

**Marie Collier: a life**

**Kim Kemmis**

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Doctor of Philosophy**

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Figure 1. Publicity photo: the housewife diva, 3 July 1965 (Alamy)

## Abstract

The Australian soprano Marie Collier (1927-1971) is generally remembered for two things: for her performance of the title role in Puccini's *Tosca*, especially when she replaced the controversial singer Maria Callas at late notice in 1965; and her tragic death in a fall from a window at the age of forty-four. The focus on *Tosca*, and the mythology that has grown around the manner of her death, have obscured Collier's considerable achievements. She sang traditional repertoire with great success in the major opera houses of Europe, North and South America and Australia, and became celebrated for her pioneering performances of twentieth-century works now regularly performed alongside the traditional canon. Collier's experiences reveal much about post-World War II Australian identity and cultural values, about the ways in which the making of opera changed throughout the world in the 1950s and 1960s, and how women negotiated their changing status and prospects through that period. She exercised her profession in an era when the opera industry became globalised, creating and controlling an image of herself as the 'housewife-diva', maintaining her identity as an Australian artist on the international scene, and developing a successful career at the highest level of her artform while creating a fulfilling home life. This study considers the circumstances and mythology of Marie Collier's death, but more importantly shows her as a woman of the mid-twentieth century navigating the professional and personal spheres to achieve her vision of a life that included art, work and family.

## Statement of originality

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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History; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
Email: penny.russell@sydney.edu.au

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History; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
Email: penny.russell@sydney.edu.au

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## A note on opera titles

Marie Collier performed at a time when operas were performed in the vernacular as much as the original language. This gives rise to a variety of opera titles which can be confusing. For example, opera companies advertised performances with the spelling they thought most appropriate, hence Collier performed one work in English under the titles *Madam Butterfly*, *Madame Butterfly* and *Madama Butterfly*.

Other usage is even more complicated. Collier never performed Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* under its Russian name *Ognenny angel*. In English it was billed as *The Fiery Angel* or *The Angel of Fire*, while when she sang it in Italian in Buenos Aires in 1966 it was known not under its Italian title (*L'angelo del fuoco*) but as *El Angel del Fuego*. It comes as a relief to talk about an unambiguous title like *Elektra* or *Tosca*.

I have used different approaches for different contexts. When referring to an opera in a general sense I have used the title as recorded in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. When speaking of specific performances I have used the title in the language in which the opera was performed or as it was advertised. This is the case in most of Collier's performances up to about 1960, when the opera companies with which she performed sang in English. Where there is ambiguity about the title I have chosen its commonly accepted English title.

## Introduction

Tosca was already a creature of myth and legend when I first met her. As a young student at Teachers' College I was given a ticket to a dress rehearsal of the (then) Australian Opera's production of *The Barber of Seville*. I had never been to an opera performance; I had never actually heard a complete opera. But I was eager to learn. I took my seat in the Opera Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and soaked in the atmosphere. Before the show started I noticed a person sitting nearby with a bag from a record store I did not recognise, and he said to his friend, 'I've just got the such-and-such recording of Callas's *Tosca*.' I had heard of Callas; apparently she was good, and from the friend's enthusiastic response I realised that *Tosca* was a significant work that I must investigate.

I enjoyed *The Barber of Seville* and decided to keep exploring opera. For a few years I did not have the money for tickets, nor could I afford full opera recordings, making do with highlights LPs and performances taped off the radio. Eventually I started earning enough to buy concert tickets, and later an opera subscription. I saw my first performance of *Tosca* in 1988, with Leona Mitchell, Kenneth Collins and John Shaw under conductor Carlo Felice Cillario.<sup>1</sup> The souvenir programme for *Tosca* included a feature article about the Australian Opera's past productions of *Tosca* which mentioned a season in Adelaide in 1968 with Tito Gobbi ('Gobbi!' I thought, 'I would like to have seen that!'). It mentioned that 'the performances starred one of the most acclaimed Toscas of recent times—the Australian soprano Marie Collier'.<sup>2</sup> I had not heard of her, but mentally filed away the name.

Over the next few years I came across references to Collier in various books and magazines recording that she had died tragically, or committed suicide, in a fall from the window of her flat in Leicester Square in 1971.<sup>3</sup> There was little on what she had actually achieved as a performer. Conversations with other fans usually elicited a comment such as 'Collier? She jumped from a window, didn't she? Very sad.' For some years all I knew of Collier was that she sang *Tosca* and died after a fall from a window, possibly a suicide. That was enough; she was only a peripheral figure in my thinking. It was not until I came into possession of a recording of the 1968 Adelaide *Tosca* with Gobbi that my interest was piqued; Collier's performance was riveting, and I

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<sup>1</sup> The last two being former colleagues of Collier.

<sup>2</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, 'The Australian Opera's Past Productions of *Tosca*', in *Tosca* (opera programme) (Pymble, N.S.W.: Playbill Pty Ltd, 1988), n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these references will be examined in Chapter Six.

had to find out more about her. What I discovered went well beyond *Tosca* and the circumstances of Collier's death.

This thesis asks, who was Marie Collier? My aim is to look beyond the death to discover, not the Marie Collier of popular legend, seemingly locked in a perpetual reiteration of her demise; but the woman as she was formed by her time and circumstances, who negotiated her career, her voice, her public persona and her private life to become a person of such interest that her passing was worthy of note.

Questions open up exponentially from this simple query. Firstly, what factors contributed to the formation of the artist, and more specifically the female artist? This inquiry examines the milieu in which she developed—the social and class influences that shaped her experience of music, and the culture and business of art and performance. It considers the resources and opportunities available to her to develop her interest and talent, the course and value of the training she received, and the strategies she followed.

Other issues emerge as we investigate how Collier developed her career. The move from the Australian setting to the international opera scene exposed her to differences in the business of opera; not just in stage presentation, but in its organisation, in its standards, and in its expectations of the performers. Like her predecessors since the emergence of opera in the seventeenth century, Collier negotiated her career and personal life within a web of expectations of impresarios, audiences, sponsors, media, court, government and church. By the mid-twentieth century state and church no longer exerted so strong an influence; audiences, impresarios and media held different expectations; and demands on performers increased as technological changes and the globalisation of the industry gave broader community access to the art form. The research examines how Collier handled these challenges: how she met artistic and professional demands, dealt with the increased levels of public visibility that came with her success, negotiated changes in popularity and demand, and responded to the natural changes that occurred to her singing voice over time.

Another set of questions arises from the image that Collier created and developed to enhance her career. How much could she control how she was perceived? Her persona as a singer was her own creation, but it was also the construction of others. How much was this persona a reflection of her own self-perceptions, expectations and hopes, and how much was it a reaction to the expectations of the opera companies,

critics and audiences? What factors led her to declare a distinctly Australian character in her public persona? How did she use this identity, and how did her home country use this image?

Beneath all these issues lies the issue of gender. The investigation needs to identify what aspects of Collier's career were influenced by questions of gender, how her experience as a woman affected her development and her success, how she used her gender and sexuality to her advantage, and the tensions gender expectations created for what Collier was trying to achieve.

My goal is to identify the specific challenges that Collier, and the strategies she used as she negotiated her vision of a life that included art, work and family. To investigate these questions I will take a narrative biographical approach, making both a diachronic examination of themes to identify changes and a synchronic analysis to locate the stresses and influences at stages of her career.

### **How does one write a biography of an opera singer?**

As a form of historical work, narrative biography has been viewed with ambivalence by many historians for some decades. Twentieth-century historiography saw a shift in focus from the study of the individual as the shaper and instigator of events, to the study of historical processes acting on people. In the later part of the century, however, historians stressed the value of using the stories of individuals to explore those processes and patterns, the smaller field of investigation revealing the larger patterns or exemplifying their impact. Biographies have now taken their place beside microhistories, in sophisticated and non-traditional forms, in investigating different subjects and as alternative approaches to explore larger fields.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Historians give different weight to biography depending on their focus. Ian Kershaw wrote his biography of Hitler only because it seemed the best way to explain how Germany developed in the 1930s; Kershaw sees only a limited role for biography in casting light on motivations and factors that are explicable only by an individual's influence (Ian Kershaw, 'Personality and Power: The individual's role in the history of twentieth-century Europe', *Historian*, Autumn 2004, 83, p. 18). However Jo Burr Margadant sees a much more prominent role for biography in the study of how people use the material conditions of life to form themselves, 'since cultural politics are most easily examined as well as empathetically imagined in the individual life.' (Jo Burr Margadant (ed.), *The new biography: performing femininity in nineteenth-century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 7). Barbara Caine discusses these approaches in *Biography and History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 103-121.



Narrative is a useful tool for exploring an individual's formation. For example, a singer does not instantaneously appear fully formed—she becomes a singer over time. Her capacities and career evolve through events and circumstances, and thus the context of a career can be understood through a 'guided' narrative showing the individual constructing herself.

This change over time can be discussed through a diachronous account, a narrative of events with thematic emphases. At the same time a synchronous account preserves the complexity of the individual's experience, showing the factors and stressors acting on her at specific moments and how she shaped her responses to each, with a degree of nuance not obtainable through a purely thematic examination. The combination of the two levels of description avoids the fiction of the life being explicable through a single or limited set of ideas or focuses, by preserving the thickness of experience.

But there is a trade-off in this approach. The biographical need for a narrow focus, examining the individual as she experiences events, precludes the deep discussion of topics which have interest in their own right but with which the individual was only tangentially involved. For example, Collier's performance of roles in new and unknown works by Soviet and eastern European composers placed her at the edge of Cold War cultural politics; however her participation in this field was limited only to the stage, and an examination of the wider implications of a cultural trend that was both détente and strategy are beyond the scope of this investigation.

This approach is in tune with the current tendency in studies of operatic performers. For most of the twentieth century, singer biographies traditionally reviewed the performer's repertoire and triumphs, the elements that secured and maintained their fascination to audiences. These elements are important to an understanding of a career, but scholars now also examine the circumstances in which an artist's repertoire was formed, and the elements working to create those triumphs—the development of the singer's abilities, the creation of the singer's image and the performance of celebrity. A major development in the change in how female singers' lives are examined has been a focus on issues of gender and sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds), *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. xxx.

In the 1970s the philosopher Catherine Clément provocatively analysed opera as a venue for the enactment of the subjugation of women.<sup>6</sup> She focused on the ways that male composers, librettists, managers and audiences have shaped female characters in opera, and the women who sing them, into a particular image of femininity subject to male control and violence, so that 'on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing.'<sup>7</sup>

Clément's thesis has been strongly contested. Musicologists pointed out that by focusing on the libretto and the literary content of opera Clément failed to consider adequately how the music itself conveys meaning,<sup>8</sup> and how the female voice can assert authority over the listener, thus subverting victimhood.<sup>9</sup> Clément viewed nineteenth-century operas with a twentieth-century gaze, not recognising the different attitudes of earlier times.<sup>10</sup> Her discussion of tragic operas ignored that it is in the nature of that genre for the protagonists to suffer, regardless of their gender;<sup>11</sup> and she did not consider comic operas where it is in the nature of the genre for protagonists to win.<sup>12</sup>

But at the time, Clément's identification of the shaping of women through the observer's gaze stimulated scholars, and her critique of opera coincided with and inspired an increase in studies examining links between music and gender. Musicologists such as Susan McClary and Carolyn Abbate were already exploring the relations between opera and gender. In the late 1980s McClary wrote a number of essays in conscious response to the emergence of feminist criticism in other fields such as literary and film studies, and of the growing openness to new perspectives in her own field of musicology.<sup>13</sup> Her collection *Feminist Endings* inspired scholars to

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Clément, *L'opéra ou la défaite des femmes* (Paris: Grasset, 1979); trans. Betsy Wing, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (London: Virago Press, 1989), pp. 6-8. For a succinct discussion of the weaknesses of Clément's thesis see Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 9-15.

<sup>7</sup> Clément, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Ellen Rosand, 'Review: Criticism and the Undoing of Opera', *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Summer, 1990), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Robinson, 'It's Not Over Until The Soprano Dies', *New York Times*, 1 January 1989, p. BR3; see also Carolyn Abbate, 'Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women', in Ruth A. Solie (ed.), *Musicology and difference: gender and sexuality in music scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 254.

<sup>10</sup> Rutherford, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> Susan McClary, 'Feminine Endings in Retrospect', in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002 (original publication 1991), p. ix.

explore the impact of gender on the creation and discussion of musical works.<sup>14</sup>

Abbate's work in the late 1980s and 1990s examined how the female voice (physically and musicologically) disputes notions of subjectivity and male authority in opera, figuratively 'envoicing' women.<sup>15</sup>

These studies were essentially musicological, but towards the end of the 1990s an alternative approach to the study of women in music emerged. Where once writers, historians and biographers focused their accounts on the singer's art and appeal,<sup>16</sup> they now studied artists within their wider cultural and social contexts: how they functioned within their profession and their business, how they formed themselves and were formed by their environments. Historical context was given in local, specific terms. The singer's art was examined not as a record of triumphs but as a process, exploring the development of her technique and repertoire within her circumstances. Writers looked beyond the works to identify how gender influenced the reception and progress of the singer. The value of the new approach is that we view the singer's experience from aspects which have not been highlighted; we can investigate their achievements using interpretive themes beyond the halo of the celebrity.

Works published since about 1990, when the new approach began to be adopted by scholars, fall into two broad types: the traditional study of an individual singer, and a newer type of work, the survey that combines a study of the profession with group biography. The latter category has been more successful in presenting a more complete picture of the artist, focusing on the construction of, and assumptions about, the profession of the opera singer, and showing female singers not just as exponents of artistic glory but as women exercising agency in the business and the wider world. Individual biographies for the most part have leaned towards the traditional style, partially because of the dominance of the genre's conventions, but mostly because the authors place too much emphasis on narrative and do not adequately consider the significance and nature of the events they describe.

Surveying the evolution of the profession from early days to the mid-twentieth century, John Rosselli's *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* dedicates a

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<sup>14</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Abbate, op.cit., pp. 225-258; see also 'Elektra's voice: music and language in Strauss's opera', in Derrick Puffett (ed.), *Richard Strauss: Elektra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 107-127; and *Unsung voices: opera and musical narrative in the nineteenth century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Rutherford, op. cit., p. 2.

chapter to the unique problems faced by female singers.<sup>17</sup> He examines the conditions under which women participated in the business from the late-seventeenth century, the restrictions on their autonomy, and how their opportunities were shaped by the kinds of opera desired by audiences. While female singers came to be regarded less as sex objects and more as artists, their sexuality was still a preoccupation with impresarios and spectators, and Rosselli traces how the courtesan-singer became a role that women made for themselves and had made for them.

Another work examining the pre-modern era, Susan Rutherford's *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930*, explicitly aims to examine 'the life beyond the opera house—the social, cultural and political framing that shaped individual experience, artistic endeavour and audience reception.'<sup>18</sup> Rutherford describes the discourses and myths around the prima donna in the long nineteenth-century, discussing the images of the prima donna such as the 'siren', the 'songbird' and the 'superwoman'. She examines the various avenues for teaching and tuition, the ways that family, patrons and spouses influenced singers' careers, and the challenges and conventions that they faced in dealing with the business of opera and progressing their careers. Rutherford then considers artistic factors: voice type, performance styles and expectations. Because her focus is a period rather than a singer, Rutherford is not bound by narrative but thoroughly examines the themes arising from the singer's career and the context in which she appears.

A similar approach is seen in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, a collection of essays by historians and musicologists edited by Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss.<sup>19</sup> These studies focus on the archetype of the prima donna and how singers interacted with it: how they created their image and promoted themselves using traditional media such as poetry, newspapers and biography, and new technologies such as the gramophone and cinema; and conversely, how celebrity has been earned, assigned or denied to performers simply because of the ways they practised their craft.

Most singer biographies of the last three decades appeared in popular or trade press and are not scholarly in intent, so it took some years for these elements to appear. The

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<sup>17</sup> John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 56-70.

<sup>18</sup> Rutherford, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Cowgill and Poriss, op. cit.

majority of works still follow the traditional pattern. Brian Adams's *La Stupenda*, an authorised biography of Joan Sutherland first published in 1982, is a chronological account of events and achievements, anecdotal rather than thematic and analytic.<sup>20</sup> Taking advantage of new documentation to inform a tale told many times before, Ann Blainey's 2007 biography *I Am Melba* presents the facts of the life of Nellie Melba as a straightforward chronological account.<sup>21</sup> Another that follows this path is Sara Hardy's *Dame Joan Hammond: Love and Music*.<sup>22</sup>

The more historical turn has, however, seen some researchers engage more closely with primary sources. Richard Davis's study *Wotan's Daughter* draws on Marjorie Lawrence's own papers to describe contract negotiations and the process of working with agents and managers. He presents a good analysis of her voice and how it changed after she contracted polio, with a close description of performances based on available recordings.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in their biography of Florence Austral, *When Austral Sang*, Michael Elphinstone and Wayne Hancock use a close examination of contracts, schedules and correspondence to uncover how the singer contributed to her own image-making in order to cover up career disappointments and to avoid scandal. Hancock and Elphinstone describe the changing characteristics of her voice as her career progressed, and analyse how her repertoire formed and changed through her career. They also describe the uneven and ultimately unsuccessful teaching career Austral followed after retiring from the singing.<sup>24</sup>

Singers previously obscured by their more famous contemporaries have received attention. Peter Dunbar-Hall's *Strella Wilson: The Career of an Australian Singer* sheds light on a lesser-known performer from the pre-World War II era and offers a more feminist reading of a career, showing how an independent woman and single mother controlled her career and shaped it to the needs and tastes of the time.<sup>25</sup> In her article 'Frances Saville: Australia's Forgotten Prima Donna', Adrienne Simpson presents an

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Adams, *La Stupenda* (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, rev. ed. 1993; originally published 1982).

<sup>21</sup> Ann Blainey, *I Am Melba* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Sara Hardy, *Dame Joan Hammond: Love and Music* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Davis, *Wotan's Daughter: The Life of Marjorie Lawrence* (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Elphinstone and Wayne Hancock, *When Austral Sang* (Magill, SA: Wayne Hancock and Michael Elphinstone, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Dunbar-Hall, *Strella Wilson: The Career of an Australian Singer* (Chatswood, NSW: Redback Press, 1997).

account of the career of the Melbourne-raised lyric soprano.<sup>26</sup> Simpson dedicates significant attention to the difficult relationship between Saville and Gustav Mahler, the director of the Vienna Hofoper when she sang with the ensemble from 1897 to 1903—a clash between two strong-willed characters protecting their rights and status, as Saville tried to negotiate and develop a career and profile. Jeff Brownrigg's *A New Melba? The Tragedy of Amy Castles* examines how Catholic forces, both lay and religious, promoted Castles as a Catholic alternative to the Protestant Melba, illustrating how the religious sectarian divisions of Australia in the late-nineteenth century extended even into the world of music.<sup>27</sup>

A discussion of a singer such as Collier, of whom no full-length biography exists and the major part of whose life is unknown to most opera enthusiasts, must by necessity include a chronological account of events simply as a starting point. But good scholarship demands a more extensive picture of the performer, assessing the artist within her professional and cultural context and resisting the tendency to focus on the triumphs and tragedy. This thesis places Collier in her professional milieu. It describes her evolution as an artist, as she developed her skills and repertoire. It examines how she participated in the business of opera, as she interacted with opera management and developed a reputation with the public and the media. It traces how Collier developed a repertoire of roles that suited her skills and assured her regular employment, but also left a lasting legacy in the roles she pioneered that are now regularly performed. It shows how she tried to influence public perceptions of herself through the deliberate cultivation of an image, and how the public actually saw her, as a celebrity during her life and a legend afterwards. It explores the reciprocal relationship between the professional and the personal: how gender expectations influenced her career and personal life, how her national identity influenced her professional life, and how she tried to maintain a place for relationships, sexuality, family and personal expression. Such an approach is needed in order to show Collier not just as the successful and celebrated artist but as a career woman of the mid-twentieth century negotiating the professional and personal spheres to achieve her vision of a life that included art, work and family.

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<sup>26</sup> Adrienne Simpson, 'Frances Saville: Australia's Forgotten Prima Donna', *Australasian Music Research*, 4 (1999), pp.1-32.

<sup>27</sup> Jeff Brownrigg, *A New Melba? The Tragedy of Amy Castles* (Darlinghurst, NSW: Crossing Press, 2005).

## Challenges in investigating the singer

Uncovering Collier's story has both painless and problematic aspects. Given her location in time, relevant documents not only still exist but are quite accessible, so there is much evidence to work with. But there are many gaps in the documentation; and the material evidence does not always lend itself to elucidating the more subjective elements of the singer's career.

Constructing the framework for the investigation is a simple process. The facts of Collier's life—the substance of the narrative—are easy to trace. News reports (and obituaries) give us the major events of her career and the ways in which people responded to them. After mapping the milestones the first major task is to compile a chronological account of Collier's career. Mining the huge store of newspaper and journal material now available one can uncover much, especially from the less-obvious items. Advertisements tell us what Collier was singing, and when and where she was singing it. Radio and television schedules record the times and frequencies of broadcasts, interviews and variety show appearances. This can be checked and verified against reviews and opera company records.<sup>28</sup>

This comprehensive if incomplete chronology of her performances is the basis for a deeper investigation. It allows us not just to see what she did, but also to track the extent of her visibility and popularity, and the audiences to whom she was visible and popular. The reviews tell us how she performed, and how she was received. The thorough, even saturated coverage of the more newsworthy episodes of Collier's career—her initial triumphs and subsequent tours of Australia, her substitution for Callas in *Tosca*, and her death—allow us to examine in depth some of the landmark events. Interviews, not just from the artist but also her colleagues, give us reflections and summations of what has happened as well as incidental detail.

Much of this record has been available on microfilm and microfiche. Now online archives and internet search engines such as Trove<sup>29</sup> allow us to search not only the journals of record from the metropolises but also small, regional newspapers previously

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<sup>28</sup> No chronology of Collier's career has been assembled until this project. The final document runs to over 150 single-spaced pages and is unfortunately too large to be included in this work. An exhaustive list of Collier's roles and significant dates can be found in Appendix A, with her concert and amateur repertoire recorded in Appendix B.

<sup>29</sup> Developed by the National Library of Australia, Trove (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>) is a search engine for digital records relating to Australian subjects in libraries and other collections across the country.

inaccessible to anyone but local readers (and researchers with sizeable grants), and which are especially useful for the examination of her early career in her home country.

The internet has also opened the door to other kinds of resources. Email lists and bulletin boards unite greater numbers over vaster distances, providing easy accessibility to information, anecdote, and historical recordings (mostly unofficial). More raw information is accessible, things reducible to database entries or digital versions that were not significant enough in their own right to receive attention in other formats. Opera theatre archives now often have a presence on company websites; for some, it is only a note advising of their holdings and access details, but others have partial or complete performance information online. The gold standard of these is the MetOpera Database, with comprehensive details of every performance held by the Metropolitan Opera, and links to photographs, reviews and other material. This available to the fan gratis, and provides a profitable alternative to social media for the procrastinating researcher.<sup>30</sup>

Opera companies often hold other archival material. Press releases, biographies and other publicity materials were released by opera companies and management to promote their stars. More obscure but fascinating documents can give us a picture of the singer engaging in the business of her art: the letters, contracts, financial information, personnel records and schedules that reveal the quotidian details behind the glamour.

