

FRANCO CORELLI



Prince of Tenors

René Seghers

with a foreword by Marco Corelli

ing that *Don Carlo* was just impossible for him, Bing pitched a fit. He explained to his tenor in Italian that there was a limit to which any friendship could be stretched. Corelli immediately apologized. Whereas Del Monaco and Callas had proved incapable of recognizing Bing's limits (and vice versa), Corelli and Bing somehow pulled off a delicate balancing act, continually managing to meet each other in the middle of a tightrope.²⁸

December 7, 1960–January 15, 1961: *Poliuto*

On stage I am a lion, but before . . . what a terror! The audience thinks of me as an operatic character, bold and confident in life as on stage. But I am very timid. And from this shyness stems the fear: a terrible fear of the confrontation with the public, a fear which consumes my nervous system and makes me approach the performance as a battlefield. Yet, once I step out of the shadows behind the scenery and the lights of the stage surround me, my nervous tension miraculously vanishes and a supreme serenity infuses me, I could even call it a state of grace, which makes me lucid and aware of my performance at all moments. These are the only truly happy moments of my days, where no worries, no doubts, and no uncertainties cross my mind.

Franco Corelli, in "Sulla scena sono un leone," *Arianna*, February 1961

Alfa Romeos and Ferraris replaced the horse-drawn gilded coaches of days of yore on this starry night at La Scala. Elegantly gowned women enveloped in mink, ermine, chinchilla, and delicate perfumes clung to the arms of important men in tails. There were Princess Grace and Prince Rainier of Monaco, ravishing in gold-embroidered white, accompanied by the Prince Pierre de Polignac; the Begum Aga Khan, majestic in a gold-embroidered corsage; the ubiquitous Elsa Maxwell; and, finally, Aristotle Onassis, Callas's lover, arriving all alone and gazing out at the scene from behind dark sunglasses. Even before the curtain opened it was clear that this was going to be one of the most memorable operatic events of the 1960s. The filmed newsreel footage of the premiere shows the extent to which La Scala was still linked with the epoch of Rossini, Stendhal, and Verdi as the epicenter of Italy's high society. The gilded La Scala doors seemed to transport those present to the distant days when



Left: It has been said that Corelli didn't like rehearsals, but he still prepared himself like few other tenors. He took great care with his costumes and the visual aspects of the stage direction, as can be seen in this photograph of his preparations for *Poliuto*, Milan, November 1960. Right: Corelli as *Poliuto*, Act I, December 7, 1960. (Photos: Erio Piccagliani. Courtesy of the Teatro alla Scala)

Tamberlick and his successor Tamagno sang their *Poliutos*; some spectators had actually witnessed Pertile or Gigli wearing the mantle of the convert. However, few spoke of tenors on this night, where all attention turned toward Maria Callas's return to La Scala. The soprano had been absent for two and a half years, since the legendary *Il Pirata* run with her friend Corelli where she had publicly defied La Scala's intendant, Ghiringhelli. Would there be another scandal on this night?

Actually, La Scala was already in the midst of a scandal. The director and set designer Luchino Visconti had walked out on the *Poliuto* production, not for any reason related to opera, but rather because of the Italian film censors, who had just banned one of his more notorious film projects. Visconti vowed not to set foot in a state-subsidized theater again.²⁹ La Scala's opening night was in fact a scandal averted, for it had been unclear whether the production would be performed at all, given that government budget cuts at all state-subsidized theaters had recently interfered with opening nights in Bologna and Naples. La Scala was due for a similar strike, but the politicians gave in to the demands of the strikers at the last minute, fearing the commotion that would arise if the historic opening night on St. Ambrose's Day, December 7, were canceled or suspended.³⁰

December 7, 10, 14, 18, 21, 26, and 29, 1960; January 15, 1961

Gaetano Donizetti: *Poliuto*

Milan, Teatro alla Scala

Maria Callas, Leyla Gencer [December 26, 29; January 15] (*Paolina*), Franco Corelli (*Poliuto*), Ettore Bastianini (*Severo*), Nicola Zaccaria, Agostino Ferrin [January 15] (*Callistene*), Rinaldo Pelizzoni (*Felice*), Piero De Palma (*Nearco*), cond. Antonino Votto; stage director, Herbert Graf; stage director and scenery, Nicola Benois

As the auditorium filled, all eyes were glued in vain on the box where President Giovanni Gronchi was expected to appear. This evening he settled the score for the Rome premiere of *Norma* in 1958, where Callas had walked out on him after the first act. At 8:55 P.M., 3,200 lorgnettes turned from the empty presidential box to the pit. A storm of applause rained down upon Antonino Votto,³¹ who bowed his head before raising his baton.

