



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 3: Italian Roots

Broadcast Intermission Interview

Turandot, 1977

Featuring: **Montserrat Caballé (role: Turandot) and Luciano Pavarotti (role: Calaf); Arthur Kaplan (interviewer)**

(transcript read time ~ 12 minutes; audio run time ~ 15 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial Celebration.

ANNOUNCER: A few days ago, Arthur Kaplan, the staff writer in San Francisco Opera's Public Relations Department, interviewed Montserrat Caballé and Luciano Pavarotti in Mr. Pavarotti's hotel suite. The opening of *Turandot* had taken place several days earlier, and the artists talked about their experiences in performing what for both of them had been firsts in their operatic careers. Mr. Kaplan.

ARTHUR KAPLAN [AK]: Welcome, Señora Caballé, Signor Pavarotti. In both of your cases you're going into somewhat of a new repertory, more dramatic and heavier roles than you've sung before. How does a singer know when he or she is ready to sing a *Turandot* or a *Calaf*?

LUCIANO PAVAROTTI [LP]: The day after the performance. (laughter)

AK: Not before?

MONTSERRAT CABBALÉ [MC]: I agree.

LP: Not before.

AK: Well, I guess you know that you're ready then. When you're preparing for a role like this, do you go first to the music or to the libretto, or how do you go about preparing a new role?

LP: There is, in any score, in the behind ["in the past"], the name of the opera, and when I was a kid I say, "This I am going to sing at the age of 21, this at 24, this at 26," and everything of that did become ten years later than I thought. (laughter) When you are young, you are optimistic. And in my mind was never *Turandot* when I was young. That has been, for me, an incredible -- I cannot say improvement, because it's just a question of choice in the repertoire, but it was a great conquest for me. And it's not easy. It's a

very demanding role, and I did approach, just after *L'elisir* in Chicago, and (laughs) it's quite the opposite of the two things, and I'm very, very happy –

AK: Yes, and we are, too.

LP: -- of the result.

AK: What about you, Señora Caballé? This is a very demanding role for a soprano, and you're known for spinto parts, but not anything quite as heavy as *Turandot*.

MC: Mm-hmm.

AK: Can you hear your own voice when you make that decision? You know that your voice is ready?

MC: No, I don't, really.

LP: But we do, [and how?].

MC: Luciano says you never know that. You try, you sing and prepare. I am not, and all the doubts come around your head, your chest, every place (laughs) in your body. And then, when the rehearsals, the real rehearsals begins, not only the ones you have done for yourself, in my case, all the doubts –

AK: Doubts?

MC: -- yeah -- came, and you think, but I am really that crazy to do that? (laughter) I am really...? And really, you need lots of strength and nerve to go on and not run away.

AK: I can imagine. Both of you, of course, are very well known as bel canto singers, the operas of Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini, and some of the early Verdi, too. Now that you're moving on to more dramatic roles, will you still be singing as much of the lyric, the bel canto repertory, as well?

MC: What want, what me is concerned, yes. Yes, for the moment, I don't intend to left any of the repertoire I've been doing all these years. I'm, as always, every season I sing one or two, or more, new operas, but that don't means that I leave it, the old ones. I think, for my voice, it's very good to remain in Mozart and bel canto. It is like a balsamo (laughter) for my vocal cords, and it is very good now after *Turandot* to go right to *Gemma di Vergy* and –

AK: Something much lighter.

MC: -- *Parisina d'Este* and things, *Virginia*, which I will sing this season.

AK: That's a *Mercadante* opera, right.

MC: *Mercadante*, yeah. And you see, I think that is very good for me.

LP: And for me the same. I am coming from *L'elisir of Love*, and –

AK: Which was marvelous. I saw it this summer in Hamburg.

LP: It's marvelous. It is incredible role for a tenor, really. The opera is good for everybody, but the tenor, the chance to really be funny and dramatic and sympathetic, is –

AK: Do you enjoy comic roles?

LP: If a comic role is like Nemorino, yes, because it's not really what I call comic. It's a normal situation of the life, and he's comic just because he's in love, and when somebody's in love he *is* comic. (laughter)

AK: This was, I believe, your second time working with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle.

LP: Yeah.

AK: You worked with him this summer on *L'elisir d'amore* in Hamburg.

LP: Beautiful.

AK: And your first time, Señora Caballé.

MC: Yes, correct.

AK: How was the experience for you? He is, of course, a very controversial [00:05:00] director.

MC: Well, he was very nice, very nice, very understanding, and very... I think all the things he asked me to do, he knew very well I can do it, and the things I cannot do he has not asked me to do it. And I have to really say that the thing that has moved me very much, it is because without saying not one word -- that years ago I have an accident in New York and I have my left leg not that well to going up and down the steps, for example. He immediately reacted and says, "But don't worry, we have lots of things. I was really thinking of something special," and he has done something special –

AK: Very special.

MC: -- and not one remark, because it is like in the production and helps me very much. So I can only say thank you, Monsieur Ponnelle.

LP: Well, thank yourself, even, because you did move more than any other Turandot that I saw on the stage.

AK: You actually take the stairs two or three times.

MC: Well, he makes me move because he thinks Turandot has to be -- that's what he explains to me -- more human, he says. All this ice-cold thing, it is only a form of *panel*. I don't know what *panel* is. Not Ponnelle. (laughter)

AK: *Panel*.

MC: Something to cover your –

LP: Screen?

AK: Screen.

MC: -- your afraid and –

AK: Screen, yes.