These are ways in which we can uncover the facts of Collier's life and career. But how can we investigate her key attractions: her abilities as a performer, and the combination of talent and mystique that was key to her success?

The 1950s and 1960s were a golden era for opera recordings, with companies such as Decca, Deutsche Grammophon and RCA releasing set after set of records that became cultural landmarks. It is strange, then, that an artist of Collier's visibility released few studio recordings: only one full opera, an album of highlights from another, and a single aria for a compilation album were available during her lifetime.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The MetOpera Database, <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> The full opera recording was Richard Strauss's *Elektra*, in the Decca recording conducted by Sir Georg Solti and released in 1968; an album of highlights in English from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* was released by HMV in 1960; and the aria 'How can I sleep?... Is anyone there?' from William Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* appeared on the *Covent Garden Anniversary Album* issued by Decca in 1968.



But the studio and the stage are different venues, and, as the recordings show, Collier's forte was the stage. A large number of broadcasts and in-audience recordings were made of Collier's performances, and were shared and collected by aficionados, at first from hand to hand and through mail order, but more recently through digitisation and file sharing on the internet. Visual records also exist, in photographs and film. Opera companies took photographs for publicity and as a record to help re-stage the productions in later seasons. No film of any of Collier's stage performances exists, but some studio performances of operatic excerpts were filmed for television (see Chapter Three). While the audiovisual record is not as complete as we might like, it is extensive enough to tell us much.

With a clear chronological framework and the range of material available, the task of describing Collier's life should be like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, a predictable and precise process. Unfortunately the pieces are not always where one would expect them to be.

This is literally true when examining archives. In his history of the Royal Opera, Norman Lebrecht noted the absence of important records in the organisation's archive, and its inaccessibility; at the time when he researched there the archive had been officially closed for two years.<sup>32</sup> I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the Royal Opera House Archives in one of the intervals when access was possible; soon after my visit in May 2011 the Archives were closed once again for several years, due to special projects, rehousing of the collection, and review and restructuring.

At least I was able to spend time there. I made arrangements to visit the archives of the English National Opera, formerly Sadler's Wells Opera, but before I could go I was advised that the Archives were to be closed and placed into storage due to financial considerations. Other archives do not bother to respond to enquiries at all. The truth is that the documentary records of an opera house are not essential to its continued success. Retention policies, embargoes, under-resourcing and a simple lack of interest conspire against the archivist and the researcher.

Once one gains access to the archives there arises the question of what one will find there—or what one will not find there. On my visit to Covent Garden I realised that documents I had expected to see did not appear to exist, and that even though the files

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<sup>32</sup> Norman Lebrecht, *Covent Garden: The Untold Story* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 9-10.

contained many rare and interesting items, it would be impossible to draw together a complete account of Collier's Covent Garden career from their records alone. The gaps in other archives are simply alarming. The dramaturg and part-time archivist at one continental house insisted that Collier had sung very rarely for the company; yet I had copies of the company's own playbills from another source that told the opposite story.

Another gap is in Collier's own papers. Collier left no diaries, and she was not an enthusiastic letter writer. Some letters exist—personal ones to family and friends, and business letters to her agent and opera management—but with some exceptions these offer very little to the biographer. There is no mother lode of documents offering an easy way into Collier's mind or offering a tantalising avenue of inquiry. But are the insights we might gain from a letter as valuable as we might think? As a means of access to the inner life, letters have their problems. Emotions, opinions and facts are all mediated—the letter is a means of constructing the self as powerful as any other, and the historian can easily fall into the error of taking it to be 'the trope of authenticity and intimacy'.<sup>33</sup>

With no direct insight into her thoughts and responses, we must draw what we can from the versions of Collier mediated through newspaper articles, and recollections of family, friends, colleagues and observers. Bearing in mind that in these Collier was often performing her persona we must view these with a reasonable scepticism. One reads the material with a strong conception of her personality, which can distract as much as inform. The evidence or 'facts' we glean from interviews with her family and friends is also subjective; as Alessandro Portelli has noted, oral history 'tells us less about events as such than about their meaning'.<sup>34</sup> But reviewing the material one becomes aware of a consistent factor, across radio and newspaper interviews and in the accounts of people who knew her: more often than not Collier was quite open about what she was thinking and feeling. The level of candour and sincerity which she displayed in encounters with journalists—startlingly direct and open—strikes one as evidence of someone expressing a confidently-held understanding of herself, the person who she believed herself to be.

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<sup>33</sup> Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven (eds), *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop*, No. 12 (Autumn 1981), p. 99.

A different issue of subjectivity lies in the analysis of Collier's artistic achievements. In newspaper reviews we have an extensive written record of descriptions of Collier's performances and audience responses to them. But these observations were all expressed within the extent of their authors' knowledge and experience. Some reviewers such as Andrew Porter, writing in London in the 1960s, worked from years of study and experience of opera and performance. Others lacked the knowledge or experience or both, such as the journalists responsible for reviews of *The Consul* as it toured Australia in the 1950s (see Chapter One).

Then there are the different ways one may describe the voice. Technical terminology—of voice type and range, of categories of role—establishes certain areas of agreement. But how does one describe or quantify the qualities which the performer communicates to the hearer, the outputs that create the effect, and the success or failure, of her performance? How does one define 'charisma', let alone measure it? Beyond a point the reviewer must resort to analogies and metaphors. The description of the physical performance, the way the singer portrays her character in non-vocal ways, suffers from the same imprecision. But what exactly do they mean when they say she was 'sensuous', 'slinky' and 'kittenish'?<sup>35</sup>

Are there more objective sources of information? We can look to the sound and video recordings, but these have their problems. There are approximately seventy hours of sound recordings of Collier's performances. Some of these are officially sanctioned recordings, such as radio broadcasts and studio recordings; many are unofficial, such as in-house recordings made by audience members. The studio recordings are of optimal quality within the limits of their time. But the majority of the others are of lower quality. Most are 'airchecks', recorded on home equipment from a radio during the broadcast. These suffer from background noise, tape noise, and the loss of higher frequencies through tape deterioration, poor recording or a poor signal. Parts of performances are missing, such as the gaps from cassette turns or changes, and sections unrecorded or edited out because they did not interest the collector. In-house recordings are peppered with coughs, comments and applause drowning out the singers.

Visual records such as photographs and video are also flawed not so much because of quality issues, but because Collier's performance is still mediated, with the

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<sup>35</sup> R.C., 'Walton's Opera In Adelaide', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 1964, p. 6; 'A Lively Tosca Revival', *Times* (London), 6 October 1961, p.20.

photographer creating an image to attract attention to the production, or the director filming a performance according to televisual rather than stage values. But these records allow us to recover a sense of the performer's physicality, one that can amplify the otherwise abstruse 'sensuous', 'slinky' and 'kittenish'. With all their faults the sound and video recordings allow us the most immediate access to Collier's work as an artist: a living archive, where the singer and actress can be experienced in the moment of creation.<sup>36</sup>

These questions of subjectivity and mediation might suggest that, beyond a narration of the course of her career, conclusive statements about Marie Collier may be elusive. But in spite of the gaps and the interpretive slipperiness of the evidence, there is enough material to make a considered analysis and to reach reasoned conclusions about how she created her art and interacted with her world.

## Overview of the study

The examination of Marie Collier's career involves an appreciation of her artistic achievements, but also illuminates some broader questions facing performers of her time and place: how artists experienced and negotiated the tensions between Australian and international conceptions of culture; and how the demands, desires and expectations of gender influenced the choices and directions taken by female artists.

The cultural milieu in which Collier was formed was the product of a particular people, time and place. Middle-class Australia placed high social and cultural value on manifestations of high art, with greater opportunities than before for performers and artists after World War II. Through her middle-class background Collier had access to a culture of performance and to different avenues of teaching and training. Her progress through this culture was mediated by her gender: it opened up networks of support and mentoring, it placed her in a discourse of representations of women in theatre, and it forced her to face questions about career that were not faced by men.

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<sup>36</sup> The broad extent of Collier's recorded legacy may be seen from the list of her live and studio recordings in Appendix C. A number of celebrated singers—such as Magda Olivero and Leyla Gencer—have established a strong post-career reputation and following through live, unofficial recordings, made, collected and exchanged by fans rather than created and distributed through official channels. The nature of this reputation—how it is formed and maintained, the reasons these singers do not have as strong a commercial recording presence as many of their contemporaries, and why it is usually women who achieve this kind of repute—is a major subject for research in itself.

Chapter One examines the beginnings of Marie Collier's career in her home country in the early 1950s, seeking to understand her as an Australian and as an artist in post-war Australia. I examine how her family background and the middle-class milieu in which she grew up influenced her path into music. I describe how Collier first developed as a performer: how she learned to sing, and how the particular way she sang became the foundation of her career, for good and bad. At this time she also laid the foundation for the repertoire she was to pursue in her international career and which was to make her reputation, a repertoire that fell into two parts: popular Italian works that dominated the opera stage, and highly dramatic contemporary works.

Collier's first encounters with the business of opera came with amateur and then professional companies, and I look at how she developed a network of supporters, mentors and professional contacts, and how she pursued opportunities for work across genres and media. A crucial part of Collier's career was the image she presented to the world. This chapter examines how early representations of Collier were created for publicity, and how she participated in the process.

As a singer in middle-class Australia in the years following World War II Collier had greater opportunities than previous singers from her country to develop her talent and pursue a career at home. Up until then opera in Australia had largely been presented by touring companies and visiting artists. By Marie's time it offered more professional possibilities. I explore how Marie made decisions about the kind of life she would like to have, and how she negotiated gender expectations and musical opportunities to try to create a life that included family as well as career.

Recollection of the international part of Collier's career focuses on her 'overnight success' when she replaced Maria Callas at short notice for performances of *Tosca* at Covent Garden in July 1965. The success actually came slowly; it had taken Collier ten years to reach a place of professional reputation and artistic skill where she could take advantage of the opportunity. This stage of Collier's career exemplifies how the Australian artist venturing overseas in the 1950s experienced a cultural change. Accomplishments and standards highly-rated at home were found to be well below the level of professionalism and attainment required on the international stage. Chapters Two and Three examine those years in which Collier built her international career. After a period of study in Milan Collier secured a contract as a principal singer with Covent Garden. In Australia it may have seemed that she had reached the top; but she was only beginning the process. I describe how Collier continued to learn her craft and

business at a higher level of professionalism, singing principal roles but performing mostly as a company member in minor roles. She took further vocal and acting training, discovering her strengths and learning to negotiate her weaknesses. Her repertoire began to consolidate as she sang traditional roles and discovered her particular talent and temperament for modern repertoire; and she worked to develop opportunities in that repertoire, in other opera houses, other countries and other media. She also actively worked to develop an image, portraying herself as the housewife-diva, the woman building a family while developing and maintaining a demanding career.

This period of hard work saw her achieve international success, expanding her career throughout Europe and into North and South America, and becoming a freelance artist able to negotiate her career with more flexibility and freedom. The 'lucky break' by which she replaced Callas gave her fame beyond the opera house and placed her in the eye of the general public. This marked the beginning of legend-making about her; it was also the start of a period of high professional demands and personal costs.

While Collier was achieving international success she was still at heart and in character an Australian. The situation this created sheds light on another facet of the tension between cosmopolitan and provincial as experienced by expatriate artists when they returned to Australia in the 1960s. Chapter Four examines Collier's relationship with her home country after she had become an international star. When Collier returned to Australia for performances in the 1960s she moved from a world where she was seen solely as the professional performer to one where attitudes and expectations were based on her origins. Her professional status was acknowledged, in the pride in which she was held as a cultural manifestation of the country, and in her role as a representative of the high cultural standards to which the country aspired. But living up to this status placed demands on her; she had to deal with the expectations of the Australian public, and the press that had conspired with Collier's handlers to propel her into stardom in the early 1950s now worked against her, making her a figure of controversy when she merely wanted to do her best for her people.

By the late 1960s Collier had reached the peak of her success and was moving into the singer's middle career, a phase presenting challenges for all professional singers. Her voice was changing, showing not only the usual changes that happen to a singer's voice as she moves into middle age, but also the effects of years of singing with poor technique. The preferences of the audience and opera management were also changing. While she preserved a core of fans who enjoyed seeing her perform,

audiences and managers were looking to new singers and different repertoire. Chapter Five examines the possibilities that Collier had to reshape her career. It describes how she negotiated problems and changes in her voice, and how she re-evaluated her repertoire, removing roles, revisiting others and attempting to add new ones, and achieving an encouraging level of success.

Of course Collier never became the late-career singer; she is largely remembered as the singer who died. Collier had crafted an image of herself that guided public perceptions of her and had been crucial to her success; but after her death public representations of her were radically transformed. The death of the public figure became an event in which the public participated, in ways different and contradictory to the experience of her family and colleagues. In Chapter Six I examine how over time the memory of the event was shaped in different ways, and how and why the knowledge of Collier's achievements was obscured by a discourse which remembers women in different ways to men, and which portrayed Collier as a Tragic Diva, a talented but suffering artist doomed to an early demise.

Marie Collier's career began in the amateur theatricals and church halls of suburban Melbourne, just as Australia began the process of rebuilding itself after World War II. The seeds for an international career were there, in the young woman's talent and in the growing potential for professional performers in the new Australia; how they were nurtured and encouraged to grow is the subject of Chapter One.

## Chapter 1      A career and a duty: 1943-1954

In November 1946 Marie Collier went to a photographer's studio to sit for a portrait as a gift for her father. The photograph shows an attractive young woman in a short-sleeved dress in a green and brown print with a fern pattern. She is relaxed, leaning back and smiling pleasantly at the camera (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Marie Collier, studio portrait, 1946 (Margaret Collier)

The woman in the photo is recognisable, but this is not the way we know her. In public memory Marie Collier always appears as the singer—the confident, talented, glamorous, triumphant star. That image dominates recollection, whether as a



component in the Tragic Diva trope or simply as a memory of her career. But this chapter presents another way of remembering Marie Collier, as the apprentice singer beginning to make a career in the period of economic and cultural expansion in Australia after World War II—the young woman in the studio portrait before she became the star.

I examine how her family and class background influenced her progress towards a musical career, and how the time and place affected the development of that career. The environment in which Marie Collier grew up—middle-class, affluent, post-World War II Australia—was a milieu that gave a talented but ambivalent young woman encouragement and opportunities to pursue musical success that had not before been available to Australian singers. I examine the features of her world that influenced her choices and development, and how she and her mentors negotiated these circumstances.

I explore the formation of the performer: how she learned the art of singing and the business of the stage, in the convivial enjoyment of amateur theatricals and in the demanding environment of the professional theatre. I identify significant characteristics of Collier's career that were present from the beginning: her motivation for singing, her approach to vocal technique, and how her public image and her repertoire were formed.

By 1955 Marie Collier had become a star in her home country, but had gone overseas to further her career. The chapter concludes by examining the factors behind that decision. Collier began singing at a time when opportunities for professional development and performance were finally beginning to become concrete. However geography placed limits on these opportunities, and I consider what options Collier had to overcome these limits.

## **Family and music**

Although born into the working class, Marie's father Thomas Robinson Collier became the model of a middle-class man. He was a decorated war hero; he held a managerial position with Victorian Railways; and he lived in a comfortable Melbourne suburb with a wife and two children. Thomas was born in 1894 in Warragul, a small town 100 kilometres east of Melbourne. After leaving school he joined Victorian Railways as an operating porter, assisting with signalling or 'safeworking' as it was known. When the Great War came Thomas enlisted like many of his countrymen. His unit, the 5th

Australian Division Signals Company, was sent to France in June 1916 and first saw action the following month at Fromelles. Thomas was mentioned in despatches twice for maintaining communications under heavy fire, the second incident earning him a promotion to second lieutenant.<sup>1</sup> At Ypres in October 1917 Thomas won a Military Cross (MC) and a promotion to full lieutenant, but he excelled himself at Corbie on the Somme during the German spring offensive the following April when he won a bar to his MC. After heavy shelling forced the brigade headquarters to move he maintained lines to the brigade units. The citation noted, 'He was out in heavy fire, and the area reeking with gas which nearly blinded him, but he stuck to his work.'<sup>2</sup> Suffering severe conjunctivitis and throat inflammation from the gas, he was evacuated to hospital in England.

On his return to Australia in September 1919 he rejoined the Railways, and in August 1920 married Annie Marie Bechaz, born in Australia in 1894 of immigrants from northern Italy. The couple moved around country Victoria as Thomas was posted, eventually to Ballarat, where Marie Elizabeth Collier was born on 16 April 1927, with her brother Maurice following in 1930; and finally to Melbourne in the late 1930s, where they settled in Upper Hawthorn.<sup>3</sup>

The Colliers were not an especially musical family, but Marie was surrounded by music. She grew up listening to her mother singing. During the war Annie had sung in concerts for soldiers with her sister Rosalie; now she was married her music-making was confined to singing Italian songs while preparing meals and doing the ironing.<sup>4</sup> Marie sang along and gave her earliest public performances at Sunday School.<sup>5</sup> She especially enjoyed listening to Neville Cardus's broadcasts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), aimed at educating both young and old to listen critically to music.<sup>6</sup> She absorbed the voices she heard on the radio. Joan Hammond's 1941 recordings of Puccini's 'O My Beloved Father' ('O mio babbino caro', *Gianni Schicchi*) and 'Love and Music' ('Vissi d'arte', *Tosca*) were immensely popular in

<sup>1</sup> Australian War Memorial, Series AWM28 Recommendation files for honours and awards, AIF, 1914-18 War; Call no and page 2/105 p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> 'Lt. Thomas Robinson Collier, M.C., Aust. Engrs.', *London Gazette*, 16 September 1918 (no 30901), page 10910, position 2.

<sup>3</sup> In World War II Thomas Collier served in a less dangerous theatre. In 1943 he re-enlisted in the Australian Army Transportation Corps (Rail and Road Division) and advised the Federal Government on logistical matters. On his demobilisation in 1946 he held the rank of Colonel.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Collier, letter to Kim Kemmis, 22 March 2007; *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Home Service, 21 February 1966 (BBC Programme Number 28SX8324).

<sup>5</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', *People* (Sydney), Vol. 4 No. 10, 15 July 1953, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Daniels, *Conversations With Cardus* (London: Gollancz, 1976), p. 54.

Australia. Collier had a timbre<sup>7</sup> like Hammond's in those recordings, and adopted a similar vibrato and attack but without Hammond's capacity to support the note at lower volumes. Her ability was recognised from the beginning; in February 1942 when Singapore fell and Australians realised the possibility of invasion, Marie led the students and staff in 'Land of Hope and Glory' over the loud speaker system at Camberwell High School.<sup>8</sup>

Her father encouraged her to learn the piano, a suitable pastime for an intelligent middle-class girl.<sup>9</sup> Marie took lessons from the age of ten until about seventeen, and she appears to have achieved a level of competence, if her later claim to have played Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie* is trustworthy.<sup>10</sup>

In 1943 a change of school and a sports injury set Marie on the path to her career. When Melbourne Boys' High School was requisitioned by the Navy the students were transferred to Camberwell, which became boys-only. The girls were transferred to East Camberwell Girls' School. Soon after the move Marie broke her arm in the school gymnasium, and she had to stop playing piano while it mended.<sup>11</sup> Boredom ensued. But she made the acquaintance of a girl who wanted to meet boys—a project rendered difficult by the move—and had found a way to do so.

Raymond Fehmel, the music master at Melbourne Boys' High, had transferred to Camberwell with the students. There he established a group, initially called the Mont Albert Choral Society, to perform Gilbert and Sullivan. Marie's friend wanted to join rehearsals for *The Pirates of Penzance* but did not want to go by herself. So Marie found herself preparing for her first stage production, debuting in November 1943 in the mezzo-soprano role of Kate, one of Major-General Stanley's daughters, with her brother Maurice in the chorus.<sup>12</sup>

Singing replaced the piano. Marie joined the youth choir at her local church, St John's Church of England, Camberwell. The choir master, Charlie Richards, recognised her potential, and watched her develop, waiting for the time he could move her from the

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<sup>7</sup> The timbre of a singer's voice is the set of characteristics that give that voice its unique identity.

<sup>8</sup> E. Bruce Hayman, letter to Kim Kemmis, 13 June 2007.

<sup>9</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>11</sup> *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Blyth, 'Marie Collier', *Opera*, December 1968, pp. 953-4.

'Young St John's' choir into the senior choir.<sup>13</sup> In 1945 the renamed Youth Operatic Society mounted *The Mikado*, with Marie as Pitti-Sing, another mezzo-soprano role. For this the *Argus* gave Marie her first notice, a single sentence: 'Marie Collier was a fetching Pitti Sing.'<sup>14</sup>

From her piano studies she was accustomed to the idea of dedicated training. Marie began formal studies as a contralto, but soon gave them up: her teacher was uninspiring, her father was not well-disposed towards a career on the stage,<sup>15</sup> and Marie was not especially motivated to sing. Unlike many singers such as Nellie Melba and Marjorie Lawrence, for Marie it had not been a lifelong imperative.<sup>16</sup> Her motivations were social interaction and a broader need to be creative. Much of Marie's motivation stemmed from the social aspect; amateur music-making was a way of participating in the community. Church and school provided fields of social interaction; the Youth Opera intersected with both of these circles and others. Singing also provided opportunities for service; through singing she contributed to school spirit, enabled people to worship or otherwise enjoy church, and through the Youth Operatic Society gave financial support to worthy causes. Singing enabled her to be a good citizen. At the same time Marie was a creative person, and she wanted to express that creativity. Singing just happened to be the field where she had talent. She was good at it, but it was only something that she had been 'moderately fond of doing'.<sup>17</sup> Later she told people she had taken it up because she was 'bored at the time', and that 'I might just as easily have chosen pottery or painting as a pastime.'<sup>18</sup> She could just as well have chosen the accepted path of marriage and children as an avenue in which to express her creativity.

## Formal training

However she must have been motivated to express that creativity as well as she possibly could. To learn about her art Marie attended concerts; and at a performance of Verdi's *Requiem* at Melbourne Town Hall in June 1945 she was particularly impressed with the mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Coote. She told her father about Coote and was

<sup>13</sup> 'Marie Collier To Sing With Her Old Church Choir', *Herald* (Melbourne), 28 March 1968.

<sup>14</sup> 'Young Singers In "The Mikado"', *Argus* (Melbourne), 19 July 1945, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 954. The identity of Collier's first singing teacher is unknown.

