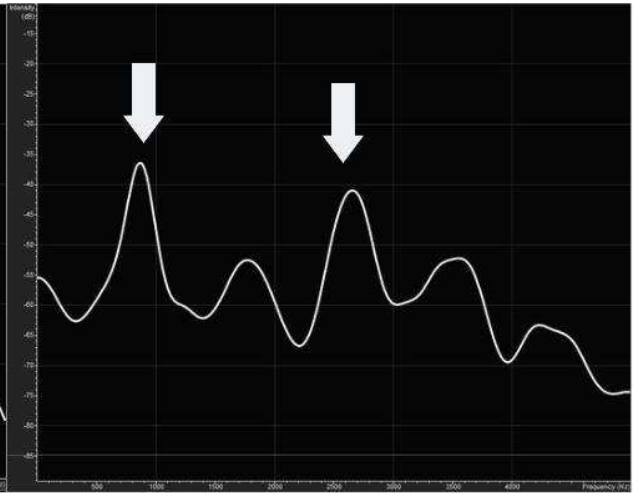


Figure 1b – LTAS of the first syllable of "quante" on Ab5

The second dramatic beat of the aria (AB2) is signaled by the orchestra as the time signature changes from 2/4 to 4/4, and the mode modulates from Eb minor to Eb major, *dolcississimo con grande sentimento*. An Eb pedal in the bass and ascending and descending arpeggiated triplets elicit sympathy for Tosca. She relaxes her clasped hands and seductively falls back into her chair. Her body limp and helpless, she pleads with the Almighty. Her voice is quiet and controlled with a manipulative hint of self-pity. Her articulation is clear and concise, and her tactic now is to negotiate with God, "*Sempre con fè sincera la mia preghiera ai santi tabernacoli salì.*" [Always with sincere faith; my prayer rose to the holy tabernacles]. Her voice begins to rise in frustration, "*diedi fiori agli altar.*" [I decorated the altars with flowers.] She reaches out her right hand, casts her gaze to the heavens, and then pulls back, perhaps for fear of offending. Nevertheless, she presses on clutching her jeweled necklace, a gesture proleptic considering that she will refer to donating jewels to Madonna's mantle in the next acting beat (AB3). Tosca ends this section tearfully asking "*Nell'ora del dolore, perché, perché, Signore?*" [In this hour of grief why, why, Lord]. Quiet and contemplative, she breathes intently and sighs, "*perché me ne rimunerì così?*" [Why do you reward me thus?]. The waveform envelope<sup>8</sup> of AB2 shows the complexity of the rise and fall of intensity through this section. (Figure 2) This is part of the push and pull of the dramatic equation that is rooted in Puccini's masterful music and Callas' luminous execution.

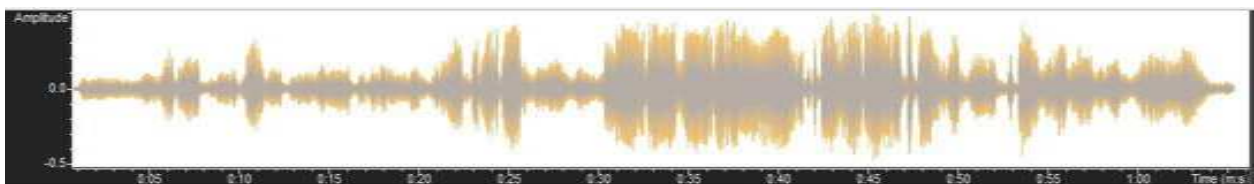


Figure 2 – Waveform of AB2

<sup>8</sup> The waveform envelope is a display of intensity over time. Time unfolds in seconds from left to right and the further the excursion above and below the center line, the more intense the sound is.

The same orchestral music that initiated AB2 also signals the third beat (AB3) and draws up back into Tosca's dilemma. The Eb pedal with arpeggiated triplets again draws our attention. Tosca, at the sound of the pedal, turns her gaze outward. Her arms rise, and she steps forward in defiance, her tactic now to challenge God. This time, the voice starts with more intensity. In support of her objective, she lists all that she has done for her faith. "*Diedi gioielli della Madonna al manto*" [I donated jewels to the Madonna's mantle] "*e diedi il canto agli astri, al ciel che ne ridean piu belli.*" [and offered songs to the stars and to heaven which thus did shine with more beauty]. "*Nell'ora del dolore, perché, perché, Signor, ah!*" [In this hour of grief, why, why, Lord] Tosca's voice, like her gesture and manner, is defiant, yet pleading, powerful yet wounded. Again, she ends AB3 with a question: "*perché, perché, Signore ?*" Tosca's tactics cannot compete with and overcome an unshakable obstacle. By the end of AB3, Tosca's dramatic equation is reaching its limit as her objective intensifies to compete with the obstacle. This limit is also reflected in the voice as Callas sings the dramatic climax of the Bb5 (Figure 3). The slope of the peaks has become much shallower and the higher harmonics challenge the intensity of the fundamental. At this pitch, that is an indication that the singing is near its vocal limit<sup>9</sup>.