Donizetti's rarely performed *Poliuto* is a spectacular opera in the Meyerbeerian mold, including a finale with Christians who are to be fed to the lions. When the curtain parted, the glitter and glamour of La Scala made way for Decius's court in Mytilene around 250 A.D. The splendid temples and terraces and the spirit of ancient Rome were recreated on the stage, the site of the conversion to Christianity of the Armenian nobleman *Poliuto*. From the instant he set foot onstage, Corelli was the incarnation of the convert. His rendering of "D'un'alma troppo fervida" stunned the audience; the familiar dark-bronze hue of his voice was suddenly gilded with 14-karat gold and topped by notes of mesmerizing brilliance. As for Callas, Harold Rosenthal took the serious route in his review for *Opera*, but *Paris Match*, whose reporter's impressions have already been noted, took an eloquent French approach to the diva's first-act appearance:

Her haughty bearing in that white cape gave her the curves of the ancient Pharos [the Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world], a piece of tulle rolled into a necklace around her throat, almost concealing an ill-conceived baroque hairstyle, tied up in bows. She acted with measured, noble gestures and walked out right up to the footlights, where she hurled denunciations, her eyes blazing, her mouth open like the muse of

tragedy, toward the Christians, as if they had become her personal enemies. Who cares if her voice is not her voice of old; what matters is that she is there. From the last seat just under the roof to the very first an ovation was bestowed upon her.³²

At the first intermission Callas dominated the conversation. All marveled at her weight, now down to 139 pounds (22 more than three years earlier, but what's a pound or two among fans?), and her salary: 40 million French francs (about \$500,000) per year from EMI royalties, 3 million per recital.³³ Despite the captivating Callas, in the second act the true triumph was *Poliuto*'s. In his great aria "Sfolgorò divino raggio" Corelli confirmed his now undisputed reputation as the last of that ultra-rare breed of unchained dramatic tenors in the mold of Adolphe Nourrit and Gilbert Louis Duprez, both linked to *Poliuto*'s world premiere. After Ettore Bastianini responded to Corelli's aria with a superbly sculpted opening of the trio "La sacrilega parola," the audience held its breath for the challenge Callas faced in her entry line, "Qual preghiera al ciel discioglio?" The amazed audience heard the purest emotions and most subtle phrasing pour from her lips. Corelli then echoed her subtle inflections in his entry, "Dell iniqua, del protervo," which still stands as the culmination of his art. The subsequent unison finale was described as an operatic thriller that would be remembered as long as memories of opera performances exist. And that was only the second act.³⁴

The third act led the audience to the cave in which the persecuted Christians were hiding. Reunited with Paolina, *Poliuto* refuses to renounce his new faith in a magical rendition of the duet "Ah! fuggi da morte." Paolina decides to convert as well, and they march toward the lions and heavenly bliss in "Il suon dell'arpe angeliche." Upon the final notes of the opera, the stupefied audience erupted in an ovation that turned this night into one of those handful that defined La Scala and opera in the twentieth century. The *Paris Match* reporter moved toward the stage to focus on Corelli: "His joy is understandable. Sure, he owed this break to Callas, but he is the one who has won everything in this opening night, during which he redirected his competitors Mario Del Monaco and Giuseppe Di Stefano back to their earthly realms. With all the vanity and the egoism that is a tenor's own, he has taken all and everything."³⁵

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When the applause subsided and I was alone in my dressing room, I had a long, intensive moment of meditation and I realized for the first time that my career had changed my personality and my psychological makeup.

Franco Corelli, "Sulla scena sono un leone, ma prima . . . che paura!," *Arianna*, February 1961

Against the background of these new insights into his own personality, it didn't take long before Corelli was able to formulate a fitting explanation for his success, the key of which was to be seen in his very nervousness. His nerves, says Corelli, were always his cross and his blessing, for they propelled him onward: "Poliuto raised so many vocal difficulties that few tenors ever truly mastered it. Directly proportional to it was my heroic momentum on stage, that made me come out victorious, should you allow me to use such flattering words." In addition to his immediate triumph at his debut in the role, he also cherished the high Ds that he interpolated in the production's final performance, when Leyla Gencer took over from Callas and he no longer needed to hold back.³⁶