<sup>16</sup> For Melba's and Lawrence's motivation see Nellie Melba, *Melodies and Memories* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1925), p. 15; and Marjorie Lawrence, *Interrupted Melody* (Sydney: Invincible Press, 1949), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> 'Marie Collier', *Repertoire*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (1959), n.p.

surprised to learn that he already knew about her; the singer's husband was Thomas's colleague at the Australian Army Transportation Corps. Thomas arranged a meeting, and Coote, who taught under her married name van Rompaey, agreed to take Marie as a student.<sup>19</sup>

Marie attended lessons once a week after work. She had now begun working in Fred Denton's pharmacy at Glenferrie, aiming to qualify as a pharmacist's assistant principally because she had liked chemistry at school, but she found that she preferred meeting people at the counter to studying.<sup>20</sup> She continued with the church choir. Now that she had been promoted to the senior choir, Charlie Richards allowed her to sing her first solo, 'I Know That My Redeemer Liveth', a soprano aria from Handel's *Messiah*. Richards went to the Collier home in Upper Hawthorn to practice with her, and noted that 'she was completely dedicated to achieving perfection'. She was an instant success with the congregation.<sup>21</sup> The following year Marie appeared again with the Youth Opera Company at Hawthorn Town Hall in her first starring role as the title character in *Iolanthe*. Keith Manzie, the *Argus's* music critic, reviewed the performance, noting that Collier 'brought considerable physical and vocal qualifications to bear upon the role of Iolanthe.'<sup>22</sup> Five months later the company mounted *The Gondoliers*, not only starring Marie as Tessa but produced by her as well. Her stagecraft, rudimentary as it would have been, was good enough for her to be entrusted with the direction of the production, although later she would dismiss her efforts by saying that all the moves were laid down in the book.<sup>23</sup> Her voice and her presence made an impression; a young contralto, Lauris Elms, saw Collier in *The Gondoliers* and noted that 'she was so dynamic and charismatic you didn't look at anybody else.'<sup>24</sup>

As Marie's experiences progressed from informal performances at school, to the church choir and then solos, and to the Youth Opera Company, the increasing demands on her singing and acting abilities and the greater responsibility for carrying the performance compelled her to improve her skills and professionalism. Van Rompaey soon realised that Marie needed more advanced tuition than she could provide, and encouraged her to apply for a bursary with the University Conservatorium.

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<sup>19</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 954.

<sup>20</sup> *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>21</sup> 'Marie Collier To Sing With Her Old Church Choir'.

<sup>22</sup> F.K.M., 'Good voices heard in youth opera', *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 September 1947, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 954.

<sup>24</sup> Lauris Elms, quoted in Frank Van Straten, *National Treasure: The Story of Gertrude Johnson and the National Theatre* (Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1994), p. 150.

Weeks after *The Gondoliers* she won a Conservatorium Exhibition of £10 and began studying there.<sup>25</sup> The experience was frustrating. She was assigned page after page of English and Australian airs, excellent for developing the voice slowly, but not the arias that Marie preferred to sing.<sup>26</sup> Despite the bursary she still needed to find money to pay for the lessons, and she remembered J.C. Williamson.

After Keith Manzie had seen Collier in *Iolanthe* he contacted the American actor and director Carl Randall, who was directing *Annie Get Your Gun* in its Australian premiere season for the entrepreneurs J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd, and told Randall about Collier. He then phoned Collier twice to encourage her to approach J.C. Williamson. The mere fact that Manzie thought she could be on stage inspired her; later she told him, 'That determined me on an operatic career.'<sup>27</sup> It is unclear if Collier auditioned for J.C. Williamson at that time; if so, nothing came of it. But the idea remained with her, so that when she decided she needed to earn more money she approached J.C. Williamson and was engaged in the chorus for their forthcoming seasons of Benatzky's *White Horse Inn* and Rodgers' and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* in late 1948 and early 1949.

Her time with J.C. Williamson was the longest and the hardest she had worked on the stage until now; later she credited the experience for her professionalism in the theatre.<sup>28</sup> The revival of *White Horse Inn* opened at His Majesty's Theatre with a matinee performance on Boxing Day 1948 and then played eight shows a week for six weeks.<sup>29</sup> She took leave from the pharmacy for rehearsals then went back to work during the season. *Oklahoma!* opened in February and closed in September after 236 performances,<sup>30</sup> but Marie was not with the show at the end of the season. It is not clear if her father disapproved, or if Marie left of her own accord. What is clear is that the Conservatorium learned of it, and Marie was called in to explain herself. It was the last straw; she walked away from the Conservatorium and ceased lessons entirely.<sup>31</sup> She spent her newfound free time with her boyfriend. She had known Victor Vorweg

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<sup>25</sup> 'University Exams', *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 February 1948, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Manzie, 'They Produce Opera On A Shoestring'; 'Opera singer will stay in Australia to marry', *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1952 p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Thomas Cassidy, *Luncheon at the Music Center*, KFAC Los Angeles, Thursday 11 November 1965.

<sup>29</sup> Advertisement, *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 December 1948, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Advertisement, *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 September 1949, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 954.

for many years because his family lived not far from hers.<sup>32</sup> He had graduated as a civil engineer, and Marie could well have married him and left singing behind had she not encountered Madame Katherine Wielaert.<sup>33</sup>

Born in New Zealand, the soprano Katherine Wielaert settled in Melbourne in 1940 with her husband Johannes, a conductor pianist. They opened a studio in their Collins Street flat, Johannes taking piano students, Katherine advertising for vocal students in both singing and speech. Her 'scientifically certain method' of voice improvement was founded on the correct positioning of the tongue. At rest the tongue should lie on the floor of the mouth, with the rear of the tongue partially relaxed.<sup>34</sup> If the singer did this correctly, the tongue would form a heart shape. Wielaert pointed to Mario Lanza as the exemplar of this technique. As she worked with the singer the muscles at the root of the tongue were strengthened and needless movement eliminated.<sup>35</sup> The increased strain at the base of the tongue made it harder to sing high notes correctly, a problem that some of Wielaert's students including Collier and Lauris Elms were to encounter.<sup>36</sup> But however dangerous the technique might be, Wielaert produced successful singers: before she took on Collier, she had taught Betna Pontin (winner of the 1949 Melbourne Sun Aria) and Dorothea Deegan, both of whom sang with the National Theatre; and later students included Elms and the tenor Harold Blair.

A year after she had abandoned the Conservatorium Marie decided to resume lessons. As she told the story in later years, she saw the Wielaerts' brass plate in Collins Street and impulsively went up the stairs to inquire. Wielaert later told people that on listening to Collier she heard one note and realised that she had a star on her hands.<sup>37</sup> She recognised that Collier was not a mezzo but a soprano, and started her training by giving her three months of speech exercises.<sup>38</sup> Later she told Collier, 'Another six months of your former development and you would have been ruined.'<sup>39</sup> This was ironic, given the problems Wielaert's technique was later to cause Collier.

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<sup>32</sup> Margaret Collier, phone interview, 15 March 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Born in New Zealand in 1882, died in Melbourne in 1966.

<sup>34</sup> 'Tame Your Tongue - Correct Speech Improves Health and Wellbeing', *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 June 1941, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> 'Voice-Training Method', *West Australian*, 10 July 1950, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Lauris Elms, *The Singing Elms* (Terrey Hills, NSW: Bowerbird Press, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Collier, phone interview, 15 March 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 954.

<sup>39</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 23.

For two years Collier went to the Wielaerts' studio twice a week for half an hour at a time.<sup>40</sup> As Elms describes, Wielaert was 'a short, stout, tightly corseted little woman with steel-grey hair cut severely short in an Eton crop, and she had remarkable, rather prominent blue eyes.'<sup>41</sup> Her discipline was as severe as her hair style; she was 'blunt in criticism, slow to praise', but also kind and supportive, and 'an untiring worker with those who are prepared to improve and study well.'<sup>42</sup> Marie was one of the latter, but had to be convinced of Wielaert's confidence in her talent; against her inclination, Wielaert 'brainwashed' her into accepting that she had 'a career and a duty to be an opera singer'.<sup>43</sup>

Collier made occasional appearances in public. In 1950 made her first radio broadcast in a talent competition, the 'Maples Parade' on 3KZ Melbourne, getting to the qualifying rounds by defeating Betty Scotland, a soprano who had become popular through appearances on radio and in Hector Crawford's 'Music for the People' concerts.<sup>44</sup> The following year Collier entered again in the successor competition, 'Swallow's Parade'; the contest adjudicator, the soprano Florence Austral, liked what she heard, because Marie proceeded to the semi-finals.<sup>45</sup> In September 1951 Collier sang the title role in *Princess Ida* for her old company, now called the Hawthorn Operatic Society. It was her first soprano role and her last Gilbert and Sullivan.

For the first five years of her career Marie had followed a similar path to many amateur singers of her time and place. An interest and a talent had led to her to amateur performance and to singing lessons, a journey characterised by an intermittent engagement with the business rather than a highly focused determination. However with success and encouragement her attitude changed, and in 1951 she looked to the National Theatre to develop her skills to a professional level.

## The National Theatre and *Cavalleria rusticana*

In 1950s Australia talented singers had few options to exercise and develop their skills. The bass-baritone Neil Warren-Smith described the predicament:

<sup>40</sup> Linda Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!', *Woman's Day*, 26 May 1952, p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Elms, *The Singing Elms*, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'.

<sup>43</sup> *Desert Island Discs*. The 'brainwashing' metaphor appealed to Collier; a year earlier she had told an interviewer, 'I think I was brainwashed by my singing teacher' (*Luncheon at the Music Center*).

<sup>44</sup> 'Substitute Competitor's Parade Vocal Heat Win', *Age* (Melbourne) (Radio Supplement), 15 June 1950, p. 1; 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> *Age* (Melbourne) (Radio Supplement), 23 August 1951, p. 1.



Most of us learned to sing because it was discovered we had voices, but without any clear idea of what we were going to do with these voices. The reffos [refugees from Europe] might talk about state-subsidized opera companies, but there was no such thing in Australia and very little likelihood, as far as we could see, of one ever emerging.<sup>46</sup>

There were no subsidies and grants for learning singers, and competition prizes were cups and platters rather than cash. Warren-Smith found that when he explained he was a singer people would ask, 'But what do you do for a living?'<sup>47</sup> Most singers took day jobs to pay the bills. Warren-Smith worked as a butcher in the family business. After Lauris Elms finished four years of visual art studies she worked for a greeting-card manufacturer, then taught craft at a girls' school while she tried to break into music.<sup>48</sup>

With her National Theatre Movement Gertrude Johnson was working hard to change this. When performing as a coloratura soprano in England in the 1920s and 1930s Johnson was impressed by Lillian Baylis's Old Vic company. She observed the opportunities the Old Vic offered young artists in opera, drama and dance, and 'I remarked to the Australian baritone John Brownlee that there should be an Old Vic in every State of Australia, all combining to form a truly national theatre. John laughed and agreed that it was a grand idea, but asked who was to get the thing started?'<sup>49</sup>

On her return to Melbourne in 1935 Johnson garnered support from artistic, social and political circles, and the National Theatre Movement was formally established in February 1936.<sup>50</sup> From 1938 the organisation was based in the parish hall of St Peter's Church of England, Eastern Hill in East Melbourne, where Johnston launched schools in drama, dance and opera. The company presented performances of *The Flying Dutchman*, *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1938-39, but its operations were curtailed when the Princess Theatre was converted into a cinema for the duration of World War II. The company's major triumphs were to come after the war when it staged major festivals of opera, drama and ballet from 1948 to 1954, attracting Marjorie Lawrence to sing the title role in Verdi's *Aida* in 1951.

Wielandt saw what the National Theatre could do for her star pupil. Collier's vocal ability had progressed to the point where Wielandt thought she could learn complete roles.

<sup>46</sup> Warren-Smith, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>48</sup> Elms, *The Singing Elms*, pp. 21, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Gertrude Johnson, 'Melba Inspired Movement', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 May 1953, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Van Straten, op. cit., p. 58.

Wielandt coached Marie in the part of Santuzza in Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, and insisted she add French and German to the Italian that Marie had already learned from her mother.<sup>51</sup> Marie's stagecraft also needed work. The chorus movement she had learned while working at J.C. Williamson was good enough for a chorister in *Oklahoma!* but she still had to develop the more specialised skills demanded of a soloist. For this Wielandt sent Marie to the Opera School of the National Theatre. There Marie began to be noticed. One day Gertrude Johnson heard her singing in another office; on being told that Collier had sung in the J.C. Williamson chorus, Johnson commented, 'She won't be in the chorus for long!'<sup>52</sup>

In October 1951 she walked onto the stage at Eastern Hill to audition for Johnson and the conductor Joseph Post. To the accompaniment of a pianist she sang, in English, Santuzza's aria 'Voi lo sapete'.<sup>53</sup> The aria perfectly suited Collier's voice and temperament: a passionate, climactic confession of illicit love and betrayal. Her voice was impressive, but so was her presence. Post allegedly turned to Johnson and commented, 'She even walks like a Sicilian!'<sup>54</sup> They asked Collier to sing the role in their next season, to begin in March.

Wielandt continued to coach her in *Cavalleria rusticana* and started to teach her the role of Aida. This choice was not random, nor was it merely standard preparation for a singer. At the beginning of the 1952 Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh were to make their first tour of Australia, and the National Theatre had been asked to perform at a Royal Command performance at the Princess Theatre on March 22. In early February it was announced that Collier would sing the title role in the Triumphal Scene from *Aida* in a concert featuring opera, dance and drama.<sup>55</sup> The performance did not take place; days after the announcement King George VI died at Sandringham, and the royal tour was cancelled. But if Collier was disappointed she could have taken solace in the fact that she was thought worthy enough to perform for royalty, something the girl who performed at school assemblies could only have dreamed about.

The company continued to prepare for the season. Mina Shelley Baily, a theatre teacher from Sydney, came to Melbourne to direct *Cavalleria*. With Gertrude Johnson and the critic and composer Linda Phillips, Shelley was to be a mentor to Marie at this

<sup>51</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'.  


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<sup>52</sup> Van Straten, op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>53</sup> In the English version sung by Collier, 'Mother, you know the story'.

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'.

<sup>55</sup> 'Royal Command Artists Selected', *Argus* (Melbourne), 2 February 1952, p. 4.

part of her career, becoming a good friend and acting as Collier's unofficial personal assistant on her later visits to Australia in the 1960s.<sup>56</sup>

*Cavalleria rusticana* opened on 18 March. After finishing her day at the pharmacy in Glenferrie at 4pm, Marie caught the tram into the city, to the Princess Theatre on Spring Street, a block away from the Eastern Hill hall. Instead of joining in the cheery banter of the chorus dressing room she concentrated on the role she was about to perform. She put on her makeup and sat before the mirror trying to induce a melancholy that would take her into the psychological state of Santuzza, while trying to keep some detachment so that she would retain her singing technique and stagecraft.<sup>57</sup> In the audience the critic Linda Phillips wondered sceptically how the lauded newcomer would fare.<sup>58</sup>

The first indication came during the Easter Hymn, when Collier's strong spinto voice<sup>59</sup> soared over the chorus and orchestra, and listeners became aware that they were hearing someone with a better-than-usual voice. But the epiphany was Santuzza's aria 'Voi lo sapete', when she described her story and her sorrow at Turiddu's betrayal. The tragedy took its course, and at the end the audience gave Collier an ovation, sure that they had seen the debut of someone due to have a long, successful career.<sup>60</sup> Behind the curtain the usual opening night excitement was heightened; the cast congratulated her, while those involved in *Pagliacci* prepared for their turn on the stage.

The next morning Phillips's review of the production appeared on page six of the *Sun*,<sup>61</sup> but it contained little about Collier. The star was on the front page. Under a photo of 'the find of the season', the usually moderate and measured Phillips spoke in superlatives:

Last night I heard the most promising voice since Florence Austral.... Her Santuzza was intelligently handled—not overdone as so many are. She was poignantly appealing, beautiful of appearance and graceful in movement.... She is possibly the greatest find of the National Theatre and possesses one of the most thrilling dramatic soprano voices since Florence Austral was discovered. Her voice is not unlike Austral's in its great power and potentialities. Not only has she this magnificent voice; she has a distinct flair for acting. Of course,

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Collier, phone interview, 15 March 2007.

<sup>57</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Linda Phillips, 'Unknown soprano "thrilling find"', *Sun* (Melbourne), 19 March 1952, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Literally 'pushed' (It.), a spinto is a lyric voice capable of singing sustained climaxes with the power characteristic of the dramatic voice type.

<sup>60</sup> 'Short Operas in National Festival', *Age* (Melbourne), 19 March 1952, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Linda Phillips, 'Well-staged opera in double bill', *Sun* (Melbourne), 19 March 1952, p. 6.

there are the faults of inexperience yet, but careful grooming will make her into a very fine singer.<sup>62</sup>

Later Phillips clarified her comments. 'I am aware that at present it is less powerful than the Austral voice we have known, and that there are vocal aspects needing supervision and development. But the overtones are similar, there is the great ring, the authentic suggestion of future Wagnerian singing, the reserves of tonal power.'<sup>63</sup> Lindsay Browne of the *Sydney Morning Herald* offered a clearer account of Collier's voice when she debuted in Sydney in May, describing her 'powerful and luxuriant voice which rode almost every climax with ringing confidence and style.' He noted one weakness: her 'imperfect control of her breathing left the tone a little unsteady and strained.'<sup>64</sup>

Marie was at home in Hawthorn the next morning when her fiancé Victor rang at 6.45am to tell her, 'Darling, you are in all the papers.' Flowers began arriving at 8am, and the phone rang all day. But Marie was at work at the pharmacy. Colin Prosser, a journalist for the *Argus*, visited the house to speak to Marie's parents. Annie expressed her long-held belief in Marie. Thomas admitted to having opposed her stage ambitions; but the response to her performance the previous night had softened his attitude, and he told the journalist, 'I guess it's all right under these conditions.'<sup>65</sup>

Although Marie did not have to perform again until Thursday she went again to the theatre on Wednesday night. Prosser was in attendance with a photographer. John Brownlee personally congratulated her before his performance of *Don Giovanni*, and she posed for photographs with Harold Blair, who declared that Marie had sung better than anyone he had heard at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Prosser asked Marie if she would go overseas to study like so many before her. Marie had not given much thought to this, and her reply betrayed her lack of drive for a musical career. She said, 'I'm not going overseas yet, I'm going to stay in Australia and marry Victor.' As if seeking other reasons for her lack of enthusiasm she added that her teacher was 'as good as any teacher overseas.' Prosser used this as the lead for his story.<sup>66</sup> At the beginning of her career the relationship between career and family life was regarded as a binary opposition.

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<sup>62</sup> Phillips, 'Unknown soprano "thrilling find"'.  
<sup>63</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'.  
<sup>64</sup> Lindsay Brown, 'Soprano's fine debut', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1952, p. 2.  
<sup>65</sup> Colin Prosser, 'Opera singer will stay in Australia to marry', *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1952, p. 16.  
<sup>66</sup> Colin Prosser, 'Marie makes her choice. "I'm staying here with my Victor"', *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 March 1952, p. 1.

## Building an image

Collier's success onstage in *Cavalleria rusticana* had been the result of her own talent, but the attention she gathered offstage owed more to the publicity surrounding her. With the cooperation of the press Johnson had intentionally shaped Collier's public image with the intention to launch the singer into the world with maximum impact; and the themes evoked by this publicity were to be the basis of Collier's public persona for the rest of her career.

The initial focus was on Collier's ability. Rumours were fed into Melbourne musical circles:

'I have heard,' said a society woman who is an enthusiastic opera fan, 'that this woman, whatever her name is, will be the find of the century.' She lowered her voice confidently. 'They tell me that she will challenge Austral, perhaps Melba.'<sup>67</sup>

With the support of the press it began to emerge just who this person might be. While the Royal Command Performance was to include ballet and drama as well as opera, reporting of the announcement tended to focus on the 'unknown young singer' who was to take the leading role in the opera, with the *Argus* featuring her photo on page one.<sup>68</sup> The *Argus* was to champion Collier enthusiastically. On the morning of the opening of *Cavalleria rusticana* its front page again boasted a photo of Marie, this time in costume as Santuzza.<sup>69</sup> Inside were more pictures; the newspaper had photographed Marie over previous days, dispensing a headache draught in the chemist's shop at Glenferrie, pouring water into a cement mixer as she helped friends build their home, and in the dressing room making up for the dress rehearsal (Figure 3). The article's avowed purpose was to show the diva 'playing a workaday part'; she was not only the talented star, but a woman with a down-to-earth domestic life.<sup>70</sup> After the season opened the press continued in this vein; in the discussion over Marie's personal dilemma of marriage versus career the *Argus* presented the picture of an ordinary woman having to make momentous decisions about her extraordinary talent.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> 'She will sing for Royalty', *Argus* (Melbourne), 2 February 1952, p. 1; 'Royal Command Artists Selected', *Argus* (Melbourne), 2 February 1952, p. 4; 'Opportunity for Unknown Singer', *Age* (Melbourne), 2 February 1952, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> 'Marie sings—and builds', *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 March 1952, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> 'Girl chemist mixes cement—and song', *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 March 1952, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Prosser, 'Marie makes her choice. "I'm staying here with my Victor"'.



Figure 3. Chemistry, cement and song. *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 March 1952.

The publicity appealed to a cliché, the 'overnight success' trope familiar to the audience through movies such as *42nd Street* and *A Star Is Born*.<sup>72</sup> But there was some truth behind this mythologising: the 'surprise discovery' at her audition, and the overwhelming success of a singer who had not performed a major role on the professional stage, were matters of fact. Collier's mentors were genuinely excited at her ability and potential, and called on the clichés to create that excitement among the public.

Talent and character were not the only selling points. Collier's physical attributes were a major attraction. Reviewers had always commented on her appearance, describing her as 'fetching', 'vivacious' and 'beautiful', and having 'considerable physical and vocal qualifications'.<sup>73</sup> Some of the photographs appearing in newspapers and magazines at

<sup>72</sup> *42nd Street*, Warner Bros, Lloyd Bacon (director), 1933; *A Star Is Born*, Selznick International Pictures, William A. Wellman (director), 1937.

<sup>73</sup> 'Young Singers In "The Mikado"'; 'Royal Command Artists Selected'; Phillips, 'Unknown soprano "thrilling find"'; F.K.M., 'Good voices heard in youth opera'.

this time verged on the salacious.<sup>74</sup> This was not just an expression of the sexism of the times. In the strongly gendered world of opera a woman's femaleness is an asset. Her participation in the art is largely contingent on her gender: the roles the soprano sings can only be sung by women, and femaleness is often central to the journeys of the characters she portrays. So it is natural for her to display her femaleness to advance her visibility in the industry. Marie Collier voluntarily participated in the process, cultivating an appearance of glamour to complement the star persona constructed for her by management and press. Whenever appearing in public, especially where a press camera was nearby, she ensured that she was well-dressed and highly groomed. When the National Theatre company went on tour writers of the social pages found good copy in her outfits. At a reception in Adelaide she wore 'golden-apricot corded faille with big buttons, narrow belt, suede gloves and smart little head-hugging hat of ink black';<sup>75</sup> and a dinner given for her in Perth saw her in 'a ballerina-length frock of dark green tie [sic] silk with a folded bodice'.<sup>76</sup> Her unfeigned love for clothes was to be a focal point for publicity in future years.

Although she may have found its burdens onerous, Collier was comfortable with the image she was expected to present, probably because it was based on the real Marie. This pattern of publicity foreshadowed the path her image-building would take during the rest of her career; the 'star-girl next door' image of her Australian career was to become the 'diva-housewife' when she courted public attention overseas.