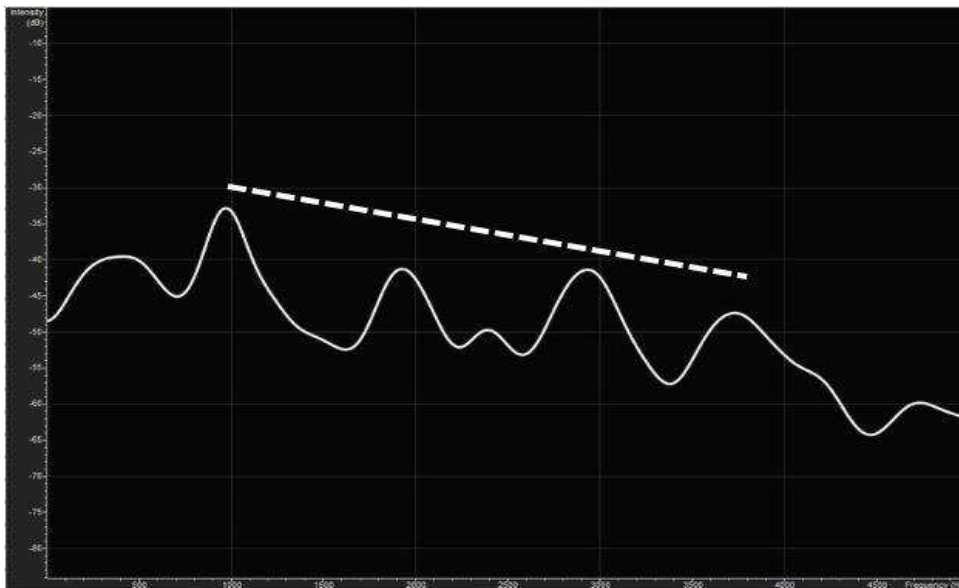


Figure 3 – LTAS of climactic Bb5 on the second syllable of the word "Signor."

The fourth beat of the aria (AB4) begins as Tosca, exhausted, turns her gaze inward and clutches her breast. Her breath heaving, she clasps her hands in prayer, her tactic now to plead. With a voice that is trembling and weak : "*perché me ne rimunerì così ?*" [Why do you reward me thus?] Nearly defeated, her voice trembles hopeful yet hopeless.

<sup>9</sup> Molina, Emilio, Isabel Barbancho, Ana M. Barbancho, and Lorenzo J. Tardon. "Parametric Model of Spectral Envelope to Synthesize Realistic Intensity Variations in Singing Voice." *2014 IEEE International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing (ICASSP)*, May 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1109/icassp.2014.6853673>. Scherer, Klaus R., and James S. Oshinsky. "Cue Utilization in Emotion Attribution from Auditory Stimuli." *Motivation and Emotion* 1, no. 4 (December 1977): 331–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00992539>.

These four dramatic beats are wonderful examples of the actor playing the objective against the obstacle. Too often in opera, singers choose to play the emotion by succumbing to the obstacle, leading to self-indulgent expressions in their voice and mannerisms. Callas stays true to her tactics until she realizes that she needs a new argument to compete with the obstacle, and her voice responds instantly and intuitively to her renewed dramatic equation.

As the aria ends and the transition to the duet begins, there is a fantastic example of a rapid change of objective and the tactics or arguments used to achieve the objective. This creates a contrast with the slower dramatic beat changes of the aria. Callas' performance of the transition is a perfect example of *actioning* which is when there is a change of beat for each line. With each musical phrase, Callas makes a different tactical choice to achieve her overall objective, which is to convince Scarpia to release Cavaradossi and set them both free. In the aria, Tosca is praying to God for help, but as she comes to the end she feels forsaken. Tosca is a strong and resourceful woman, and she brings all of that to bear as she now takes on Scarpia directly. The dramatic tempo shifts from a prayerful suspension of time to real-time. With each dramatic choice Callas, as Tosca, informs and transforms her vocal spectrum. During the short 15-measure transition Tosca makes six tactical beats (TB1, TB2, TB3, TB4, TB5, and TB6) to argue her objective. With each beat, Tosca goes through remarkable changes in vocal expressions which can be charted in the power spectrum (Figure 4). As the beats progress, the arrows point to the most important area of change from the preceding beat. During the transition, the acting beat change for each line is made in tandem with a noticeable acoustic change. In each of the first four transition beats, Callas increases the higher frequencies which in turn builds the dramatic intensity. As previously stated, higher frequency intensity is correlated to higher emotional arousal, especially, in this case, the core emotions of fear and anger<sup>10</sup>. In TB5 and TB6 (Figure 5), the acoustic and emotional intensity regresses to their starting point as Tosca's efforts are momentarily spent.

