

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

Singing and the French horn

"Mozart," Dennis and Aubrey Brain, French horn, EMI CDH 64198
"Five Heroines," Maria Callas, soprano, EMI CMS 64418 (5 CDs)

After the usual hunt through a week's worth of worthless new classical CDs, I was delighted to find something to recommend: EMI Classics' two new CD recordings made 40 years ago by Dennis Brain and Maria Callas.

French hornist Dennis Brain (1921-1957) will be music to the ears of those weary of the presidential saxophone, an instrument which, no matter how skillfully played, is purely ugly. Brain's ability to make his French horn sing Mozart reminds us why men used to build instruments, which we seem to have forgotten: to make music more beautiful.

In Mozart and Beethoven's day, the "natural horn," which played at C=256 (A=430), was even more difficult than the modern horn. In addition to the cumbersome mouthpiece, long coiled pipe, and the instability of tone production, Mozart's horn had no valves and was even longer-piped.

To play these horns, players had to *shape* the tone like a singer, in the mind, with little dependence upon the instrument—to *sing* through the instrument. Instrumentalists and singers alike were trained to sing high bel canto for many years in childhood. That is, unlike the President, they played *because* they could sing; not because they could neither sing nor speak.

Neither was Brain a technical marvel replaceable by synthesizer. His phrasing of a musical line makes his some of the best recordings of Mozart ever done, period. He sounds like a great singer with a deep comprehension of the poetry—but there aren't

any words. EMI's new release of Dennis Brain with his father Aubrey is a fine introduction, but also hear Dennis Brain's mature "Mozart Horn Concertos" on EMI CDH 63013.

Bel canto repertoire

Maria Callas (1923-77) is the most famous singer after Caruso, and despite what you've heard, a much greater artist. Unlike today's classical singers, most of whom just sing the notes, Callas sang the idea between the notes.

Callas moreover had the shocking idea that the late 19th century *Verismo* school, which had taken over the stage by her debut, was not all there was to art, no matter what the morons at the *New York Times* said. *Verismo* (verism, or realism) was the predecessor of today's "rap." It rejected the idea that music should elevate the soul, and sought to deliberately "get ugly," to represent "the ugliness of real life," with adultery and murder galore.

Callas went on a campaign in the 1950s to rescue the lyrical scores of the 1810-40 bel canto operas by Donizetti, Bellini, Rossini, and Verdi. She recognized the deep humanity in the bel canto works, which had been thrown into disuse as superficial and "too idealistic" to be "relevant" or politically correct. In performance, Callas was willing to go the extra emotional mile and bring out the profundity of this music poetically for the audience.

EMI's "Five Heroines" contains an hour each of Callas' best three bel canto roles, a 1954 Bellini *Norma*, a 1954 Donizetti *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and a 1955 Verdi *La Traviata*, with Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and *Tosca*. While the last two are *Verismo* items, in which not only knives, but forks no less, are used to murderous

effect, the first three are magnificent. "Rarities," another Callas release on EMI (CDC 54437), also gives a us chance to hear her since Mozart, Beethoven, and other roles she rarely performed.

The importance of elevating the voice

It must be said, however, as these discs also show, that Callas was one of the first victims of what today is the rule: bad 20th-century vocal training. She was never taught the technology of *elevating* the voice in the head, as it was done in bel canto from the high 16th through 19th centuries. "As a dramatist she was unmatched," an old Italian school teacher once told me, "but when she sings, especially in the higher registers, if you listen carefully you will hear that it is just a pretty little scream. Her voice is in the throat."

Something closer to original bel canto is heard on the 1920s recordings of Amelita Galli-Curci and Tito Schipa, for example. Comparison of Callas's "mad scene" from *Lucia di Lammermoor* with that of Galli-Curci makes this clear. The gargly throat "wobble" which made an early end to Callas's career is painful, heard next to Galli-Curci's effortless, floating head tone.

Callas could never quite overcome this obstacle. When the voice catches in the throat, there are certain forms of "long line" which cannot be executed musically, no matter how hard the mind tries.

Purists need not be smug, however, because whatever her limitations, Callas, unlike most audiences today, could at least tell beautiful from ugly. At least she knew what art is. Her dramatic interpretations should be heard and learnt from.