Offers for work poured in, so many that Marie had to tell her long-suffering boss that she must leave the pharmacy.<sup>77</sup> At the end of April the National Theatre company took the train to Sydney and joined Clarice Lorenz's company, the New South Wales National Opera, for a season at the Tivoli Theatre. *Cavalleria rusticana* opened on 14 May, with Collier singing four of the nine performances. Again she was praised in high terms, the *Sun* declaring that 'her operatic future could easily become a matter of national pride'.<sup>78</sup> When Marie returned to Melbourne her first appearance was a return to her old church at Camberwell to perform for her former choir master.<sup>79</sup> Another concert in August was for her own benefit. The day after her triumph in *Cavalleria rusticana* the mayor of Hawthorn, Councillor Harold George, had announced an appeal

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<sup>74</sup> For example 'Girl chemist mixes cement—and song'; also 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> 'Town Hall Welcome To Opera Stars', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 22 May 1953, p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> *West Australian*, 23 July 1953, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>78</sup> 'Magnificent performance in two operas', *Sun* (Sydney), 15 May 1952, p. 29.

<sup>79</sup> 'Many Will Offer Special Music', *Argus* (Melbourne), 31 May 1952, p. 14.

to raise £1000 to send Marie overseas for further study.<sup>80</sup> After a public meeting at Hawthorn Town Hall the 'Marie Collier Trust Fund' was established under an executive committee involving Wielaert, Johnson and notable Melbourne fundraisers. A 'Night of Opera' was organised for 8 August at the Town Hall, with the State Governor, General Sir Dallas Brooks, lending his support and the social cachet of vice-regal patronage. After a first half featuring extended excerpts from *Cavalleria rusticana*, soloists from the National Theatre presented arias and duets. Marie had been working with Wielaert on new repertoire: the concert aria 'Ah! perfido' (Beethoven) and the *Miserere* scene from Verdi's *Il trovatore*, which she performed with the tenor Lance Ingram and the City of Camberwell Philharmonic Choir.<sup>81</sup> The evening raised £740 towards the fund.<sup>82</sup>

Marie had a list of concert and radio engagements that would keep her in the public eye for the rest of the year. She made her first radio broadcasts in October and December, in programs of thirty to forty-five minutes in mid-evening time slots. No set lists are available but the repertoire was probably a mixture of opera, operetta and art song. A transcription disc exists of Marie singing the ballad 'Count Your Blessings' for a Red Cross appeal on Radio 3UZ in March 1953.<sup>83</sup> Her timbre is almost contralto, and her tone is strong but uneven, showing that she still needed to work on the way she produced her sound. But the higher notes ring clearly, and one can hear the strengths and the potential.<sup>84</sup>

In December 1952 Collier made her first appearance in oratorio, performing the soprano part in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at the Melbourne Town Hall. This type of appearance was to take second place to the opera stage; from the beginning of her career Collier expressed a preference for performing opera over concert work, finding the static nature of the concert performance inhibiting.<sup>85</sup> No doubt her experience at the 'Carols by Candlelight' concert in Alexandra Gardens made her cautious. A moth, attracted by the lights, flew around her mouth while she sang *The Holy City*; she had to wait until the moth was out of range before she could breathe in, and her colleague Lauris Elms watched fascinated from the side of the stage as the moth flew in and out

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<sup>80</sup> 'A fund for a star', *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 March 1952, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> *A Night of Opera*, souvenir programme, Hawthorn Town Hall, Vic, 8 August 1952 (File 'Marie Collier', National Library of Australia, Call no. Ephemera (PROMPT)).

<sup>82</sup> 'Marie Collier's Trust Fund Concert', *Australian Musical News*, September 1952, p. 37.

<sup>83</sup> 'Leading Identities in UZ Red Cross Appeal', *Age* (Melbourne), 27 March 1953, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Eswin O. Excell and Johnson Oatman, Jr., 'Count Your Blessings', Shirley Radford, organist, Red Cross public service announcement, March 1953 (transcription 78 rpm).

<sup>85</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'.



of Marie's mouth during the long top note at the end.<sup>86</sup> The insect was not to be her last difficult co-star.

To cap the year, on 10 December Marie married Victor at Melbourne Church of England Grammar, Victor's school.<sup>87</sup> They moved into a flat near the National Theatre headquarters in East Melbourne.<sup>88</sup>

### *The Consul*

The following year Marie made her first impact in a repertoire that was to shape her career. For the 1953 season the National Theatre offered something radical: amid the standard repertoire Johnson planned to present a new opera making a huge impact on audiences across the world. Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul* had received its first performance in Philadelphia in March 1950 and had transferred to Broadway for a run of 269 performances.<sup>89</sup> Set in an unspecified location in post-war Europe, the opera tells the story of Magda Sorel, whose husband John is a political dissident pursued by the police. Sorel goes into hiding while Magda repeatedly attempts to obtain visas for them to leave the country. She is harassed by a Secret Police Agent, frustrated by the bureaucracy and devastated by the deaths of her child and mother-in-law. John is eventually captured, and Magda is issued a visa to leave, but too late to stop her suicide.

Menotti had been moved to create the work after reading a newspaper account of Sofia Feldy. After spending the war in Poland, Feldy had attempted to enter the United States to rejoin her husband, an American citizen; but she was refused entry because without her knowledge he had divorced her in 1940. Devastated, she hanged herself in her cell at Ellis Island.<sup>90</sup>

The opera won Menotti the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for Music and was quickly presented in Italy and London. Australian newspapers reported on its success,<sup>91</sup> and after Gertrude

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<sup>86</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 21; Elms, *The Singing Elms*, p. 20.

<sup>87</sup> 'Operatic star is married', *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 December 1952, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> 'She Is On The Way To Fame', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 May 1953, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> The Internet Broadway Database, <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2137> (accessed 3 October 2013).

<sup>90</sup> 'Immigrant A Suicide', *New York Times*, 12 February 1947, p. 52; cf Tim Smith, 'At 89, Gian Carlo Menotti Says He's Just the "Medium" for Operas He Has Written', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 January 2001, p. F21.

<sup>91</sup> 'Broadway Flocking To A New Style Of Opera', *Sunday Herald* (Sydney), 23 July 1950, p. 14S.

Johnson saw the opera on Broadway she started negotiations to bring it to Australia.<sup>92</sup> The National Theatre producer Stefan Haag saw it in Europe while on a study tour and was keen to stage it when he returned.<sup>93</sup>

Marie worked on the part of Magda through January and February,<sup>94</sup> and the production opened at the Princess Theatre on 7 March 1953, with Haag producing as well as performing the role of Magda's husband. Reviewers were less than enthusiastic about the quality of the music,<sup>95</sup> but that was not a consideration for the audience. According to the *Argus* the performance 'knocked the audience endwise'.<sup>96</sup> The *Age* considered that the cast 'seemed to be infected by the knowledge that they were participating in a revelation of genius'.<sup>97</sup> Lindsey Browne declared it to be 'in all the theatrical respects the most brilliant work yet done by any Australian opera enterprise. It is taut, intense, electrically nervy.'<sup>98</sup>

Collier's performance was central to the production's success. The *Age* declared 'It was Marie Collier's night, a wonderful night for a budding young soprano who already sings and acts like a veteran, while still possessing the priceless attributes of youth and good looks.'<sup>99</sup> Browne was impressed by 'a most vehement and memorable acting performance', but was disappointed that her voice was 'beginning to falter under the pressure of burdens it had never been adequately prepared to bear.'<sup>100</sup> Phillips again resorted to superlatives, announcing that 'her singing and acting would have made her welcome on any stage in the world.' Phillips did not describe the performance so much as the impact of it on the listener: Collier 'amazed and delighted... thrilled and brought tears to the eyes.'<sup>101</sup> Marie's brother Maurice, normally the strong and silent type, had tears in his eyes.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Van Straten, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>93</sup> 'It cannot succeed without State aid', *Argus* (Melbourne), 16 November 1951, p. 4

<sup>94</sup> Biddy Allen, 'New Tenor will be drawcard', *Argus* (Melbourne), 31 January 1953, p. 14.

<sup>95</sup> See for example 'The Consul—"A Theatrical Event"', *Age* (Melbourne), 9 March 1953, p. 2; and Linda Phillips, 'The Consul brilliant and outrageous', *Sun* (Melbourne), 9 March 1953, p. 8.

<sup>96</sup> Biddy Allen, 'Marie Collier shines in opera's success' *Argus* (Melbourne), 9 March 1953, p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> 'The Consul—"A Theatrical Event"'.  
<sup>98</sup> Lindsey Browne, "'The Consul' should come here", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 1953, p. 12.

<sup>99</sup> 'The Consul—"A Theatrical Event"'.  
<sup>100</sup> Browne, "'The Consul' should come here".

<sup>101</sup> Linda Phillips, 'The Consul brilliant and outrageous', *Sun* (Melbourne), 9 March 1953, p. 8.

<sup>102</sup> Margaret Collier, interview, Balwyn, Vic, 2 May 2007.

It was the audience impact that sold the show. One of the early performances was recorded and broadcast on 3LO Melbourne a week after the opening; a reviewer declared 'Once it began I could not have left it in any circumstances.'<sup>103</sup> But the strongest impact was upon those who responded from personal experience. Many audience members had only recently come to Australia as refugees from a devastated Europe, and the opera recalled their sufferings, not only during the war but from the wave of totalitarian rule that had descended over a large part of the continent afterwards. Magda's Act II aria 'To this we've come' encapsulated the despair of those trying to escape but thwarted by bureaucracy:

Towards the opera's end the soprano answers an endless questionnaire:  
 "What is your name?" This is my answer. My name is Woman. Age? Still young.  
 Colour of hair? Grey. Colour of eyes? The colour of tears. Occupation? Waiting,  
 waiting, waiting...'<sup>104</sup>

The air of menace focused in the role of the Secret Police Agent, played by the baritone John Shaw, who only had to swing his keys slowly in order to terrify the audience. 'I'd come out after the performance and people would abuse me, they would call me everything under the sun,' he later recalled.<sup>105</sup> One evening a woman screamed at him from the dress circle, 'You bastard! You bastard!'<sup>106</sup>

With that kind of reaction Johnson was confident in arranging a national tour, starting in regional Victoria in April, eventually going to Adelaide, Perth and Broken Hill, and finishing in Sydney in October. The company's repertoire included *The Barber of Seville*, *Così fan tutte* and *Madame Butterfly*, but attention focused on *The Consul*. Audiences across the country responded to the opera just as they had in Melbourne; in Perth the critic 'Fidelio' reported that 'when the curtain fell at His Majesty's the audience demonstrated with a fervour seldom seen here.'<sup>107</sup> In Broken Hill matinee performances began at 10 a.m. to accommodate the shift-working miners;<sup>108</sup> one performance had to be stopped when, as Magda's mother-in-law (played by Justine

<sup>103</sup> 'Ariel', 'A Fine Operatic Broadcast Of The Consul' *Age* (Melbourne), 21 March 1953, p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> 'Broadway Flocking To A New Style Of Opera'. A record of Collier's performance of this aria exists in the profile she filmed for the BBC series *Voices for the World*, Ian Engelman (producer/director), BBC 1 TV, 13 May 1968. (BBC Programme Number LMA7132Y).

<sup>105</sup> John Shaw, quoted in Van Straten, op. cit., p. 173. The swinging of the keys was a piece of business incorporated into the production after Haag had seen Shaw doing it during a break in rehearsals.

<sup>106</sup> Robert Allman, quoted in Van Straten, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>107</sup> 'Fidelio' [Albert Kornweibel], "'The Consul' fires Perth audiences', *West Australian*, 4 July 1953, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> *Voices for the World*.

Rettick) sang a lullaby to the dying baby, a woman began screaming and could not be stopped.<sup>109</sup> In Sydney demand was so strong that, after the initial run of eleven performances at the Tivoli Theatre ended, the company moved to the Theatre Royal for another seventeen. Ann Sefton, a medical student in her first year at the University of Sydney, was so impressed by *The Consul* she saw it twice. 'It was the most amazing thing I'd seen,' she later recalled. 'It just came like a bolt from the blue to see something so immediate and so very relevant to what was happening in the world at the time.'<sup>110</sup> The ABC recorded and broadcast another complete performance on 2BL.<sup>111</sup>

Over these months Marie learned the discipline and demands of touring. It was an opportunity to refine her stagecraft, to perform a new role in difficult circumstances, and to experience the intense pressures of the life of the star singer such as publicity and keeping a demanding schedule. Years later Collier estimated that she had performed *The Consul* seventy-six times.<sup>112</sup> She learned how to consolidate her portrayal, to work out how to keep the energy and the performance from getting stale, and how to keep composure when things went wrong. During the last scene in Benalla a stage hand forgot to anchor the gas stove, which had to roll on stage in time with the music so that Magda could put her head in it. The conductor Eric Clapham later recalled,

The gas stove kept on rolling down the stage and ended up at an angle on top of the piano, while Marie Collier was singing, 'I never meant to do this, I never meant to do this.' The audience roared with laughter. We had to retrieve the oven, go back to the beginning of the scene and do it all again.<sup>113</sup>

Collier experienced the pressure of trying out a new role in less than optimal circumstances. In Adelaide she was given the chance to perform her first Tosca when Betty Fretwell was committed to a number of performances of *Madame Butterfly* in the same week.<sup>114</sup> Collier sang opposite Lance Ingram as Cavaradossi and John Shaw as Scarpia. If there had been any stage rehearsal there could only have been time enough for a walk-through with the producer. It was the longest and most demanding role that Marie had performed to date, and with her lack of experience she would have found performing it for the first time difficult. Her sister-in-law Margaret flew to Adelaide for the

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<sup>109</sup> Justine Rettick, quoted in Van Straten, op. cit., p. 176.

<sup>110</sup> Ann Sefton, interview, Camperdown, NSW, 9 March 2007.

<sup>111</sup> On Friday 21 August 1953, from 9.15-11.00pm.

<sup>112</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>113</sup> Eric Clapham, quoted in Van Straten, op. cit., pp. 174-5.

<sup>114</sup> 'On par with Old Vic. Productions', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 16 June 1953, p. 2.

performance, and found that Marie ‘wasn’t very good’.<sup>115</sup> The *Advertiser* kindly neglected to describe her performance in its report, noting only that it was her first Tosca and that ‘she received a big ovation after the famous aria ‘Love and Music’ in the second act and several curtain calls at the end.’<sup>116</sup> It was not an auspicious start for the role with which she would become most identified. A second opportunity came in Perth when Fretwell would otherwise have sung Puccini four evenings in a row. Performing to an audience sitting in the aisles, Marie seemed to have improved since Adelaide, ‘Fidelio’ recording that her portrayal ‘was, dramatically and vocally, a very fine performance’.<sup>117</sup>

In Perth Gertrude Johnson fed the press some numbers and images: in audiences totalling 54,000 in Melbourne and 38,000 in Adelaide, women had apparently risen to their feet shouting and throwing their corsages at the conclusion of *The Consul*.<sup>118</sup> It was part of a consistent publicity program that had been in place since the tour began in Victoria. There the company had supplied prepared copy for regional newspapers to use: ‘Among the singers who will be in [name of town]... will be Marie Collier, the most discussed young singer in Australia at the moment. Not for years has the Australian theatre witnessed a final curtain ovation such as that accorded to this very talented artist...’<sup>119</sup> The *Horsham Times* made more effort and interviewed Marie. Having gained more experience with the media since *Cavalleria* she understood how she had to sell the opera, and told people what they could expect. But the company had moved on to the next town by the time the story went to press.<sup>120</sup>

When the company moved to Adelaide Marie was treated like a visiting star, fêted and adored, but also committed to publicity, public appearances, radio and concerts. She gave several interviews to the *Advertiser*, disarming journalists with her personality and betraying some of her ambivalence: ‘Marie Collier is the most completely charming celebrity one could hope to meet. Tall and slim, with black hair, and a warm smile, she’s an acclaimed opera star who simply feels “I’m afraid I’ll wake up.”’<sup>121</sup> In another interview she told how she prepared for a performance:

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<sup>115</sup> Margaret Collier, interview, Balwyn, Vic, 2 May 2007.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Big crowd at opera, 100 turned away’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 17 June 1953, p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> ‘Fidelio’, “‘Consul’ star shines in a new role’, *West Australian*, 18 July 1953, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Big Crowds Acclaim New Opera’, *West Australian*, 29 June 1953, p. 16.

<sup>119</sup> See both ‘Notable Artists For Benalla’, *Benalla Ensign*, 16 April 1953, p. 5, and ‘Notable Artists With Opera Company’, *Camperdown Chronicle*, 5 May 1953, p. 2.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Opera Star Praised By Duo Singers’, *Horsham Times*, 12 May 1953, p. 2.

<sup>121</sup> ‘She Is On The Way To Fame’.

She sits quietly in her dressing room an hour before the curtain goes up, concentrating on the score and thinking herself into the role of Magda Sorel. Other members of the cast refrain from talking to her during this time, and she retains the atmosphere of the part until after the final curtain. She says she feels the intensity of the role throughout and everywhere it has been played the audiences have shown that they have felt it with her.<sup>122</sup>

She also shared publicity commitments with the rest of the company, feeding the ducks for the *Advertiser* photographer in the Botanic Gardens,<sup>123</sup> and visiting a car dealership so that the stars of *The Consul* could 'meet a Ford Consul'.<sup>124</sup>

Marie enjoyed the interviews and the socialising, but it all added to an exacting schedule. In between performances in Adelaide she recorded songs from the operettas of Franz Lehár for 'Song of Vienna', a four-part dramatisation of the life of the composer for the ABC radio station 5CL.<sup>125</sup> She appeared on radio station 5KA, not singing but as a 'guest expert' on the game show 'Twenty Questions'. The following day she performed a Saturday matinee of *The Consul* then immediately flew to Melbourne to sing at Maurice's wedding that night. The following Monday she performed as an associate artist in a violin recital by Desmond Bradley at the Melbourne Town Hall, and the next day flew back to Adelaide to perform the opera that evening.<sup>126</sup> After another performance of *The Consul* on Wednesday night Marie had a few days off to prepare for two events: a bracket of French arias and songs at a free concert at the Elder Conservatorium on Sunday afternoon,<sup>127</sup> and on the following night her first performance of *Tosca*. The frantic pace was noticed by the press,<sup>128</sup> but if it caused problems for her she did not indicate it. It was a foretaste of the kind of demands she would follow at the time of her greatest success in the 1960s, and she may have looked back on this time as a source of confidence when faced with an equally testing schedule.

Collier's experiences playing and touring in *The Consul* consolidated her professional skills and her celebrity, but the most significant outcome was her realisation that she

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<sup>122</sup> 'Opera star 'feels' role', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), Thurs 28 May 1953, p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> 'Opera Stars Relax At Botanic Garden', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 30 May 1953, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> 'Stars of 'The Consul' meet a Ford Consul' [advertisement], *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 May 1953, p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> James Cramond, 'Musical Serial Is A Hit', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), Saturday 11 July 1953, p.15; 'John Quinn's Radio Round-Up', *Mail* (Adelaide), Saturday 4 July 1953, p. 55.

<sup>126</sup> 'Good Morning', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 11 June 1953, p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> Dr Enid Robertson, 'Big Crowd At First Of Free Concerts', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 15 June 1953, p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> 'Good Morning'.

liked performing contemporary repertoire. She found she preferred the straight-forward nature of works that were true to life to the artifice required to express the truth in traditional operas.<sup>129</sup> For the rest of her career Collier was to become known for her participation in contemporary or recent modern opera, especially in roles which balanced verisimilitude and melodrama, reflecting her temperament and her taste in storytelling.

## Disaster and experience

The year 1954 saw Collier consolidate her stage skills and experience, performing in stage productions and exploring new repertoire in concerts. At the same time she encountered problems that were to face her for the rest of her career and which she never satisfactorily resolved. Collier had fulfilled her potential as far as she could in Australia, and while she could have had a good career there she prepared to go to Europe. Two productions in which she performed exposed the problems of Australia as a cultural centre—a type of provincial thinking on the one hand and the poor quality of musical theatre standards on the other.

March 1954 finally saw the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, delayed because of the death of George VI. Cultural Australia mobilised its forces to honour the new queen; in Victoria the Government gave the National Theatre £26,000 to stage a 'Royal Visit Arts Festival' in which eight operas were to be presented, including Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which would be attended by Her Majesty.<sup>130</sup> This brought criticism as 'a singularly inept choice' from some who thought the entertainment for the Queen should reflect Australian life more closely. 'The opera has as much connection with this country and what is known as the Australian way of life as has "Traviata" with the daily habits of an Abominable Snowman,' complained the *Argus*.<sup>131</sup> Marie Collier was to sing the courtesan Giulietta, with Barbara Wilson and Betty Fretwell in the other soprano roles.

To ensure the production worked, *The Tales of Hoffmann* opened three weeks before the Royal Command Performance. Stefan Haag's production reflected elements of The

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<sup>129</sup> Biddy Allen, 'They'll say: 'I heard Marie Collier"', *Argus* (Melbourne), 16 February 1954, p. 19.

<sup>130</sup> Van Straten, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>131</sup> Frank Doherty, 'What a tale to tell the Royal visitors', *Argus* (Melbourne), 5 December 1953, p. 16.

Archers' recent film of the opera.<sup>132</sup> The staging was innovative, modern, and surreal; but it was also beyond the technical capacities of the National Theatre and above the heads of the audience and critics. It did not help that the show was inadequately rehearsed. The critics derided it. Their main targets were the concept and the design. The *Age* listed some of the features that alienated the audience:

In the strange atmosphere conjured up by means of transparent curtains, shadowgraphs of ballet, grinning masks, human lamp posts and electrical gadgets unknown in the days when Hoffmann told his tales, what is known in these bright young days as 'décor' assumed a role far in excess of its importance.<sup>133</sup>

In the *Sun* Linda Phillips contented herself with the description 'a hotch-potch.'<sup>134</sup> To Haag's disappointment Johnson made the decision to present the opera in a more conventional, and shorter, version at the royal performance.<sup>135</sup> Reports of that event focused on the social impact of the event, so there are no accounts of the artistic aspects of the performance nor of how the audience responded.<sup>136</sup> However the visitors seemed to have been impressed; one performer later recalled that 'Prince Philip's eyes were out on stalks when Marie Collier came on dressed in half a yard of ninon and not much else!'<sup>137</sup> The principals were presented to the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh after the second act.<sup>138</sup>

A month later the company performed Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* in an even more disastrous staging. Johnson had hired the musical comedy star Max Oldaker to give gloss to the production. Oldaker found the company one of the most amateurish he had ever encountered, and following the season he wrote a scathing account of his experiences, shedding light on the variable standards by which the company functioned.

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<sup>132</sup> *The Tales of Hoffmann*, The Archers/Vega Film Productions, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (directors), 1951.

<sup>133</sup> 'Old tales in new setting', *Age* (Melbourne), 15 February 1954, p. 2.

<sup>134</sup> Linda Phillips, "'Hoffmann" needs much effort to be dainty dish for Queen', *Sun* (Melbourne), 15 February 1954, p. 14.

<sup>135</sup> Darrell Symmons, 'Opera back to normal for Queen', *Sun* (Melbourne), 20 February 1954, p. 4.

<sup>136</sup> 'Queen goes to the theatre', *Age* (Melbourne), 2 March 1954, p. 1; 'The Queen at the Princess', *Age* (Melbourne), 2 March 1954, p. 5.

<sup>137</sup> Agnes Fulton, quoted in Van Straten, op. cit., p. 189. The Macquarie Dictionary defines ninon as 'a fine semitransparent silk fabric, used mostly for expensive lingerie'; *Macquarie Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Dictionary Publishers, 5th ed. 2009).