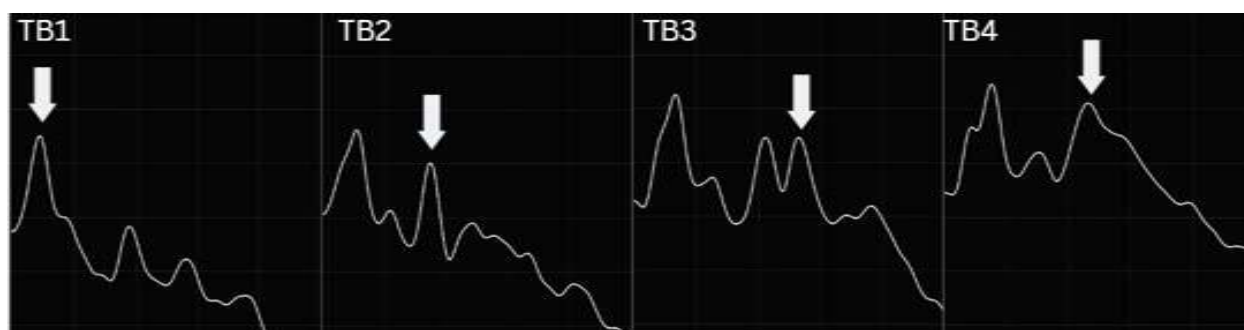


Figure 4 – LTAS of the first four acting beats of the transition.

There is silence as the aria ends. Tosca slowly turns her gaze toward Scarpia. She must now convince the formidable Scarpia who in a change of the dramatic equation now becomes her obstacle. TB1 begins at the end of "*Vissi d'arte*." A modulation from Eb major to Eb minor with syncopated diminished chords draws Scarpia back into the scene. As Tosca's hopes fade that God will rescue her, she reaches out her praying hands from God to Scarpia, acknowledging his authority over her. Tosca's tactic is to manipulate Scarpia by appealing to his ego. He now becomes the object of her prayers, elevating him to a godlike stature. Tosca steps

<sup>10</sup> Scherer, Klaus R., and James S. Oshinsky. "Cue Utilization in Emotion Attribution from Auditory Stimuli." *Motivation and Emotion* 1, no. 4 (December 1977): 331–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00992539>.

towards Scarpia, stretching her hands out further in supplication with her palms turned up slightly. Her gestures are contrite, and her voice is sweet and appealing, almost seductive in tonal quality: "*Vedi*" [Look at me]. She pleads for his help singing, "*le man giunte io stendo a te*" [with clasped hands, I beseech you!].

In TB1, Callas keeps her voice gentle. Most of the acoustic energy is concentrated in the fundamental (Figure 4, TB1 arrow) with just enough energy in the higher harmonics to clarify the words. This sound is pure and feminine, and with its quiet dynamic, there is no attempt to intimidate, only to convince.

TB2 begins again with a measure of syncopated diminished chords and a haunting reminder of Scarpia's menacing presence. Tosca moves to persuade Scarpia, her second tactic. She ever so slightly casts her gaze downward and to her right, exposing her neck in an animalistic act of submission then steps closer to him. Desperation starts to add intensity to her voice as she sings "*Eccò*" [Here you are]. In the acoustic spectrum, there is a sudden spike in energy in the area of the third harmonic (Figure 4, TB2 arrow). This adds brightness and intensity to the vowel quality and aligns with her rising sense of urgency. Her gesture and voice are begging, as if to say, here you are, and only you can help me. Scarpia slowly looks down upon her as if emotionally moved and then turns away with full knowledge that he holds all the power in this situation.

Scarpia condescendingly looks away, ignoring Tosca with disdain as TB3 begins. Tosca becomes more confrontational in her cries and steps quickly and aggressively toward Scarpia, her tactic to insist that he release Cavaradossi. Her voice cries out angrily, "*Vedi*" [Look at me]. Tosca is now standing close to Scarpia with her hands no longer pressed together in prayer but rather splayed with resolute determination. In TB3, Callas again raises her vocal intensity. This adds even more acoustic energy to the third harmonic but also activates the fourth harmonic. There are now three strong spectral peaks that create layers of intensity (Figure 4, TB3 arrow).