MC: -- your feelings and your everything. And the final of the *incognitos* he tells me, "You have to convince yourself when you pray "*Figlio del cielo*" to your father that you already are in his hands, that your feelings are with him already, and you don't want, but every time you look of him you go to him because you are already *vinta*, like it's –

AK: Yeah, already conquered, yes.

LP: Conquered, yeah.

MC: Yeah. And I think this is nice –

LP: This kind of virginal controversy, you know. She want, she doesn't want, and it's very –

AK: But that comes across very well in the –

LP: It comes across very well.

AK: -- in the production.

LP: Come across to me on the stage.

MC: I like it very much.

AK: I can tell both of you have this complete commitment to your roles, which is just so marvelous to watch.

LP: Well, I think we are in the right age to approach the thing very seriously, and I think we have done, and we are proud of this. When you are 20, 25, 30, sometimes you are a little not so deep in the –

MC: Yeah, I think so, too.

LP: -- opera, but now I think we have the right age to be professional at the maximum, with always the best result, beside the feeling you must have, but this is...

AK: Let me ask you one question, getting back to the bel canto repertory. Many of the operas that both of you sing came back into the repertory because of the artistry of Maria Callas, who recently passed away. How, if at all, did she affect you as an artist and as a performer?

MC: Well, I have never seen Maria onstage. The only time I have seen Maria was at Carnegie Hall, I think two years ago, or three, when she came to do a recital with Pippo Di Stefano, but I have all -- I think all -- her records, which I have been listening for years, because I like it, and I admired her very much. And I only know her for that, and for few times as we have come together in New York or in Paris, or in London. And she was always very kind to me, whatever I ask her.

I ask her some advice, because before I was singing my first time Norma in 1970, the first person who told me to sing Norma was Joan Sutherland, and I was thinking, oh, she's joking. She says, "No, you take a look at the score. You will see." That was 1967, I think, or '68, so when I was to London, then I was to Joan home when she was living in London, and I said, "I have taken a look, and it's true, it's not that difficult. I was thinking it is difficult. But do you really think I can try?" And she says, "Yes, I am sure you will be a very nice, wonderful Norma." That was her words. So short time after this I was talking to Maria on the phone, and I says, "Maria, really, do you think that?" And she says, "Well..." She's always very nice, don't understand from what I say now. She says, "Well, after me, (laughter) I think really that you will be the proper Bellini Norma." That was her answer. And I said, "You don't think that can damage my voice? Because Joan assures me that that cannot damage my voice." And Maria says, "Well, when Joan says so, you can be sure that not damage your voice, (laughter) because not."

AK: Well, you have had a great success in Norma since, and I'm glad that both those artists gave you the go ahead to sing the role. You both have very successful family lives, and as international artists it means being away from your children. You have three daughters, I believe, Signor Pavarotti, and you have a son and a daughter, Señora Caballé. How do you manage to do this? It must be a tremendously demanding thing, first of all, an international career, and then to hold on to that family life.

MC: Well, it is, yes, it is, and you see, I think no matter you are a man or a woman, the sadness is always the same. We are long away from them. And I don't know in your case, Luciano, but my children say all the time, "Why you cannot be like a normal mama?" (laughter) And, well, I know what they mean when they say so, and I hope when they're growing a little more up they will understand that I really don't mean it to leave them.

AK: No, of course not.

MC: I only mean it to do the job I have tried to do.

LP: The real sad part of our profession, if there is one sad part, is really this one, because basically making these career, we even become more sensible, and we –

AK: The feeling for the family, probably, because you're apart is deeper.

LP: Is even deeper. And when you go home, sometimes you realize you are almost, but not a stranger, but almost. You know, they come to you, "How are you? How are you? I must go out to my friend. I must go." Well –

AK: And you wish they had a little bit more –

LP: -- you plan in your mind, now I go home and they become crazy, they stay around me for 20 days, and you go home and they stay around you for 20 minutes, (laughter) and that's all.

MC: That's correct.

LP: That is really the sad part, but this is our choice, and we have already done, I think. You cannot go back.

AK: What do you enjoy most about being an opera star?

LP: What a question. (laughter)

AK: Is it the fame? Is it working with colleagues like Señora Caballé.

LP: For me, I know what it is, and even the colleagues are part of this, perhaps are the first -- I have no doubt about that -- but it's the communication with the people. I cannot live without stay with people. When I was a kid, I was 15, my mother said to me to become an engineer, to make houses, geometer –

AK: Architect.

LP: -- and I said, "No, I want to become a teacher because I want to stay with the kiddos. I want 20, 40 boys every day, girls, to talk with." I want... I am a human, a human being, and I like humanistic study, and this is the reason, the first thing to give me pleasure. Of course, in the order there is colleagues like Montserrat and others, of course, and the music we make, but the public we meet, even -- not just the public on the other side of the orchestra, but the public behind, the public who write us letters, who say we do for them some very special power in their life, and it is, I think, the best part.

AK: And for you, Señora Caballé?

MC: Well, it is the same, like Luciano says. It's something, this approach which makes you feel that you are here for something, not for nothing, and this is very nice, as he says, to have this feeling, this feeling really that somebody for one moment needs you, and you can be useful for them.

AK: You have both given us a great deal, and we thank you very much for it.

LP: Thank you.

MC: Thank you.

SB: You have just heard an interview with Montserrat Caballé and Luciano Pavarotti, by Arthur Kaplan, staff writer of the San Francisco Opera's Public Relations Department.

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