<sup>138</sup> Van Straten, op. cit., p. 191.



Oldaker had assumed that when he arrived three weeks before the opening the cast would already be studying their roles and rehearsing. They could not do this because the script had not been finalised; Oldaker arranged for scripts to be duplicated, but they were not available until the final week of rehearsal. Neither the cast nor Haag adhered to rehearsal schedules. The singers looked down on operetta, and were inexperienced in dialogue or did not care for it, so that prompting was required at every performance. Props and sets were badly made, making changes slow; and the cast held up proceedings further by interpolating their own private jokes into the dialogue. Oldaker wrote:

I could not find an experienced professional mind amongst the personnel engaged in direction and production, and few among the cast who understood the meaning of theatre, or who had knowledge of the behaviour and concentration necessary when in the theatre for the purpose of either rehearsal or performance.<sup>139</sup>

He found Collier difficult to work with. In a letter written after her death he said, 'She was then not a good actress. Love scenes were an awful chore. I got no response from her at all, and felt cheated.' He concluded that she was 'sexless';<sup>140</sup> but she was simply out of her depth in musical comedy. Collier had been apprehensive about playing Hélène. She confessed to a journalist, 'How can I make myself appear gay and giddy I have no notion at the moment!'<sup>141</sup> What may have been good physical casting did not work vocally or dramatically.

After an opening night that stretched from eight o'clock until midnight the critics were in no mood to moderate their opinions. The *Age* declared the performance was 'more like a hastily concocted undergraduate romp than the production of an experienced company.'<sup>142</sup> Dorian Le Gallienne wrote, 'The vast stretches of spoken dialogue seemed interminable and unnecessarily vulgar... Most of the performers did not seem sure of what line, between slapstick and grand opera, to take... Splendidly voiced Marie Collier tried hard but was badly miscast as Helen...'<sup>143</sup> The company curtailed the run, replacing it with a hastily-mounted production of Fraser-Simpson and Tate's musical comedy *The Maid of the Mountains*, but *Hélène* ran for another eleven painful performances before the new show was ready.

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<sup>139</sup> Charles Osbourne, *Max Oldaker: Last of the Matinée Idols* (London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1988) pp. 184-185.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>141</sup> Allen, 'They'll say: 'I heard Marie Collier''.

<sup>142</sup> J.B.McA, 'Myths of Troy in operatic farce', *Age* (Melbourne), 5 April 1954, p. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Dorian le Gallienne, 'Champagne was sadly flat', *Argus* (Melbourne), 5 April 1954, p. 4.

The new show again exposed Collier's limitations in comedy. She took the lead role of Teresa opposite Oldaker as the bandit Baldassaré. Critics regarded the production as competent, but Collier appeared mannered and deliberate, singing 'with a scrupulous attention to the notes as they were written that seemed to rob the tunes of their easy swing.'<sup>144</sup> When she sang Marenka in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* in Hobart in October her comedy skills appeared to have improved,<sup>145</sup> but she needed to gain a lighter touch and more subtlety; and she was not going to develop those in the atmosphere of well-meaning amateurism that prevailed at the National Theatre. She started to finalise her plans to go overseas.

With an eye to funding her European studies, Collier took on as much work as possible, and this created huge demands. While the production of *Hoffmann* was undergoing revision Collier also had another season of *The Consul* interspersed with further performances of *Hoffmann* and rehearsals for Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*. She also participated in concerts celebrating the Royal Visit. *Hoffmann* had opened on Saturday 13 February; after another performance on Monday night she flew to Canberra to sing in a concert on the lawns of Parliament House with singers Ronald Dowd and Peter Dawson, and pianist Isador Goodman while the Queen attended a State Ball inside.<sup>146</sup> On Wednesday she flew back to Melbourne for *Hoffmann* that night, followed on Thursday night by an 'Empire Gala Concert' at the Melbourne Town Hall, with the first two performances of *The Consul* on Friday and Saturday. Like her marathon in Adelaide the previous year, this was a pattern that was unsustainable for long periods.

Collier's repertoire was developing according to opportunity and custom rather than with an overarching career plan. Her operatic roles were those the National Theatre wanted to present, rather than the focused repertoire that a professional soprano might list in an audition application. Her recital programmes trod a well-worn path, presenting a mix of arias, art songs and sacred songs; while her radio broadcasts featured folk and popular songs, concessions to the audience that would not be of much value in her opera career. The populist approach reflected the opportunities she was given. Her programmes reflected a traditional style that aimed to please rather than edify; in this

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<sup>144</sup> J.B.McA, 'Maid of the Mountains', *Age* (Melbourne), 19 April 1954, p. 2; see also Keith Manzie, 'Ageless Maid', *Argus* (Melbourne), 19 April 1954, p. 4.

<sup>145</sup> 'Beautifully Staged Opera Presentation', *Mercury* (Hobart), 21 October 1954, p. 32.

<sup>146</sup> 'Concert Audience of 5,000', *Canberra Times*, 17 February 1954, p. 1.

they more resembled the recitals of Nellie Melba<sup>147</sup> and Marjorie Lawrence<sup>148</sup> than of Joan Hammond, who in her tours a few years earlier had impressed critics greatly with her discerning choice of repertoire.<sup>149</sup>

For the rest of 1954 Collier travelled between the eastern States singing in concerts and broadcasts. Vocal problems began to appear. In August she finally sang Aida, in a concert performance in Brisbane with the mezzo-soprano Margreta Elkins and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. The *Courier-Mail* liked Collier's 'full, rich, resonant voice with good musicianship and dramatic ability.'<sup>150</sup> But the following month Verdi's *Requiem* with the Victorian Symphony Orchestra found her out of tune and 'swooping' from one note to the next.<sup>151</sup> When Collier performed a concert with John Shaw a few days later Linda Phillips observed the persistence of a recent tendency 'to produce a far-from-steady vocal line and high tones so unsupported that she endangers her sense of pitch when rising to them.'<sup>152</sup> When she performed her farewell recital in Melbourne in November the problems were still noticeable; but they were not going to keep her in Australia. The decision to go to Europe had become irrevocable.

### Choosing a career

Collier's decision to go to Europe was not an automatic or simple one. To arrive at it she had to balance the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian scene with her personal wishes and the expectations of those around her.

From her first success it was assumed that she would go to Europe. Almost as soon as she walked offstage from her first performance in *Cavalleria rusticana* the press asked

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<sup>147</sup> See for example 'Madame Melba. First Concert In Sydney', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1902, p. 7; 'Melba. The First Concert', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 2 June 1909, p. 9.

<sup>148</sup> See for example A.L.K., 'Marjorie Lawrence Triumphs In Sydney', *Australian Musical News*, August 1939, pp. 21-22; Neville Cardus, 'Town Hall Crowded. Marjorie Lawrence Concert', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1944, p. 4.

<sup>149</sup> For example in Sydney in 1946 Hammond presented works by Brahms, Gluck and Monteverdi in one concert, and by Faure, Wolf, Mussorgsky and Finzi in another. See Neville Cardus, 'Joan Hammond Concert At Town Hall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1946, p. 4; and Neville Cardus, 'Town Hall Crowded. Marjorie Lawrence Concert', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1944, p. 4.

<sup>150</sup> Dr Robert Dalley-Scarlett, "Opera As Concert Not As Satisfying", *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 30 August 1954, p. 6.

<sup>151</sup> Dorian le Gallienne, 'Orchestra, choir excelled', *Argus* (Melbourne), 8 September 1954, p. 6. See also 'Verdi's Requiem', *Australian Musical News*, October 1954, p. 30.

<sup>152</sup> 'Marie Collier and John Shaw – Complimentary [sic] Concert', *Australian Musical News*, October 1954, p. 31.

‘When are you going overseas?’<sup>153</sup> In the Australian mind the destiny of the home-grown singer lay elsewhere, and had for nearly a century. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries many Australian women travelled to Europe to improve their cultural capital. Returning with knowledge of languages, art, music, literature, and manners, they could enjoy higher status and uphold the Europe-centred milieu and standards that prevailed in the country.<sup>154</sup> Departing singers had a different agenda: they sought musical opportunity. When Nellie Armstrong (Melba to be) first appeared in a public concert in 1884 she realised that ‘there must be something in my voice... from now onwards, to go to England was my ruling ambition.’<sup>155</sup> The following year the violinist Johann Kruse told Nellie to leave at once to study in Europe. ‘Kruse thought a great deal of me, he says he never met any one more musical than I am. He says I ought to have been there four years ago,’ she wrote desperately to a friend:

I would give ten years of my life to be able to get to Europe to have a trial... The more I think of it the more desperate I get, I am twenty-three years old now, and I feel every day I stay here is another day wasted, there is no one that can teach me anything here... all I can say is that I would give my head to get Home.<sup>156</sup>

For a singer of Melba’s talent the musical resources in Australia were inadequate. The artistic ‘poverty’ of the antipodes was a given. Writing to a friend from the cultural haven of Paris in 1887 Melba asked, ‘Do you have any decent music in Sydney now?’<sup>157</sup> The lack of quality was not for want of ambition or taste. As early as the 1820s groups had been formed in Sydney for the purpose of musical appreciation and organizing concerts,<sup>158</sup> and the ships from England and America had brought a steady stream of musicians and teachers, good quality instruments and the latest music. But this did not guarantee quality. It was tacitly accepted that musical performances were generally not of the highest standard; reviewers tended to note when performers did achieve the best.<sup>159</sup> Australian orchestras had nothing like the numerical strength of their European counterparts. The local premieres of Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* and

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<sup>153</sup> Prosser, ‘Marie makes her choice. “I’m staying here with my Victor”’.

<sup>154</sup> Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Music Abroad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>155</sup> Melba, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

<sup>156</sup> Nellie Melba, letter to Maggie Menzies Emblad, 16 August 1885, Mitchell Library, AM 82-1/11.

<sup>157</sup> Nellie Melba, letter to Arthur Hilliger, 29 March 1887, Mitchell Library, AM82-2.

<sup>158</sup> In 1826 the Sydney Amateur Concert Society held a subscription series under the patronage of the Lieutenant Governor Colonel William Stewart. See *Australian* (Sydney), 27 May 1826, p. 3.

<sup>159</sup> See for example the comments on Henri Gautrot’s playing at a Sydney concert in 1839, *Australasian Chronicle*, 13 September 1839, p. 1.

Wagner's *Lohengrin* (in 1852 and 1877 respectively) featured orchestras well under the strength specified by the composers.<sup>160</sup> Impresarios preferred to present adaptations or burlesques of popular operas because musical parts for these were easier to obtain than the original works. In Melbourne in 1866 W.S. Lyster made it a selling point that his performances of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* in 1866 used the score by the composer, an advantage not enjoyed by other works in the season.<sup>161</sup>

The opportunities for training became greater towards the end of the nineteenth century, but were still inadequate. Even after the establishment of conservatoria there was nowhere in Australia where the highly-talented singer could get advanced training for her voice type and repertoire. Teachers and patrons pointed their protégées towards the Old World; in a recent survey Roger Neill identifies fifty-six Australian and New Zealand singers who studied with Mathilde Marchesi in Paris between 1881 and 1910.<sup>162</sup> Audiences expected it; local artists needed the imprimatur of elsewhere before they could be heralded as the best. In London in 1911 the *Daily Telegraph* complained that

We see a continual exodus of young singers from Australia, a land of magnificent voices, because they recognise that they must get the hall-mark of London before they can be received in their own country... No, the simple fact appears to be that Australians do not want Australians.<sup>163</sup>

Just what provided the desired gloss was never made clear—was it experience, training, success or just the knowledge that she had breathed the air of foreign climes? It did not matter, as long as she had gone. No singer had become a household word—like Amy Sherwin, Nellie Melba, Frances Alda, Florence Austral, Marjorie Lawrence and Joan Hammond—or even merely famous, by staying in Australia.

Success was not guaranteed, and newspapers reported the sorry tales of those who tried and were found wanting. Under the headline 'A Pathetic Story' the Sydney *Evening News* recorded an account in the London periodical *British Australasian* of a young woman who determined to return home having 'recognised the inevitable': that

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<sup>160</sup> Harold Love, *The Golden Age of Australian Opera: W.S. Lyster and his Companies 1861-1880* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), pp. 68-9; 'Melbourne Gossip', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 4 September 1877, p. 3.

<sup>161</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 October 1866, p. 8.

<sup>162</sup> Roger Neill, *Divas: Mathilde Marchesi and her pupils* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2016), pp. 400-409.

<sup>163</sup> P.J.N., 'Opera Reflections', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 23 October 1911, p. 10.

in London 'there were hundreds of girls with better voices than her own, and thousands with voices as good' competing for the limited opportunities.<sup>164</sup>

Those who returned successful could be lionized; the homecoming celebration of a successful performer became 'an Australian social institution.'<sup>165</sup> So there were scenes like those described by a sarcastic *Bulletin* in 1907:

Very doggedly determined to ovate was the crowd that filled Sydney Town Hall on last Saturday night. And rightly so. Melba is our prodigy; she is the most wonderful thing we have exported to date; she is a Marchesi pupil (poor old Cecchi we wave gently aside). She wears great Orders, and comes to us followed by the affectionate regard of a dozen European Courts. She is an institution.<sup>166</sup>

Similar scenes occurred as late as 1965 when Joan Sutherland returned from overseas success.<sup>167</sup>

By Collier's time it was not as difficult for a talented Australian to gain a foothold. Without singers from the rest of the Commonwealth, British opera houses would have had difficulty filling their rosters from local resources. Promising singers of the 1940s had had their potential curtailed by war service or work, by the lack of performance opportunities, and a reduction in the availability of good coaching. The post-war re-establishment of Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells and the continuation of the Carl Rosa Opera Company and its provincial tours, created opportunities to perform, but did little for the development of new singers. Singers from the dominions took advantage of the deficiency, and the 'Commonwealth singers' dominated Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells until the 1970s.<sup>168</sup> When Lauris Elms joined Covent Garden in early 1957, she noted that 'There were many Australians at Covent Garden at that time, certainly more than half the principal singers. Almost all the men in the chorus were Welsh.'<sup>169</sup> When Covent Garden revived *La bohème* in 1958 all the principals, including

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<sup>164</sup> 'Australian Singers In London – A Pathetic Story', *Evening News* (Sydney), 28 May 1910, p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> Stephen Alomes, *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>166</sup> 'Sundry Shows', *Bulletin* (Sydney), 19 December 1907, p. 8. The tenor Pietro Cecchi (d. 1897) taught Melba in Melbourne in her early career; see 'A Tragic Death', *Leader* (Melbourne), 6 March 1897, p. 23.

<sup>167</sup> Geoffrey Hutton, 'Glory night of La Stupenda', *Age* (Melbourne), 12 July 1965, p. 1.

<sup>168</sup> At Sadler's Wells in the 1950s alone the Australians included Arnold Matters, Joan Hammond, Elizabeth Fretwell, Elsie Morison, June Bronhill and Ronald Dowd; in the 1960s Jon Weaving, Gregory Dempsey, Donald Smith and Geoffrey Chard. Many of these also performed at Covent Garden and with the Carl Rosa company until its demise in 1960.

<sup>169</sup> Elms, *The Singing Elms*, p. 51.

Collier, came from six different countries, none of them England.<sup>170</sup> Robert Allman, the production's Schaunard, was still struck by the negative press comment forty years later.<sup>171</sup> Where once their nationality meant Australian singers had to fight to be noticed, it now gave them a foot in the door.

However while chances for singers overseas were expanding, so were the opportunities for those who remained at home. In Melbourne the National Theatre Movement was successfully presenting seasons of opera, ballet and plays. The Conservatorium of NSW Opera School presented staged performances of opera from 1935; after Eugene Goossens assumed its directorship in 1947 operas such as Verdi's *Falstaff*, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Die Walküre*, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* received their first local performances. Organisations such as Singers of Australia (SOFA) and Clarice Lorenz's New South Wales National Opera presented concerts and staged opera. In 1947 alone SOFA presented a concert of Wagner at the Sydney Town Hall in March 1947, featuring Joan Sutherland in her professional debut,<sup>172</sup> followed with concert performances of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* in August, again with Sutherland, and in October the Australian premiere of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*, little over a year after its first performance.<sup>173</sup> The Sydney Opera Group,<sup>174</sup> the Brisbane Opera Society<sup>175</sup> and the West Australian Opera Society<sup>176</sup> were some of the societies that flourished briefly in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Broadcasting had provided an alternative to the stage or concert platform since the 1920s. As radio stations proliferated throughout the country they sought content to fill their air time, and as recordings were still relatively rare, broadcasters established their own permanent ensembles of musicians or turned to local artists for regular sessions.<sup>177</sup> In 1932-33, its first year of operation, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) broadcast musical performances for fifty-three per cent of its air time, and its first annual report noted 17,067 engagements of singers and

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<sup>170</sup> 'Singers From Six Lands', *Times* (London), 9 April 1958, p. 3.

<sup>171</sup> Geoffrey Chard, interview, Forest Lodge, NSW, 6 February 2007.

<sup>172</sup> Joan Sutherland, *A Prima Donna's Progress* (Milton's Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1997), pp. 14-15.

<sup>173</sup> *Australian Musical News*, January 1948, p. 10.

<sup>174</sup> *Australian Musical News*, September 1953, p.30.

<sup>175</sup> *Australian Musical News*, November 1949, p. 24; *Australian Musical News*, May 1953, p. 37.

<sup>176</sup> *Australian Musical News*, May 1949, pp. 14-15; *West Australian*, 13 July 1951, p. 9.

<sup>177</sup> Martin Buzacott, *The Rite of Spring: 75 Years of ABC Music-Making* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2007). p. 10.

instrumentalists.<sup>178</sup> Radio gave singers greater audiences and extended their careers; after returning to Australia from Europe in 1934 the soprano Strella Wilson continued her career through to the 1950s touring and broadcasting for the ABC and 2GB Sydney.<sup>179</sup> Radio work joined concerts as a staple for the successful singer; after winning the 1950 Mobil Quest in Sydney Joan Sutherland added radio broadcasts to the round of music club appearances that took her across the length and breadth of Sydney, from Cronulla to Killara and as far west as Lithgow.<sup>180</sup>

The received wisdom that overseas was better was no longer the whole story. In terms of training, glamour and glory a career in Australia might not match one made overseas; but in terms of money and work the prospects were the best they had ever been. So when Marie told the *Argus*, 'I'm not going overseas yet,' it was not a commitment to a second-best. Some welcomed it as a decision in favour of building a 'Musical Australia', the critic Bidy Allen noting that not only was Collier wise to consolidate her success before going overseas, but that the presence of someone with her talent would provide further impetus for local authorities to work with opera companies to create opportunities for development.<sup>181</sup>

Marie was not thinking about abstractions such as history or Art, but her specific concrete situation. She was aware that she could have a good career in Australia and that the options for development were improving; she justified her decision by insisting that Kathleen Wielaert was 'as good as any teacher overseas.'<sup>182</sup> But the 'yet' in Marie's comment suggests that she was far more ambivalent about her success and the possibilities of a career. For Marie, singing was not a preordained destination; she had only taken it up because a broken arm stopped her from playing the piano.<sup>183</sup> In 1953 she showed her ambivalence when she commented how the local community had started fundraising to send her to Europe 'whether she liked it or not.'<sup>184</sup> Her comments a decade later on having been 'brainwashed' into a career by Wielaert suggest that Collier had had to be convinced.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>179</sup> Peter Dunbar-Hall, *Strella Wilson: The Career of an Australian Singer* (Chatswood, NSW: Redback Press, 1997), pp. 75-81.

<sup>180</sup> Sutherland, op. cit., pp. 431-32.

<sup>181</sup> Bidy Allen, 'Melba Would Have Approved Of Her...', *Argus* (Melbourne), 29 March 1952, p. 13.

<sup>182</sup> Prosser, 'Marie makes her choice. "I'm staying here with my Victor"'.

<sup>183</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 953.

<sup>184</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.



Personal concerns were more important. Marie had a job that she was good at and enjoyed; she had friends with whom she enjoyed socialising; and she was in a stable relationship with a professional man with good prospects. Her life trajectory had been towards a comfortable middle-class existence, and she was happy with that destiny. Marrying Victor, and the existence that entailed, was a more important goal than going overseas.

Some of her ambivalence may have resulted from her father's opposition to a musical career. Marie's mother, brother Maurice and sister-in-law Margaret all supported her singing. But in spite of his considerable pride in her, Thomas Collier did not want to see his daughter pursue a career on the stage. The acclaim which greeted Marie either convinced him that she had the talent to succeed, or that a musical career was inevitable. When Thomas finally conceded that it was 'all right under these conditions,' Marie's reaction was 'I could nearly cry with happiness.'<sup>185</sup>

However the most important support was that of her husband-to-be. The kind of career she could have depended on Victor. Not driven by an all-consuming devotion to art and music, Marie would not have sacrificed her domestic happiness for an opportunity for stardom. What was the likelihood that Victor would let her have both?

Victor Vorweg was a professional man, with a bachelor degree in civil engineering. He had served in the war, enlisting in the Royal Australian Air Force soon after his eighteenth birthday in 1943. Stationed at Deniliquin, he learned to fly Wirraways (an Australian training and light combat aircraft) and was a Flight Sergeant in the 6 Service Flying Training School on his discharge in 1947.<sup>186</sup> Like his fiancée's father, Victor had all the qualifications for a respected and respectable man of his time.

The expectation that Marie's future success might require them to leave Australia affected Victor's interests as much as Marie's. At a time of life when their friends were settling down, buying homes and starting families, Victor faced the prospect of taking a less conventional and less secure path. To go overseas would also strongly affect Victor's professional life. As a civil engineer his skills were transferable only to a limited extent; he could get a job in England, but in other places it would be more difficult. The professional connections developed through his studies and work would be less useful, and he would have to develop a completely new network.

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<sup>185</sup> 'Opera singer will stay in Australia to marry'.

<sup>186</sup> 'A wartime link', *Age* (Melbourne), 24 May 1967, p. 7.

But Victor also recognized Marie's potential and acknowledged that she should have a career of her own. There seems to have been no thought of Marie's success as a challenge to his masculine role and identity as the man of the house or the major breadwinner; the problem was how to find a way in which Marie's success could be maintained without conflicting with his own. Victor could have reasonably held out for a career in Australia, a continuation of the status quo. Marie could make a living from concert and radio work, with the occasional opera season if she had a high profile. She could have a good career and family life. There was no guarantee that such a career would be a thriving one in the public spotlight, but it would be work and creativity, a compromise for which the ambivalent Collier could have been willing to settle.

Yet Victor decided very quickly in favour of going overseas. The day after Marie announced her repudiation the *Argus* recorded that Victor planned to take her overseas after their marriage, quoting him as saying 'There must be no chance of Marie giving up a career simply because she wants to marry me.'<sup>187</sup> The accommodation was reached: both of them could have a career, even though Victor's would have to take second priority while Marie established hers.<sup>188</sup>

## Her vocal state and repertoire

When she and Victor eventually sailed for Europe on 23 November 1954, Marie Collier had a good foundation for a career: she had performance experience across stage, concert and broadcasting, a strong voice of great potential, and a useful repertoire. Collier left Australia more prepared than most singers who had gone before her.