TB4 begins as Scarpia, still patronizing, looks up and away from Tosca as if to ignore her protestations. Tosca takes a deep and determined breath, and with hands clenched, she moves quickly and resolutely to stand next to Scarpia. She looks directly into his eyes and then into her hands; her body writhes, twisting, and then she reaches her arms to the heavens. Her voice cries out powerfully, her tactic now to demand, "*e mercè*" [and vanquished]. In this dramatic beat, the acoustic energy of Callas' voice reaches its zenith with a wider and higher swath of high-frequency intensity (Figure 4, TB4 arrow).

The breath between the lyrics "*e mercè*" and "*d'un tuo detto*" marks the beginning of TB5 (Figure 5) Again she clasps her hands in prayer and leans upon Scarpia's chest. The obstacle grows stronger and the tactic weakens. In one last plea to save Cavaradossi, her tactic shifts again as she negotiates for her lover's release. Callas reverses the intensity she has built up as she sings, "*d'un tuo detto*" [I implore you]. Even though the phrase "*d'un tuo detto*" is already quieter as per Puccini's dynamic markings, Callas retains the spectral peaks on the third and fourth harmonics, which echo the acoustic contour of TB3 (compare Figure 5 TB5 and Figure 4 TB3).

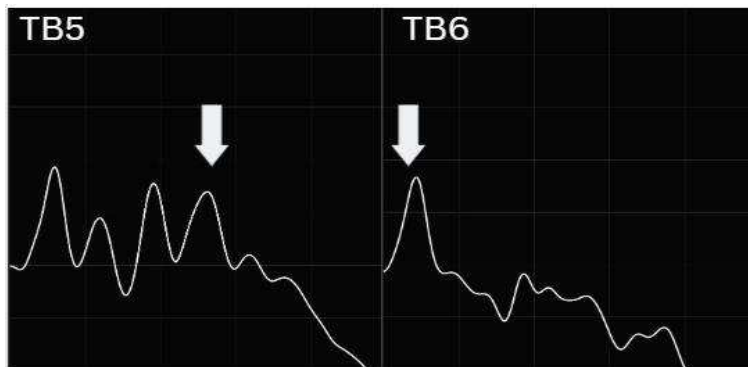


Figure 5 – LTAS of the fifth and sixth acting beats of the transition.

TB6 begins as Tosca, exhausted, falls to her knees, compliant with Scarpia's demands, her weakest tactic. Tosca is emotionally drained of her physical and mental resources. Her vocal intensity quickly fades as she sings “*vinta, aspetto*” [I wait for your word]. Her voice now returns to the purer and more vulnerable sound of the dominant fundamental similar to TB1 (compare Figure 5, TB6 and Figure 4, TB1).

In Callas' performance, the contrast of the tempo of the acting beat between the aria and the transition to the duet is striking. In the aria “*Vissi d'arte*,” time is suspended as Tosca prays to God, her respected and loved obstacle. Like a child to her father, she complains, negotiates, challenges, and ultimately pleads. When her pleadings fail, she turns to Scarpia, now her menacing and feared obstacle. Time no longer stands still, and in fifteen short measures lasting seven minutes and twenty-two seconds and with six dramatic beats, she fights for the life of her lover, Cavaradossi. Callas is artful and impressive in her process and Tosca comes to life in this transformative performance.

Impresario Sandor Alexander Gorlinsky who was also Callas' personal manager said, “[Callas] brought the opera into a new limelight, namely acting singers which up ‘till then didn't exist’<sup>11</sup>.” In an article on emotion in opera and lied singing, the author writes that in comparison with other singers, “*Maria Callas expresses more pathos and even protest... a much higher level of expressiveness and tension*<sup>12</sup>.” The work of Maria Callas marked a new era in opera in which previously remote opera characters became flesh and blood. She took the dramatic potential of opera to new heights through her passionate desire and her finely honed craft. She was never satisfied, writing, for example, “*Audiences applaud me, but I know inside myself that I could have achieved so much more*<sup>13</sup>.” Her restlessness drove her to embody her characters, their desires, their fears, and their loves until she gave them life and voice.

<sup>11</sup> Levy, Katelin. “The Magic of Callas ~ About.” PBS, August 15, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/the-magic-of-callas-about/12213/>.

<sup>12</sup> Rapoport, Eliezer. “Emotional Expression Code in Opera and Lied Singing.” *Journal of New Music Research* 25, no. 2 (June 1996): 109–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09298219608570700>.

<sup>13</sup> Allegri, Renzo, Roberto Allegri, and Maria Callas. *Callas by callas: The secret writings of “La maria.”* New York, NY, NY: Universe, 1998.