Her work in the previous three years gave her a grounding in performance that she did not have when she sang in *Cavalleria rusticana*. At the beginning of 1952 she had a minimal understanding of stagecraft gathered from several seasons in amateur light opera and ten weeks in the J.C. Williamson chorus. When the boat sailed she had well over one hundred performances as a principal artist under her belt. She had appeared in opera in five States and had had a busy schedule of recitals and in orchestral concerts. Those who could not afford tickets to concerts or operas had heard her at 'Carols by Candlelight' and other civic events. And there was radio, ranging from high art to light entertainment, where she had performed not only opera and song but had

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<sup>187</sup> 'A fund for a star', *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 March 1952, p. 1.

<sup>188</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'.

participated in interviews and game shows. She had experience of performing conditions ranging from opulent theatres to radio studios to city parks to country School of Arts halls.

The voice that Collier took to the world in 1954 was a large, barely controlled instrument that required careful handling to bring to its full potential. Lindsey Browne had noted this as early as her first appearances in Sydney,<sup>189</sup> and Biddy Allen confirmed it in 1954: 'It is too big and too unaccommodating to respond to formal training. Like the Australian wildflower, it must find its natural position and grow in its own way.'<sup>190</sup>

Collier's timbre, the distinctive sound of her voice, was the combination of objective and subjective elements. The first characteristic audiences noted was the voice's power, carrying to all parts of an acoustically awkward building like the Princess Theatre as easily as in a small country town hall.<sup>191</sup> With the strength suggested by her volume and projection listeners heard a richness of tone, and notes sung accurately and without weakness, leaving the impression that she had more in reserve. In the overtones, the frequencies surrounding the fundamental tone, Linda Phillips heard similarities to the dramatic soprano voice of Florence Austral; these gave a 'ring' to Collier's voice, a brightness that carried it out over the orchestra.<sup>192</sup>

To this basic sound Collier added other elements to help her convey meaning to the audience. She used a range of colour, at times warm, gentle, fiery or icy;<sup>193</sup> she was agile in dealing with rhythmic variation, able to change tempo without losing expressiveness;<sup>194</sup> and added an emotional conviction that Lindsey Browne described as 'surging... always urging and vehement and compelling'.<sup>195</sup>

However, flaws in her technique, the way she produced the sounds, undermined her natural gifts. Weaknesses evident at Collier's early performances were still present three years later. After her first appearance in Sydney in 1952 Lindsey Browne noted

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<sup>189</sup> Lindsey Browne, 'Australian Opera Has Made A Big Advance', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 June 1952, p. 2.

<sup>190</sup> Allen, 'They'll say: 'I heard Marie Collier''.

<sup>191</sup> Biddy Allen, "Music in Australia", *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 March 1953, p. 14; 'Bright Final Concert by Quartette Club', *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 2 November 1953, p. 5.

<sup>192</sup> Phillips, 'Unknown soprano "thrilling find"'; Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'

<sup>193</sup> 'Fidelio', "'The Consul" fires Perth audiences'; Allen, 'They'll say: 'I heard Marie Collier''.

<sup>194</sup> Allen, 'They'll say: 'I heard Marie Collier''.

<sup>195</sup> Lindsey Browne, 'Menotti's "Consul" at Tivoli', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1953, p. 2.

that ‘usually towards the end of the most purply impassioned phrases’ her poor breath control ‘left the tone a little unsteady and strained.’<sup>196</sup> In a review of Collier’s farewell concert in 1954 the *Australian Musical News* explicitly stated that she needed to develop her breath control; while singing ‘Vissi d’arte’ from *Tosca* she had run out of breath too early and was unable to support the note at a crucial point.<sup>197</sup> This occurred in the middle range of her voice and in singing pianissimi.<sup>198</sup> Because she was attempting high notes without adequate breath she was not able to produce the notes cleanly and accurately; by late 1954 this had become a regular occurrence.<sup>199</sup> In a performance of Verdi’s *Requiem* in September 1954 she sang out of tune and ‘substituted a graceful but decidedly unmusical glide for the clean progression from one note to the next.’<sup>200</sup>

Collier appreciated the importance of a varied repertoire. In 1954 she told a journalist, ‘I firmly believe that the great English actress Edith Evans is right when she says that it is good for Lady Macbeth to take time off to be a soubrette.’<sup>201</sup> During the first part of her career she had developed a repertoire including complete operatic roles, arias and duets, oratorios, art song and popular song, that built a foundation for her to work with and indicated directions in which she could develop.

Most of her roles were learned for performance with the National Theatre and were dictated by what Gertrude Johnson and Stefan Haag wanted to offer. Thus she sang roles that suited her voice and temperament—such as Santuzza, Magda Sorel, *Tosca* and *Aida*—and more lyric roles such as Héléne, *Teresa (The Maid of the Mountains)* and *Marenka (The Bartered Bride)*, in which she was less successful.

The operatic excerpts featured in her recital programmes give indications of the direction in which she and her mentors expected her voice to develop.<sup>202</sup> She possibly expected to sing more Verdi, specifically the Leonoras in *Il trovatore* and *La forza del destino*, and possibly Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda*. The spinto role of Tatyana in Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* was tried, and more Puccini was in sight, although she

<sup>196</sup> Lindsey Browne, ‘Soprano’s fine debut’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1952, p. 2.

<sup>197</sup> ‘Marie Collier’s Farewell Concert’, *Australian Musical News*, December 1954, p. 18.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*; see also ‘Marie Collier’s Trust Fund Concert’, *Australian Musical News*, September 1952, p. 37.

<sup>199</sup> ‘Marie Collier and John Shaw – Complimentary Concert’.

<sup>200</sup> Dorian le Gallienne, *Argus* (Melbourne), 8 September 1954, p. 6.

<sup>201</sup> Allen, ‘They’ll say: ‘I heard Marie Collier’’.

<sup>202</sup> See Appendix B for Collier’s concert and broadcast repertoire.

included the lighter 'O my beloved daddy' in some programmes probably because of its popularity from Joan Hammond's recording than because it suited her.

Collier found very early that she preferred performing opera to concerts,<sup>203</sup> but she was aware that a major part of a singer's work came from the concert stage. She performed in oratorio and orchestral works with solo roles, such as Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Verdi's *Requiem*, Arthur Honegger's *King David* and Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande*. She also performed shorter pieces with orchestral forces, such as the 'Air de Lia' from Debussy's cantata *L'enfant prodigue* and Beethoven's concert aria *Ah perfido*.

Collier also developed a repertoire of pieces that suited smaller venues and musical forces. In addition to operatic arias she performed popular and traditional songs, and art songs such as Chausson's *Le temps des lilas*, Grieg's *I Love Thee (Jeg elsker dig)* and Sibelius's *The Tryst (Flickan kom ifrån sin älsklings möte)*, works that had become familiar to Australian audiences through the concert tours of Marjorie Lawrence and Joan Hammond. She also brought audiences unfamiliar works, such as songs by twentieth century English composers Arnold Bax, Roger Quilter and Peter Warlock.

While it was worthy that the young singer was experimenting with different repertoire, some of her choices indicated that she did not know how to choose material that suited her abilities and temperament; and often she did not know how to adapt her vocal production to the venue and the material. For her formal Farewell Recital in November 1954 she chose an ambitious program containing mostly works which she had not sung before. Wagner's *Wesendonck-Lieder* were probably attractive to her because they suit a large voice, but she lacked the control they require.<sup>204</sup> Her diction was poor, the *Age* cruelly commenting, 'Several Wagner songs were probably given in German, although that was open to doubt.'<sup>205</sup> For other works it was not a question of ability but of style. Lighter works by Lowes, Arne and Haydn required more lyricism, and paled beside her colourful rendering of Dvorak's *Gipsy Songs*. The reviewer for the *Australian Musical News* asked an important question that should have made Collier think: 'If the singer herself could not capture this feeling for style, why one wonders, was it not imposed by her mentors?'<sup>206</sup> One of those mentors tried to help. Linda Phillips

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<sup>203</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!'

<sup>204</sup> 'Marie Collier's Farewell Concert'.

<sup>205</sup> 'Marie Collier's Farewell', *Age* (Melbourne), 12 November 1954, p. 11.

<sup>206</sup> 'Marie Collier's Farewell Concert'.

presented a detailed analysis of the problems in her review;<sup>207</sup> it appeared after Marie and Victor had sailed for Europe, but Phillips had most likely shared her thoughts with Collier before she left. Her comments on specific problems with the works and with Collier's technique would have been helpful as Marie considered what work she had to do when she arrived in Europe. She could be consoled that these were all mistakes that any inexperienced singer could make, and flaws that were common to many. None were fatal, and none beyond repair.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown Marie Collier before she was the star, as the diva-to-be—the young singer developing her skills and finding opportunities, in a mostly amateur milieu different to that which she would become a part of. The first years of Collier's career had seen her progress from a charismatic amateur gifted with a unique voice of great potential to a developing professional with useful experience and the beginnings of a marketable opera and concert repertoire, but who still needed to develop her vocal and acting skills.

We have observed some factors that remain constant through her career. She was the talented performer with charisma and stage presence; she participated in the creation of an image for promotional purposes, using her personality and sense of glamour to define herself in the eyes of the public; and she developed a varied repertoire of traditional and modern roles that was to prove crucial in gaining future opportunities. Some of these factors were challenges: a lack of drive and ambition, a sometimes unhealthy capacity for hard work, an inadequate vocal technique, and the continuing need to balance the personal and family life against her career.

Collier was at the top of her field when she left Australia. But by leaving she reversed her position; she would have to start again at the bottom in an even more demanding environment. Collier had to win a place in that world, to establish herself as a singer to be noticed, and to work her way through the hierarchies of the stage to take her place in front of the international footlights. The next chapter explores the first steps she took in that world, examining her time of study in Milan, how she gained a position in a major European opera house, how she continued to develop the skills that she needed to be a major performer, and how she built a reputation.

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2      Building a reputation: 1954-1962

One Friday morning in February 1955, soon after she and Victor had arrived in Milan, the twenty-seven-year-old Marie Collier took a backstage tour of the Teatro alla Scala. The facilities were grander than anything she had experienced: a stage ‘bigger than I’d ever imagined’, that could be raised or lowered or made narrower or wider at the press of a button; rehearsal rooms ‘all bigger than the Princess Theatre stage’ and raked at the same angle as the main stage; and a permanently-open staff bar and restaurant. A ballet school trained dancers from the age of nine, and paid the students’ fees and tram fares.<sup>1</sup> Marie realised that she was not in Melbourne anymore. Opera in Europe was a completely different world, demanding higher standards and versatility than she had experienced at home. She had left Australia at the top of her profession, but now had to start again, if not from the bottom, from somewhere very close to it.

This chapter shows several ways of remembering Collier. As the artist moving onto the international stage she built on the foundation she had begun in her home country. The course of this part of Collier’s career challenges the simplistic narrative of the beginner transitioning into the star. It was not a period of grooming in subsidiary roles while being readied for the spotlight, but a long, reiterative process in which she swung between the public focus of principal roles and the diminished exposure of the life of a company member while improving her skills and looking for opportunities.

A second way of remembering Collier is the image she promoted as the housewife diva. As she achieved success in England Collier built on the glamorous persona she had constructed in Australia, and presented herself as the opera star with a thriving family. That this image was largely true points to another element of Collier’s life that should be remembered, that she tried to build a family while maintaining a successful and demanding career.

I describe the first phase of Collier’s international career, from her time of study in Milan and her initial appearances at Covent Garden until her first international performances outside Britain in 1962. I examine the musical culture and training that she encountered, and how her sojourn in Italy gained her a place on the stage of one of the world’s most prestigious opera houses. To make an impact she had to be seen; at Covent Garden she was one of a pool of singers with whom she shared parts, and when she was not in

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Phillips, ‘Marie Collier Writes From Italy’, *Australian Musical News*, May 1955, p. 23.

the spotlight she had to perform subordinate roles behind those colleagues. I explore how she responded to this by finding and making opportunities for performance and exposure outside Covent Garden. She increased her appeal as an artist by expanding her repertoire, developing the roles from her Australian career, and discovering new roles that suited her voice and temperament. She worked to develop her craft; leaving Australia with a raw talent that had only just begun to evolve, Collier not only had to improve her skills but to remediate the weaknesses of an imperfect vocal technique and uneven acting skills. As she gained visibility and success the image she had cultivated in Australia continued to develop, in ways which she was to find challenging. And she wanted to build her family, to create a good environment in which to raise her children and to find ways in which family and career did not exclude each other. Her career was now on a wider stage; but just as the successes were greater, so were the demands and the costs.

## To Italy

Marie's ambivalence towards a singing career may not have disappeared, but it lessened with the recognition of the support from her family and her husband, and a reasoned evaluation of the compliments heading her way. Marie knew that she was capable of singing at a very high level, and she realised that she would like to do that as well as she possibly could.<sup>2</sup> The question became not 'why go?' but 'where?'

According to a 1968 interview, Marie and Victor had no clear plan for Europe.<sup>3</sup> In early 1953 Vienna had been the preferred destination for study, with departure expected after her appearances in the National Theatre's season of Menotti's *The Consul*.<sup>4</sup> But the huge success of Collier's performance as Magda Sorel meant that the departure was delayed as the production toured across the country, and it became 'this year or next.'<sup>5</sup> Then came the opportunity to perform before the newly-crowned Queen in the royal tour in 1954, and Marie and Victor did not take the boat to Europe until November that year.

Why had she decided on Vienna? Her Australian contemporaries were studying and working in other cities. In London, Joan Sutherland was singing principal roles at

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<sup>2</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', *People* (Sydney), Vol. 4 No. 10, 15 July 1953, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Blyth, 'Marie Collier', *Opera*, December 1968, p. 954.

<sup>4</sup> Biddy Allen, 'Opera in Australia', *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 February 1953, p. 10; also 'Music in Australia', *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> 'She Is On The Way To Fame', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 May 1953, p. 7; cf 'Marriage and a Career for Marie Collier', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 May 1953, p. 6.



Covent Garden, having joined fellow Australians Sylvia Fisher and Rosina Raisbeck in 1951; and Elizabeth Fretwell was working at Sadler's Wells. Paris was a traditional destination for Australian singers; Nellie Melba, Frances Alda, John Brownlee and Marjorie Lawrence had gone there for advanced teaching, and now Collier's National Theatre colleagues Robert Allman, Lance Ingram and Lauris Elms were studying there.<sup>6</sup>

But Vienna too had been a rewarding destination for Australian artists. Frances Saville had sung under Gustav Mahler at the Hofoper from 1897 to 1903.<sup>7</sup> The soprano Amy Castles also performed at the Hofoper but had to abandon her contract due to the outbreak of World War I.<sup>8</sup> Joan Hammond sang at the Volksoper and was to have sung at the Wiener Staatsoper but for the outbreak of World War II. As if to compensate for these lost opportunities, the Staatsoper had regularly featured the Perth contralto Lorna Sydney since 1946.<sup>9</sup> The city offered a network of support and development that Wielaert trusted; she had sent her student Betna Pontin, winner of the 1949 Sun Aria, to Vienna in 1951.<sup>10</sup>

But Collier never got to Vienna. As she told the story a decade later, she and Victor had left the boat at Marseilles with the intention of heading for Vienna, stopping at Milan along the way; but 'when I got to Milan I said "This is it, this is where we're staying."' <sup>11</sup> Nothing in public or private records indicates exactly when or why she chose Milan. One factor may have been her family connection, through her mother's antecedents. But the key reason was more likely her success in the *verismo* style of opera; this may have persuaded Marie that she was better suited to the Italian repertoire than the German. For that reason alone Italy would be a better place for her to study. Her time in the country challenged and stretched her artistically and personally.

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<sup>6</sup> Lauris Elms, *The Singing Elms*, (Terrey Hills, NSW: Bowerbird Press, 2001), pp. 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Simpson, 'Frances Saville: Australia's Forgotten Prima Donna', *Australasian Music Research*, 4 (1999), pp. 15-23.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Brownrigg, *A New Melba? The Tragedy of Amy Castles* (Darlinghurst, NSW: Crossing Press, 2005), p. 246.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Mackenzie, and Findlay Mackenzie, *Singers of Australia* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1967), p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> 'Soprano for Vienna', *West Australian*, 16 July 1951, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Home Service, 21 February 1966 (BBC Programme Number 28SX8324).

On arrival in Milan Marie and Victor established themselves in a furnished flat. Their language skills isolated them. Both Marie and Victor had viable Italian—Marie had learned hers from her mother—but they had none of the fluency that would have made life easier. Money was scarce. Victor's qualifications permitted him to work as a civil engineer in Australia and England but they were not accepted in Italy. Marie was unable to earn a living from her singing. After *The Consul* had consolidated her fame across Australia she had built a profitable sideline in broadcasting and concert work, but she did not yet have the reputation or contacts to be able to do that in Italy. They lived off their savings, the trust fund, and whatever work Victor could get translating technical articles.<sup>12</sup>

To complicate their situation Marie was pregnant. The baby may well have been conceived before she left Australia, or on the voyage to Europe, but what is certain is that Marie did not find out until she had left home far behind her. Whatever stress they were feeling, they evidently felt they could not or would not burden their families with the news; Marie wrote only of her 'sea sickness', so when Michael was born in August 1955 it came as a surprise back in Australia.<sup>13</sup> Although they were a long way from home and support it was probably the best time of her career to start a family. Marie had demonstrated her potential and established a name, but she had not yet started an international career. Without the immediate pressures of performance and contractual obligation she had more flexibility to deal with the vicissitudes of pregnancy and the demands of a new-born.

Nevertheless, ten years later the memory of difficulties had faded enough for Marie to be nostalgic. The rosy glasses may have been induced by good fortune, but when she was given a contract to sing for La Scala in 1964 a constant refrain in newspaper accounts was Marie's recollection, 'How many times have I stood in the 'gods' at La Scala as a girl, dreaming of the day when I would be singing on that stage?'<sup>14</sup> Her time in Milan watching and listening to some of the greatest stars of the era was a crucial part of her development as a performer. The Teatro alla Scala was an intensive course in singing and staging. In Australia Marie had heard sporadic performances from the audience, or in the wings when preparing to go on stage. Here in Milan she was immersed in the milieu that the people who had told her that she could be a great

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<sup>12</sup> Jo Harvey, 'The Darling of Covent Garden', *New Idea*, 24 June 1964, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Collier, letter to Kim Kemmis, 22 March 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Jenny Rees, 'La Scala sign up Callas stand-in', *Sun* (London), Friday 2 July 1965; see also D.F. Colquhoun, 'Another Opera Star Is Born: Marie to sing at La Scala', *Sun* (Melbourne), 3 July 1965, p. 15, and 'La Scala contract to Aust. soprano', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July 1965.

singer had seen and had judged her against. If she desired, Marie could listen to great singing every night of the week, and she listened and thought about it and assessed her own capacities in the light of what she heard.

Marie and Victor paid what they could afford for tickets to the opera. To see Giulietta Simionato and Giuseppe di Stefano in Bizet's *Carmen* they paid the equivalent of five shillings for standing room, where it was so crowded that it was 'a matter of pay up and look for a toe-hold!' In her letters to Linda Phillips she commented on the voices, performing styles and production values of the operas she saw. Simionato's *Carmen* had 'a luscious voice but woolly up top, with plenty of chest notes.' Weber's *Der Freischütz* starred Victoria De Los Angeles who 'sang very beautifully, but she did not act well', while Nicola Rossi-Lemeni was 'a splendid actor, but his voice is going at the top.' In Wagner's *Die Walküre* Hans Hotter's Wotan 'left all the others in the shade', Leonie Rysanek was 'lyric yet dramatic' and Wolfgang Windgassen's voice 'while having the range, is not very large.'<sup>15</sup> She was physically revolted by the horror of Strauss' *Salome*, sung by Christel Goltz, but realized she would like to sing the role one day.<sup>16</sup>

The sheer size and professionalism of the chorus impressed her; in *Der Freischütz* she counted more than 125 choristers and extras on stage, and in *Carmen* she found the 'scenery, chorus and crowd acting were absolutely breathtaking.'<sup>17</sup> Accustomed to the production values of the National Theatre at best and district halls at worst, Collier was awed by the scale and effectiveness of the sets and stage effects, especially the Wolf's Glen scene in *Der Freischütz* and the final scene of *Die Walküre*: 'Stupendous, in the real Cecil B. De Mille tradition, the only fitting word for it!'<sup>18</sup> It was a different way of doing opera, with a vastly higher quality of music-making and production than that Marie was accustomed to seeing and working with: inspiring, but possibly intimidating.

Collier set to work with Ugo Benvenuti Giusti, a répétiteur at La Scala since the end of World War II. She benefited from his expertise in *verismo* operas; Benvenuti Giusti had studied under the composer Pietro Mascagni and had conducted several of his operas and those of Ruggero Leoncavallo throughout Italy from the 1920s to the 1940s.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier Writes From Italy', pp. 23-24.

<sup>16</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 957.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, 'Marie Collier Writes From Italy', p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Flury, *Pietro Mascagni: a bio-bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) lists some of Benvenuti Giusti's more notable performances of Mascagni's works.

Under his guidance Collier revisited and refined her interpretations of Santuzza and Tosca, and she began to explore other roles in *verismo* repertoire such as Minnie in Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*.<sup>20</sup>

During her Milan sojourn Collier appears to have studied only repertoire, not vocal production. In the various accounts of her time in Milan, given in interviews and publicity releases, no mention is ever made of vocal coaching. It was not until she went to London in 1956 that she established relationships with singing teachers; for the almost two years between Melbourne and London she relied on the technique and regime she had developed with Katherine Wielaert, a hiatus that may have had bad consequences for her vocal longevity.

On 24 June 1955 Collier went into the studio to record a 78rpm record, with 'Voi lo sapete' from *Cavalleria rusticana* on one side and 'Donde liete usci', Mimi's aria from *La bohème* on the other.<sup>21</sup> Both sides demonstrate the progress she had made since leaving Australia. The Puccini aria shows a lighter vocal colour than in her Australian recordings, with consistent tone production and an even vibrato on the sustained high notes. On the other hand her timbre in the Mascagni aria has a slightly darker colouring, and she sings with more vibrato throughout, making the tone tremulous. She is possibly performing it the same way she had at the beginning of her career, out of habit. It may be for that reason that Collier did not like it; on the sleeve of the copy she sent to her parents she wrote, 'The "Cav" aria is not at all good - in fact I am really loathe to send it.'<sup>22</sup> But the recordings show that her taste has improved; she takes pains to convey the text with expression, possibly because she is singing the arias in Italian for the first time. She has also gained a lot of control over her voice, and is clearly transforming into a spinto soprano from the potential dramatic soprano she had promised in Australia.

Marie established contact with other performers living and working in Milan, and it was these contacts that helped her land her first professional contract outside Australia. She became friendly with Barbara Howitt, a mezzo-soprano under contract with the Covent Garden Opera Company, who was spending an extended time in Italy for

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Thomas Cassidy, *Luncheon at the Music Center*, KFAC Los Angeles, 11 November 1965.

<sup>21</sup> Pietro Mascagni, 'Voi lo sapete' (*Cavalleria rusticana*), and Giacomo Puccini, 'Donde liete usci' (*La bohème*), studio recording, pianist unknown, Milan, 24 June 1955 (unpublished 78 rpm).

<sup>22</sup> Paul Collier, email to Kim Kemmis, 7 June 2016.

holiday and study. Howitt liked Collier's voice, and on her return to London convinced Lord Harewood, who managed casting for Covent Garden, that he should hear her.

Howitt wrote to Collier that both Harewood and the agent Joan Ingpen, then in Milan with her orchestra the London Mozart Players, wanted her to audition, and advised Collier that she should obtain 'something bigger than just a small room'.<sup>23</sup> Collier sang for them; Harewood expressed his approval, and Ingpen immediately offered to represent her in London. Marie went home. A few days later she received a phone call from Howitt: Harewood had been so impressed he convinced David Webster, the manager of Covent Garden, to hear her—at Covent Garden. After two weeks of intense preparation, and with the fare advanced by Ingpen, Collier went to London with her baby Michael and sang at the Royal Opera House. Surprisingly, Collier's file in the Royal Opera archives does not hold the details of the audition, so we cannot know exactly what Harewood, Webster or the company's musical director Rafael Kubelik thought of her voice, what they thought were her strengths and weaknesses, and how they envisaged she might fit into the company. But the audition was successful. The company offered Marie a contract and nominated her for a scholarship from the Worshipful Company of Musicians,<sup>24</sup> which enabled her to study for three years with Joan Cross and Dawson Freer at the National School of Opera.<sup>25</sup> In the summer of 1956 Marie and Victor packed up their small household and moved to London.

Marie's time in Milan had been a transition from the aspirational but mediocre opera scene in Australia to the heart of the operatic world. She had become acclimatised to the standards of this milieu, that would be expected of her if she was to remain a part of it. She had been exposed to some of the world's best singers and the best production standards of her time. She had worked with musicians who had worked with the composers of her repertoire, joining in an 'apostolic succession' that gave her work a stamp of authenticity. She had established contacts with people with connections to the great opera houses; and more importantly she had worked through those contacts to earn a contract at one of those opera houses.

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<sup>23</sup> *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>24</sup> A Livery Company of the City of London under royal charter, then as now offering scholarships and other kinds of support to early-career musicians.

<sup>25</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', pp. 954-5.

## Establishing herself

The Vorweg family arrived in London in the late summer of 1956, settling in a small two-story semi-detached house in Laurier Road, NW5, near Hampstead Heath.<sup>26</sup> While Victor looked for work Marie set about finding someone to look after baby Michael while she attended rehearsals at Covent Garden. Marie would have felt at home in the characteristic backstage smell of 'old candle grease, hemp and sawdust, mice-droppings, cooked cabbage, burnt bakelite'.<sup>27</sup> But although the environment was familiar, it was a different world. No longer the darling who received every support and indulgence from the company and the public, she was one of many as equally or more talented. Collier set about achieving her professional and personal goals by performing with the Covent Garden company, developing her skills, and building her family.

The Covent Garden Opera Company was in fact younger than the National Theatre to which she had belonged in Australia; established only in 1946, it gained prestige from the glamorous past of the Royal Opera House in which it was accommodated. When Marie Collier joined the company in September 1956 she had two main duties to assume.<sup>28</sup> Just as when she had entered the National Theatre in Melbourne, she was to commence at Covent Garden as a principal singer. But to be a member of the company she also had to spend a lot of time in the background. Unlike the National Theatre, Covent Garden did not have a group of amateur singers eager to take the supporting roles. The standards of the company required the best singers for all roles, and all the contract principals were expected to perform smaller parts as well as the ones that attracted the largest applause.

However Collier made her first appearance with the company as a principal, making her Covent Garden and European debut on 6 November 1956 as Musetta, the sporadic lover of the painter Marcello, in Puccini's *La bohème*. The role suited her voice and personality. The part is often sung by mezzo-sopranos but is a soprano role with a lower range than the lyric soprano, giving great scope for a spinto voice. As for the personality, Musetta appears in Act II with the aria 'Quando me'en vo', in which she plays the femme fatale tormenting her former and current lovers, a big entrance

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<sup>26</sup> File, 'Collier, Marie', Royal Opera House archives.

<sup>27</sup> Lauris Elms noted these aromas when she joined Covent Garden several months after Collier in February 1957. Elms, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Collier officially joined the Covent Garden Opera on 3 September 1956. File, 'Collier, Marie', Royal Opera House Archives.

attracting the attention of all on stage as well as the audience. In the *Financial Times* Andrew Porter recorded Collier's impact:

Last night Covent Garden... offered a Musetta more successful than any of her predecessors since Welitsch. Her name is Marie Collier. She displayed a vital personality, a voice big enough for the house, and a lively sense of the stage. Musetta is hardly the début-role in which to assess the potentialities of a soprano, but the indications are that Miss Collier should be a useful member of the company.<sup>29</sup>

The *Manchester Guardian* noted that the new singer revealed 'both presence and a fine natural gift',<sup>30</sup> while the bowler-hatted *Times* praised her for not being 'one of the coarse hoydens who so frequently distort this lady's character.' The *Times* review indicates she had learned from the training she had received since leaving Australia. Her voice was 'not of outsize proportions'; while it was still powerful, Collier had sacrificed volume for tone. But it inexplicably lost body at climactic moments, which suggests her breath support may not have been as secure as she needed.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless it was a debut that attracted attention.

Collier then started performing her secondary duty, of support to other company members. From a major role in Puccini she moved to a minor role by another composer with whom she was to become closely associated. Leoš Janáček's *Jenůfa* received its first British performances in December 1956, with Collier appearing in the small role of Karolka, the mayor's daughter. Singing only in the final act, Collier's performance won barely a mention in the reviews;<sup>32</sup> but the critic John Steane, not given to undue or retrospective adoration, later wrote that he had noticed her 'when a phrase from the Mayor's daughter sent a totally unexpected shiver down the spine.... This was a voice that thrilled, not, on this occasion, when taking some spectacular high note, but in the middle range and by virtue of its timbre; nor was it the special focus of attention on stage, but one among several and in a relatively minor role.'<sup>33</sup>

Thus Collier made a small impression as Karolka; but in other roles of this sort she almost disappeared into the background. After *Jenůfa* she played the First Lady, one of the three flirtatious attendants of the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Porter, 'La Bohème', *Financial Times*, 8 November 1956, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> 'Our London Correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 12 November 1956, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> 'La Bohème', *Times* (London), 7 November 1956, p.3.

<sup>32</sup> See for example "'Jenufa" at Covent Garden', *Times* (London), 11 December 1956, p. 5; Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "'Jenufa" at Covent Garden', *Opera*, February 1957, pp. 73-78.

<sup>33</sup> J.B. Steane, *Singers of the Century* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, Vol. 2, 1998), pp. 176, 178.

(*Die Zauberflöte*), with no notable solo utterances; followed by Clotilde in Bellini's *Norma*, with a total singing time of less than one minute. The advantage of performing in small roles like these was that the singer can observe the established artists exercising their craft; in *Norma* Collier appeared opposite Maria Callas and Ebe Stignani. The disadvantage was that with principals like that no critic was going to write about the singer who played Clotilde.<sup>34</sup> The same disadvantage occurred when Collier appeared in another huge production, Sir John Gielgud's four-and-a-half hour version of Berlioz's *The Trojans*. Collier sang the small role of Polyxena, the sister of Cassandra, an unusual role because while the character is named in the score, she sings only in ensembles without any solo lines, and for that reason is often unlisted in the programme.<sup>35</sup>

But soon it was again Marie's turn for attention, in a revival of Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*. The critics responded to Collier's Giulietta in much the same way as the Duke of Edinburgh had in Melbourne, describing her as 'luscious-looking'<sup>36</sup> and a 'vivid beauty'.<sup>37</sup> Andrew Porter had noted her potential in the previous November's *La bohème*; now he remarked that she 'makes the best Giulietta the company has found.'<sup>38</sup>

In her first season at Covent Garden Collier had sung two principal roles and four comprimario<sup>39</sup> parts; and her roster followed a similar pattern in 1958. After more performances as Musetta, she sang Karolka in *Jenůfa*, then a season as the Fourth Maid in Richard Strauss's *Elektra*, then Polyxena again in *The Trojans*, these performances intermingled with some as Flora Bervaix in Verdi's *La traviata*, supporting Maria Callas in the title role. Even after principal roles began to dominate Collier's roster she would continue to sing smaller parts, both in London and on tour throughout England and Wales.

This pattern of principal and supporting roles in close alternation was typical for the contract singer at Covent Garden at this time. The Covent Garden audience would see the name of the new principal in the programme opposite one of the small roles: a

<sup>34</sup> See for example 'Mme. Callas Again Sings Norma', *Times (London)*, 4 February 1957, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Hector Berlioz, *Les Troyens*, ed. High MacDonald, in *Hector Berlioz: New Edition of the Complete Works*, Vol.2a [*Les Troyens* Acts I & II], (Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1969), pp. 239, 288-289.

<sup>36</sup> H.D.R., 'Covent Garden. The Tales of Hoffmann', *Opera*, August 1957, pp. 526.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Tales of Hoffmann', *Financial Times*, 15 July 1957, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> A comprimario role is one that is small and usually ancillary to the main action of the drama.



Valkyrie (*Die Walküre*, Wagner), the High Priestess in *Aida*, the First Lady, or a maid in *Elektra*, with one or two principal roles in the house and more on tour. In one way Collier started higher up the ladder than most. Joan Sutherland joined the company in 1952, but was not given her first principal roles until she played Agathe in Weber's *Der Freischütz* in 1954 and Jenifer in the world premiere of Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage* the following year.<sup>40</sup> This was the lot of the contract singer in a repertory company: hard work in small roles, filling a space in the production but not attracting attention, with the occasional principal role to put her in the audience's view.

At the peak of this period Collier had a harder workload than she had ever faced in Australia: as well as building a family, for most of the year she was performing three times a week, attending rehearsals, and studying. The last was something she could not neglect; having arrived in London with a problematic vocal technique, and an approach to acting that was more instinct than craft, Collier had to improve her skills to maintain the position she had achieved.

For stagecraft and interpretation she worked with the soprano Joan Cross. In 1948 Cross had founded the Opera School at her home in St John's Wood with the mezzo-soprano Anne Wood. Cross's philosophy was to teach each student as an individual rather than to fit them into a particular pattern of study and repertoire. Each singer had a unique voice with different qualities and needed to be guided accordingly: 'It is often just as necessary to hold back a singer in one direction... as it is to extend him in another.'<sup>41</sup> Cross's knowledge of both performing and the opera business were invaluable, and Collier was happy to pay tribute to her teacher on the closing of her school in 1963.<sup>42</sup>

For vocal training Collier went to the Wigmore Hall Studios in W1 to learn from Cross's former teacher, Dawson Freer, who introduced her to a new way of producing her sound. Freer believed that proper tone production depended on having an 'open throat', a large space in the neck in which the air could resonate. To form this space the singer kept the tongue forward and lowered the larynx naturally by expanding the ribs and

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<sup>40</sup> Joan Sutherland, *A Prima Donna's Progress* (Milson's Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1997), pp. 432-435.

<sup>41</sup> Noël Goodwin, 'London's New Opera School', *Opera*, September 1963, p. 592.

<sup>42</sup> The Opera School became the National School of Opera in 1959, and was absorbed into the London Opera Centre in 1963. See 'Midnight Opera Tribute', *Times* (London), 29 July 1963, p. 14.

breathing from the abdomen.<sup>43</sup> The tone should be aimed forward in the mask (the upper part of the face), above the bridge of the nose, with most of the resonance coming from the throat rather than the nasal cavities, creating a rich timbre rather than a hard one.<sup>44</sup>

Collier's Covent Garden colleague Edgar Evans found Freer's approach helpful in developing a voice suitable for a professional career, but discovered a major flaw. Freer thought that Evans should focus his voice above the bridge of the nose, producing a 'covered' sound like Peter Pears. But this restricted Evans's top notes, a problem that was not remedied until he learned to sing with a more open sound after study with Luigi Ricci. Freer's style suited baritones and basses, but higher voices like Evans's and Collier's had to work harder higher up the stave,<sup>45</sup> particularly at low volume.<sup>46</sup>

The advantage for Collier in this new technique was that, unlike the method she had learned from Kathleen Wielaert, it did not place dangerous pressure on the larynx. But if she was to adopt this technique she would have to relearn how to sing. It is not unknown for early career singers to change their technique to avoid disaster. Joan Hammond ceased lessons with the tenor Dino Borgioli because his breathing technique made her voice tire quickly;<sup>47</sup> on the other hand, when June Bronhill went to England in 1952 she worked with Borgioli to repair the damage her teacher in Australia had inadvertently caused.<sup>48</sup> The technique that Collier had developed resulted in a large, voluptuous tone that thrilled listeners, had taken her across the world and won her employment in one of the world's most prestigious opera houses. Freer's method would likely have taken pressure off Collier's larynx and saved much wear upon her voice, but to adopt it would be to risk losing the sound that had brought her success. It was too early for Collier to be able to make that decision. Had she been faced with this choice five years later when her career was established and the voice was beginning to show signs of wear, she may well have decided it was worth the risk. But to do so

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<sup>43</sup> Dawson Freer, 'The Principles and Some of the Methods of Teaching Singing', *Musical Times*, Vol. 71, No. 1050, (Aug. 1, 1930), pp. 726-727.

<sup>44</sup> Dawson Freer, 'Nasal Resonance: Vocal Unanimity and Singing Technique', *Musical Times*, Vol. 60, No. 916 (Jun. 1, 1919), pp. 296-297.

<sup>45</sup> The stave or staff is the set of lines on which musical notation is written in traditional Western music, with the higher notes placed at the top.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Little, *Edgar Evans Extempore* (St Albans, Herts: Bob Little Press & PR, 2005), pp. 27-29, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Hammond, *A Voice, A Life* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> June Bronhill, *The Merry Bronhill* (North Ryde, NSW: Methuen Haynes, 1987), pp. 41-42.

when she had just arrived in London was too much to ask. Her voice was still fresh, and she needed to prove what she could do.

Collier did not talk about her vocal technique in interviews or to her colleagues. The scarcity of recordings from Collier's Australian career makes it impossible to evaluate whether her production changed after studying with Freer, but the fact that Collier maintained a very fast vibrato is evidence that she maintained Wielaert's technique. The lessons she learned from her new teachers did not replace the time-honoured habits.

As well as her work and study Marie had the challenge of building a family. Michael was joined by a sister, Barbara, in late 1957, and two more brothers, Christopher in 1959 and Andrew in 1962. Marie worked up until about the seventh month of each pregnancy, returning to work two or three months after the birth.<sup>49</sup> The nature of her profession meant that travel was closely linked to her pregnancies. Michael had been born while she was studying in Italy. She most likely became aware that she was expecting Barbara during March 1957 when she was away from Victor, touring in Wales and the west of England. When she returned to work after the births of Barbara and Christopher she went straight on tour, and when carrying Andrew in 1962 she travelled to Buenos Aires for her South American debut. Having had her first child in a strange land where the medical staff did not speak her native tongue had probably strengthened her ability to deal with the emotional challenges.

By late 1959 Marie and Victor moved to Cookham, a village on the Thames in Berkshire, not far from Windsor. The location suited the careers of both: it was close to Victor's engineering practice in Slough, an hour from Covent Garden by train, and within half an hour of Heathrow by car. It would be a good place to raise the children, with good schools and a supportive community. They purchased a double-storey brick house in Burnt Oak amongst the meadows about ten minutes' walk from Cookham railway station, and hired a housekeeper to help with the children. Through geography, her work and her family were largely insulated from each other, a pattern Collier was to continue for the rest of her career.

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<sup>49</sup> Pat Rappolt, 'Opera Singer Would Like To Fly A Plane', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 March 1968, p. 17.

## Broadening opportunities

After her first two years at Covent Garden Collier had become valued as member of the company and noticed as a solo artist. Covent Garden kept her busy, but the need to build her reputation required that she move further afield. From 1958 she looked to expand her opportunities for work and exposure in various ways: working as a guest artist with other companies, touring, recording, concertising and broadcasting, and most importantly in developing her repertoire. She grew not only in exposure but in experience.

When the season ended in July 1958 she did not spend the summer months at home studying her roles or looking after the children, but arranged to be 'loaned out' to other companies. For a number of reasons it was good sense for Covent Garden to loan out a singer if they had no immediate plans to use her. Firstly, it engendered a spirit of cooperation. Opera companies depended on both ticket sales and government subsidy to survive, but to obtain these they had to maintain a healthy presence in the community, performing as much as possible and reaching as many different audiences as possible; and this was assisted by sharing resources such as artists, costumes and even productions. Secondly, the company could develop and exploit its assets. Opportunities to gain performance experience and refine their repertoire allowed singers to return to the company with greater skills. A greater audience awareness of the artists on the roster would translate into bigger box office. Thirdly, and best of all for the accountants, was that Covent Garden would retain access to the singer while the other company relieved them from having to pay her salary. Of these reasons, the artists appreciated most the chance to develop. Chances to perform principal roles at the Royal Opera House were limited by seniority and the need to hire guest artists to attract audiences; working with other companies allowed performers to try the roles and prove to management they could do them.

Marie did not lack touring experience; she had plenty of that from her days with the National Opera, and had participated in Covent Garden tours of England and Wales in both 1957 and 1958. What this time gave her were opportunities for the great principal roles for which she had trained, opportunities which would have taken much longer to arise in London. The chance to make her international debut in *Tosca* came in August 1958 when she gave a performance at the Odeon Theatre, Llandudno during a one-week season by the Welsh National Opera. It was a quiet international debut for what

was to become her most famous role, gaining a handful of notices, all positive, in regional newspapers.<sup>50</sup>

Collier experienced the demands of touring at their most exacting when she joined Touring Opera 1958, formed to fulfil the commitments of the Carl Rosa Opera Company when it collapsed in July 1958. Collier was to sing Santuzza in *Cavalleria rusticana* and Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*. The double bill of *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* was one of the first to be performed, and had to be rehearsed with four other works within a two-week period at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in Islington. The producers had time only to give the artists the barest framework of direction, and singers and choristers were left to work out their movements and stage business among themselves or to use what had worked for them in previous productions. As the tour progressed rehearsals continued, giving the second casts a chance to learn the productions and allowing the producers to work in more detail with the first casts.<sup>51</sup> A saving grace was that the operas were all to be given in English.

In mid-September Marie left the children at home with Victor and took the train north to Yorkshire with the rest of the company. Unlike the tours with the National Theatre, where singers were billeted with opera lovers in the various towns they visited, the company members had to find lodgings where they could, hopefully with food, hot water and dry bedlinen, but often with none of these. They performed at night, rehearsed by day, and every Sunday took the train to the next town, passing the long journeys more and more sociably as the weeks went by. Occasionally a party on the theatre stage at the end of the week's engagement provided relief.<sup>52</sup>

*Madama Butterfly* came into the repertoire in the third week, and was thus able to be rehearsed under conditions more approaching the usual.<sup>53</sup> This would be appreciated by any singer in Collier's position: the role was the most difficult and taxing that she had essayed, and this was the first time she had sung it and therefore had no experience of previous productions to help her develop her interpretation. No reviews are available of her first *Butterfly*, in Aberdeen on 2 October 1958, but the report of her performance in Manchester the following week recorded that she displayed 'resplendent singing and a moving conception of the part', but with a little too much

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<sup>50</sup> For example, Neil Barkla, "'Tosca" was a trump', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 30 August 1958.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Besch, 'Touring Opera – 1958. A Symposium', *Opera*, January 1959, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Besch, *op. cit.*

sophistication.<sup>54</sup> By the time she left the tour for rehearsals at Covent Garden in December she had become regarded as ‘perhaps the outstanding artistic personality of the tour’,<sup>55</sup> but more importantly had gained some much-needed confidence. Until now she had had to live with the knowledge that although she had had much experience in leading roles in Australia, by international standards she was still untested.<sup>56</sup>

Another opportunity to raise the profile came with recording. Collier’s reputation in Australia had been established through her performances on the opera stage, but most people eventually heard her through her radio broadcasts. In England, too, her greatest visibility came from the live transmission of many of her opera appearances from Covent Garden or Sadler’s Wells. But there was also the option of studio work. While some of her Australian stage performances had been broadcast, Collier had on more occasions entered the radio studio specifically to record recital programmes, so she was already acquainted with the techniques and discipline.

Rather than short recital programmes the BBC preferred to offer complete operas, and used its resources to record rarely-performed works to complement the more popular fare available through live broadcasts and commercial recordings. In early 1959 Collier’s first opportunity arose when Eugene Goossens asked her to perform in a BBC recording of his opera *Don Juan de Mañara*.<sup>57</sup> This retelling of the Don Juan legend had received a handful of performances at Covent Garden in 1937 then disappeared. With few extended utterances for her character, the opera did not give listeners any opportunity to hear Collier in full voice, but they could hear that her voice was expressive and flexible, with clear enunciation of the text displaying her skills as an actress. While not optimal, the broadcast presented Collier to the widest audience to which she had yet had access. Collier later recorded more rare repertoire for the BBC. In 1964 she recorded excerpts from Richard Strauss’s first opera *Guntram* for a broadcast marking the centenary of Strauss’s birth;<sup>58</sup> and in what was to be her final

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<sup>54</sup> J.H.E., “‘Madam Butterfly’ – Touring Opera 1958 in Manchester’, *Manchester Guardian*, 7 October 1958, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Renton, ‘Touring Opera – 1958. A Symposium’, *Opera*, January 1959, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Blyth, ‘Marie Collier’, p. 955.

<sup>57</sup> Eugene Goossens, *Don Juan de Mañara*, radio broadcast, Eugene Goossens (conductor), BBC Third Programme, 11 April 1959. (Private recording.)

<sup>58</sup> ‘Richard Strauss: excerpts from some less familiar operas’ (BBC Programme Number 14SX5482); BBC Scottish Symphony, Norman del Mar (conductor). Recorded 22 May 1964 in Glasgow; broadcast BBC Third Programme, 26 July 1964.

performance anywhere, she performed the role of Mila Valkova in Leoš Janáček's early work *Osud*.<sup>59</sup>

Collier was fortunate enough to enter the scene at the right time. The advent of the long-playing (LP) record in the late 1940s, and the spread of stereo recording across the industry in the 1950s, had led to a golden age of opera recording as record companies exploited the potential of the new technologies. Even so, British artists had not had many opportunities to record opera; international stars such as Birgit Nilsson, Maria Callas and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf received more attention from the British record companies Decca and EMI, and the market for 'highlights' collections was dominated by mediocre Italian, French and German recordings, some dating from as far back as the 1920s.<sup>60</sup> But in 1958 the Sadler's Wells company emerged from a difficult period with a hugely successful production of Lehar's *The Merry Widow* starring June Bronhill. The HMV label offered the company a contract for highlights recordings of this and other operettas, and a successful recording of *The Merry Widow* was issued, followed by Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* and Léhar's *The Land of Smiles* in 1959.<sup>61</sup> In December the conductor Bryan Balkwill took Marie Collier and the Sadler's Wells Orchestra into EMI's Abbey Road studios to record extracts from *Madam Butterfly* in English.

Collier sang in the Love Duet in Act I, the aria *One Fine Day*, the *Flower Duet* with Suzuki from Act II, and the finale. This recording alone allows us to form an opinion of Collier's *Butterfly*, as no live recordings exist. The listener can understand the reservations of critics concerning her lack of naïveté in Act I. In the extended excerpt of the love duet Collier scales down the intensity, but sounds quietly poised rather than shy and innocent, a young Englishwoman rather than a Japanese teenager. However the overall impression is of a rich voice, occasionally unsure of finding the note, but thrilling in the climaxes; and the recording of the opera's finale shows that she was indeed suited to the more dramatic music.

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<sup>59</sup> Leoš Janáček, *Osud*, BBC Concert Orchestra, Vilem Tausky (conductor). Recorded BBC Studios, Camden, October 1971; broadcast BBC Radio 3, 22 January 1972. (Private recording.)

<sup>60</sup> *Opera*, August 1960, p. 570.

<sup>61</sup> 'Sadler's Wells and the Gramophone', *Opera*, August 1961, p. 63.

The LP was released on 8 April 1960 in both mono and stereo versions.<sup>62</sup> HMV took out full-page advertisements in record magazines, putting all attention on the female lead; the rear cover of *Gramophone* for April 1960 displays a photo of Collier in costume as Cio-Cio-San, head tilted and eyes downcast in an attempt to look demure.<sup>63</sup> Critics thought that, while it was not a classic recording of the opera, it was very good, with the voices and orchestra at their best. The question of English versus original languages rose; a common complaint was the absurdity of the English translation, an ‘awful mishmash of the dainty and the stilted—“When will he come, think you?”’,<sup>64</sup> exposed all the more by the clear diction of the singers.<sup>65</sup> For Philip Hope-Wallace, Collier may not have drawn ‘the finest of fine lines’, but her voice was ‘rich and gorgeous... the sort of voice that makes many (but not necessarily all) voice fanciers exclaim: “What a lovely voice that girl has!”’<sup>66</sup> Andrew Porter’s review for the *Gramophone* serves as a summary of her performance capacity of the time:

She is a splendid creature, Miss Collier, with a gleaming and vivid beauty; tremendous high spirits; a sense of getting the drama into the interpretation; and voice which is rich, shining, full and lustrous at once. At some performances, it must be added, she has been unsteady; and there has been an occasional tendency first to feel for the note, then ‘pump’ it: but good performances have easily outnumbered the disappointing ones; and anyway in this *Butterfly* recording the voice is heard at its best.<sup>67</sup>

The *Guardian* observed that, ‘Collier is progressing rapidly as a singer, and I only regret that to my ears her vibrato verges on a wobble.’<sup>68</sup> But this was a rare negative comment.

The LP was released in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States; it is not clear exactly how well it sold, but Norman Tucker responded to allegations of low British sales by claiming good sales in the United States.<sup>69</sup> This global reach of the LP was the significant factor for Collier. The album catered for many listeners: for opera buffs, record collectors, and fans of Collier who could now have a souvenir of her

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<sup>62</sup> HMV Stereo CSD1290, Mono CLP1334 (12 in., 25s. 9d. plus 8s. 4½d. P.T.). Released on CD EMI Classics for Pleasure 585 009-2 (2003). Charles Craig sang the role of Pinkerton, Gwyn Griffiths sang the consul Sharpless, and Ann Robson sang Butterfly’s maid Suzuki.

<sup>63</sup> *Gramophone*, April 1960, cover III.

<sup>64</sup> P.H.-W, ‘PUCCINI. Madama Butterfly – excerpts’, *Gramophone*, April 1960, p. 534.

<sup>65</sup> *Opera*, August 1960, p. 570.

<sup>66</sup> P.H.-W, op. cit..

<sup>67</sup> A.P., ‘PUCCINI. Madama Butterfly – excerpts’, *Gramophone*, June 1960, p. 31.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Greenfield, ‘Gramophone records’, *Guardian*, 19 July 1960, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Sadler’s Wells and the Gramophone’, pp. 62-63.



performances at home; but importantly it was a calling card for the singer, bringing her to the notice of opera companies outside Britain.

In her Australian radio appearances Collier had usually recorded a group of works for a solo recital. But that sort of broadcast was beginning to disappear from the airwaves in favour of programmes with a number of artists; in fact Collier was to find more work performing arias in television variety shows. The concert stage was to prove a more fruitful means of exposure. In August 1960 she sang her first Proms concert, a programme of Gilbert and Sullivan at the Royal Albert Hall under Sir Malcolm Sargent. This was an unusual incidence of Collier performing popular work in concert; she used the concert hall to establish herself as a performer of modern music. The following year she returned to the Proms with Berg's *Three Fragments from Wozzeck*,<sup>70</sup> a work she kept in her repertoire.<sup>71</sup>

Collier also became a choice for contemporary composers. In October 1960 she sang Alexander Goehr's *Four Songs from the Japanese* with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall.<sup>72</sup> The following year she sang two arias from Roberto Gerhard's 1949 opera *The Duenna* in the Last Night of the Proms.<sup>73</sup> In 1963 in Liverpool she gave the first performance of John McCabe's *Five Elegies for High Voice and Chamber Orchestra*.<sup>74</sup> Collier's performances of new works did not have a lasting effect on the repertoire; of all the modern works she presented in concert, the only one still performed today is *Three Fragments from Wozzeck*. However she performed an important function: new works need performers to be heard, and Collier was more prepared than many others of her generation to perform them.

## Developing her repertoire

After Collier's technical prowess as a performer, the key factor in gaining exposure was her repertoire. From her experience in Australia and her training in Italy Collier believed she was going to excel in Italian opera, especially Puccini, and possibly Wagner. Circumstances were to both confirm her opinion and to surprise her. She developed

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<sup>70</sup> Alban Berg, *Three Fragments from Wozzeck*, Op. 7; performed by Collier with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by John Pritchard, Royal Albert Hall, London, 13 September 1961.

<sup>71</sup> 'Modern Items Fare Best', *Times* (London), 31 January 1964, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'The Prospect Before Us', *Observer*, 9 October 1960, p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> 'Novelty at the Last Prom', *Times* (London), 18 September 1961, p. 18. The full opera did not receive a full stage production until 1992.

<sup>74</sup> With the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Robert Wolf, 18 June 1963.

her interpretations in Puccini roles such as Musetta, Butterfly, Liu and Tosca. But as her voice evolved she found herself discarding one possible career direction; a trend towards singing operas in their original languages forced her to re-examine much of what she had already learned; and she discovered a talent for modern opera, a genre she had not considered, even though her greatest success had been in a contemporary work.

The first two or three years at Covent Garden were the kind of apprenticeship that Collier needed, not only to adjust to the practices and standards of English opera but to develop the roles she wanted to take on. The singer builds a role slowly. She learns the words and music in the studio, finding out how they fit her voice, and forming a conception of the character. But she needs to take the role to the stage in order to complete her portrayal, refining it as she works with her colleagues. Opportunities to play the role may come only in small clusters months or even years apart. Over several seasons a portrayal will develop more shades, nuances, subtleties, as the singer finds new ways of doing things and modifies her vocal and physical portrayal to the best fit between her abilities and the production. Collier's early years in London demonstrate this process, and show an artist exploring the potentialities of each role with differing degrees of success.

However Collier's first new role in England did not follow this pattern. Her Musetta in *La bohème* seemed to instantly manifest itself rather than slowly develop. At first appearance her performance impressed the critics, as she had all the ingredients to make the role work: it presented her as a larger than life character, and it suited her voice, her style of acting and her appearance. But the immediate success of her portrayal was also its weakness. Collier had hit immediately on the right way for her to play it, and there was no room to develop. From a carefully-pitched alternation of warmth and passion it degenerated to a blast of crudity. Collier performed the role regularly until 1964, always winning the appreciation of the audience but boring the critics. In 1962 Andrew Porter recorded that Collier's Musetta had 'to my mind now crossed the border between vividness and vulgarity.'<sup>75</sup> Perhaps Marie had become bored with it as well. When negotiating to appear at the Metropolitan Opera she

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew Porter, 'La Bohème', *Financial Times*, 9 May 1962, p. 24; see also Peter Heyworth, 'A Russian Aida', *Observer*, 13 May 1962, p. 24.

resisted the inclusion of Musetta beyond a few performances in her first season, and performed it for the final time in Montreal in 1967.<sup>76</sup>

It was unusual that Collier had premiered her first new role in England at the Royal Opera House. Usually the opportunities first came on tour; her stage debut as Aida came in Manchester in 1958, when Amy Shuard fell ill and Collier was asked to step in for her with three hours' notice.<sup>77</sup> Collier's first British performances of *Madama Butterfly* occurred not at Covent Garden but as a guest artist on tour. When she first sang it her goal was to master the music, and character development and stage business took second place. Collier was still relatively inexperienced in performing principal roles of that size, and was still working out how to bring all the elements of her interpretation—how she sang and acted each phrase—into a coherent performance, while retaining the stamina to reach the end in good condition. But as her portrayal began to take on nuance it became clear that the role was not as perfect a fit as Musetta.

The first recorded review of her in the role, for her performance in Manchester in 1958, noted that Collier presented 'a moving conception of the part, though one may hazard the objection that there was some excess of sophistication and even tragic implication in Act I, instead of shy happiness and naïve trustfulness.'<sup>78</sup> When Collier sang the role for Sadler's Wells Opera a year later the reviews again note an over-sophistication in Collier's portrayal in the first act.<sup>79</sup> When she sang her first Butterfly at Covent Garden (and her first in Italian) in March 1960 the *Times* recorded, 'she went through the appropriate theatrical gestures without ever once shaking off her sophistication sufficiently to suggest the pathos of innocence.'<sup>80</sup> The *Observer* noted, 'being rather too tall and imposing a figure for Butterfly, she would be more convincing if she didn't have quite so much Geisha pitter-patter to do',<sup>81</sup> or as the *Financial Times* put it, 'to become an entirely convincing miniaturist.'<sup>82</sup> It was not a matter of interpretation, but of personality and physical build, both of which are more difficult to alter or adapt.

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<sup>76</sup> S.A. Gorfinsky, letter to Robert Herman, 5 September 1967, Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>77</sup> 'Marie Collier', *Repertoire*, 1959, Vol.1 No. 2.

<sup>78</sup> J.H.E., "'Madam Butterfly' – Touring Opera 1958 in Manchester', *Manchester Guardian*, 7 October 1958, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> J.W., 'Sadler's Wells. *Madama Butterfly* (October 20)', *Opera*, December 1959, p. 822.

<sup>80</sup> 'Butterfly Scores in Tragic Finale', *Times* (London), 4 March 1961, p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Edmund Tracey, 'No Lollipops', *Observer*, 5 March 1961, p. 26.

<sup>82</sup> Cedric Wallis, 'Madama Butterfly', *Financial Times*, 6 March 1961, p. 21.

The fault was not Collier's, but that of Puccini and his librettists. The Cio-cio-san of the first act is a passive doll, *japonaiserie* for the western gaze, whereas the character in the rest of the opera is no butterfly but a woman of passion and decisiveness. The role requires a soprano able to perform two different kinds of person. Collier's personality, physical stature and vocal power suited the latter Cio-Cio-San, but not the former. Collier sang more Butterflies than any other role during this part of her career, but while her vocalism improved she was still too sophisticated for a completely effective Act I.<sup>83</sup> That was a lost battle.

The same problem was evident in her portrayal of Liù in *Turandot*, which she first performed in December 1958 at Covent Garden. The role of the self-sacrificing servant girl is less demanding than Butterfly, but it did not really suit Collier's voice; she lacked the needed refinement and erred on the side of loudness, one critic describing it 'as though Floria Tosca had consented, against her better judgement, to sing a secondary role, and was making the best of a bad job by giving her public the good, loud singing it had every right to expect.'<sup>84</sup> Similar criticisms were made when she sang the role a year later.<sup>85</sup> By virtue of her gifts Collier was unable to play diminished, self-effacing personalities; her characters could suffer and be repressed, but they could not do it quietly. However when Collier revisited the role in 1966 she had found the delicacy the part required; when Charles Mackerras paused the orchestra to allow applause, 'Miss Collier had sung it so exquisitely, so affectingly, that only a few insensitive people wished to cap it with their own noises.'<sup>86</sup>

With Musetta and Cio-Cio-San Collier quickly found a way of portraying the characters that suited her. With Tosca she also established her basic interpretation early, but to refine it took much longer. Collier's first performances of Tosca in Australia had been exercises in getting all the notes out in the right order. By the time she approached the role again she was able to create a living character. Her first *Tosca* in Britain was for the Welsh National Opera at Llandudno in 1958. One review suggests she approached the role with restraint rather than giving in to her natural inclination to drama: 'The jealousy, passion and tenderness was [sic] vividly presented without ever being overdone.'<sup>87</sup> Here was a suggestion of how she would continue to portray the role.

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<sup>83</sup> 'Failure to Reveal Spirit of Puccini', *Times* (London), 24 October 1961, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> Cedric Wallis, 'Turandot', *Musical Times*, February 1959, p. 92.

<sup>85</sup> 'No Climax Too Great For Miss Shuard', *Times* (London), 3 February 1960, p. 13, and Wallis, 'Turandot'.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Turandot', *Financial Times*, 8 January 1966, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> Barkla, "'Tosca" was a trump'.

In April 1960 Collier sang her first London *Tosca* at Sadler's Wells. It was a mark of her status that it was a new production; it was not specifically produced with her in mind, as was often done for Maria Callas and later Joan Sutherland, but it was still prestigious and a refreshing change to be asked to perform in new sets and costumes. With the support of the producer Dennis Arundell, Collier took a similar interpretation to the one she had played in Wales two years earlier, presenting a softer, more insecure woman, the convent-trained goat-girl, than the proud and temperamental termagant preferred by most singers.<sup>88</sup> It suited her voice and her personality, displaying warmth rather than arrogance, and made the murder of Scarpia all the more shocking because the action was so out of character.<sup>89</sup> The critical assessment of the new interpretation indicates the different attitudes and expectations that reviewers brought to a performance. The *Times*, the *Sunday Times* and *Opera* accepted it as valid, but the *Observer* thought the conception was a weakness, simply because it was not the 'great Roman *diva*' to which audiences were accustomed.<sup>90</sup> Some of the appearance of weakness may also have been due to her technique; the *Times* noted that 'the climax of "Vissi d'arte" found her short of breath, and again and again a great moment was marred by weaknesses of breathing or pitch.'<sup>91</sup> The audiences loved it, and Australia was made aware of it through an AAP-Reuters report recording that she had received a standing ovation. It also noted that 'her singing was marred by an excess of emotional feeling'; but Australian readers would most likely have glossed over that.<sup>92</sup> When Collier returned to Sadler's Wells in October the interpretation seemed more valid; the *Times* describing Collier as 'a highly-strung, highly-sexed *Tosca*, personable and beautiful, certainly much more the credible woman than the artificial peacock type *diva* of productions of older days.'<sup>93</sup>

Collier sang *Tosca* again in January 1961 but did not return to it for two years. Without opportunity to perform it her portrayal did not improve. When she sang it in 1963 critics not only observed a lack of engagement with the role,<sup>94</sup> but also noted that her physical

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<sup>88</sup> Dennis Arundell, "'Tosca" Re-Studied', *Opera*, April 1960, pp. 264-265.

<sup>89</sup> W.S.M., 'Sadler's Wells Opera. *Tosca* (March 12) [sic]', *Opera*, June 1960, p. 436.

<sup>90</sup> 'Puccini's *Tosca* As Sardou Saw Her', *Times* (London), 4 April 1960, p. 6; Felix Aprahamian, 'All-English Operatic Success', *Sunday Times* (London), 10 April 1960, p. 24; W.S.M., 'Sadler's Wells Opera. *Tosca* (March 12) [sic]', *Opera*, June 1960, p. 436; Peter Heyworth, 'Vile Old Immortal', *Observer*, 10 April 1960, p. 23.

<sup>91</sup> 'Puccini's *Tosca* As Sardou Saw Her'.

<sup>92</sup> 'Singer Well Received In London', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1960, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> 'Tosca of Warmth and Richness', *Times* (London), 14 October 1960, p. 18.

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 22 May 1963, p. 24.

interpretation seemed to hinder her vocal performance.<sup>95</sup> Collier had still to find the balance between acting and singing where each would support the other, and would take several more years to achieve this.

In Italian repertoire Collier was fulfilling her early potential. But not all the promise she had shown in her Australian career was to come to fruition. At the beginning of Collier's career those around her had foreseen her singing Wagner.<sup>96</sup> Collier had sung Wagner in concert and considered that she might one day sing Brünnhilde in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.<sup>97</sup> But when she finally came to sing Wagner on stage in December 1959 it was not as the warrior maiden but as the seductress Venus in *Tannhäuser*. Collier's voice had developed in a different direction, and while Venus is often sung by singers who also have the power and richness of voice to perform Brünnhilde, Collier's voice did not have the stamina needed for the heavier role. Instead she was to sing the lighter soprano roles of Wagner's works, such as Freia in *Das Rheingold*, and Gutrune in *Götterdämmerung*.

As Collier performed and re-performed these roles at Covent Garden a new challenge began to emerge. She had originally sung her roles in English for Australian audiences, and when she joined Covent Garden in 1956 most performances were sung in English. But audiences wanted to see famous foreign artists, and in the late 1950s the company began to change from a *Volksoper*-style house, with English singers performing in their own tongue, to an international house with performances in original languages.<sup>98</sup>

This transition created challenges for contract singers like Collier who had started under the earlier ethos. To attract the attention of foreign houses they had to sing in the original tongues. In 1959 the critic Philip Hope-Wallace questioned whether Joan Sutherland could have capitalised on her success in *Lucia di Lammermoor* earlier that year had she not sung the role in Italian: 'For, surely, if Miss Sutherland had sung her Lucia in English would she now be on the international circuit, the choice of Paris and Italian cities?'<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> 'Scarpia Died Too Soon', *Times* (London), 21 May 1963, p. 15.

<sup>96</sup> Linda Phillips, 'Marie Collier—What A Voice!', *Woman's Day*, 26 May 1952, p. 15.

<sup>97</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', p. 22.

<sup>98</sup> In 1959 the annual report of the opera house revealed that at performances in English attendance was 72 per cent, but at productions featuring imported artists singing in the original languages attendance was 91 per cent, in spite of higher ticket prices. 'Covent Garden States the Case for its Present Operatic Policy', *Times* (London), 9 December 1959, p. 4.

<sup>99</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, 'Gibberish in the Opera House', *Guardian*, 17 December 1959, p. 6.

A consequence for Collier was that she had to relearn old repertoire. In one way this would have been a beneficial exercise, because she could re-examine her approach to each musical phrase and refine her interpretation; but it was still time-consuming work requiring more expensive coaching. Collier relearned her roles, but still sang in English at Sadler's Wells, and in rare repertoire, in order to introduce it to English-speaking audiences. The practice of singing in an accessible language also meant more work than first envisaged. In 1965 she sang Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* in London in English rather than the original Russian, but when she sang it the following year at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, she had to relearn it in Italian.

The move to original languages from the vernacular may have been a disadvantage for Collier. She had developed her career singing in English, and her interpretations and style of expression owed much to the language. But in a performance in Italian of Puccini's *Il tabarro* at Covent Garden in 1965, Andrew Porter noted that the English-speaking singers seemed disconnected from the meaning of the text, and that 'Marie Collier's Giorgetta, for example, never for a moment sounds really inside her words.'<sup>100</sup> Sir Georg Solti later made a similar criticism of her German.<sup>101</sup> One must ask whether her grasp of the languages was sufficient for her to unearth the nuances of the original texts or whether she at times relied on the interpretation she had developed from the English text, a 'muscle memory' that may not have been appropriate.

Collier was making her reputation in traditional opera, but opportunities arose in another area. In the 1960s, opera's place in the world was being questioned. Opera exhibited characteristics of both elitism and democracy. It was still an expensive and somewhat exclusive art form, attended mostly by the middle-class and paid for by people seeking prestige as well as entertainment. But it was becoming more accessible than ever before. The United States had experienced a boom in the establishment of opera companies since World War II; an opera company was a civic badge of honour alongside other cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries.<sup>102</sup> In Britain and Australia touring companies regularly played in regional centres. The development of the long-playing record by RCA had led to a boom in recordings of complete operas.

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<sup>100</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Trittico', *Financial Times*, 30 April 1965, p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> Norman Lebrecht, *Covent Garden: The Untold Story* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 258.

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Snowman, *The Gilded Stage: A Social History of Opera* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), p. 377.

Movies about opera and opera performers such as *The Great Caruso* and *Interrupted Melody*<sup>103</sup> took their place alongside musical comedies as good box-office.

But some critics believed opera was becoming obsolete, an art form celebrating the past rather than creating the future. Later in the decade the composer and conductor Pierre Boulez claimed that no truly modern operas had been written since Berg had composed *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, and suggested that the conservatism of the opera houses could best be dealt with by blowing them up.<sup>104</sup> As entertainment, opera was growing; but as a musical form it was becoming moribund.

The need to rejuvenate the art form had already been felt as early as the late 1940s, and the impetus to do so came not from the critics but from the companies and the audiences. The 'advanced' opera goes in the capital cities, the connoisseurs of works more complex and demanding than the repertoire staples, wanted to expand their experience of the art form, and since the war opera companies had become financially and artistically secure enough to be able to meet this demand. Established companies such as Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells, and small groups such as the New Opera Company, were scheduling works that were known by reputation but had not been staged in London. Collier's voice and temperament made her the ideal performer for much of this new repertoire, and as opportunities arose she was able to build a record of success that eventually established her in a niche that doubled her marketability.

When Collier arrived in London interest in eastern European opera had reached critical mass. Several musicians in Britain believed that Leoš Janáček was a composer waiting to be discovered by the world. In October 1947 Charles Mackerras was in Prague with his wife Judy, studying conducting on a British Council Scholarship. One night they went to the National Theatre to hear the prominent conductor Václav Talich, with whom Mackerras hoped to study. The work was Janáček's *Katya Kabanova*, and the music was a revelation, completely unlike any other they knew from the Western tradition.

The main feature of Janáček's style is the use of short, repeated melodic phrases based on speech rhythms. Where Italian opera focused on the potential of the long

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<sup>103</sup> *The Great Caruso*, Richard Thorpe (director), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1951; *Interrupted Melody*, Curtis Bernhardt (director), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954.

<sup>104</sup> 'Sprengt die Opernhäuser in die Luft!', *Der Spiegel*, 25 September 1967, pp. 166, 172. Boulez's words were, 'Die teuerste Lösung wäre, die Opernhäuser in die Luft zu sprengen. Aber glauben Sie nicht auch, daß dies die eleganteste wäre?' ('The most expensive solution would be to blow up the opera houses. But don't you think that would be the most elegant?') (p. 172).



vowel sounds, Janáček wanted to reproduce the power of the spoken word.<sup>105</sup> He also differed in his orchestration; where in Western opera the strings dominated the melody, Janáček gave a greater melodic burden to the woodwinds, the strings more often providing a supporting texture. To unaccustomed ears it was a startling effect, but Janáček also provided more conventional lyrical passages which heightened the emotion. This mixture of concision and lyricism was fresh and appealing to some Western European listeners.

During their stay in Czechoslovakia the Mackerras travelled all over the country to hear as much of Janáček's music as possible.<sup>106</sup> On their return to London Mackerras showed the vocal score of *Katya Kabanova* to Norman Tucker, the administrator of Sadler's Wells, and the critic Desmond Shawe-Taylor, and he played them a tape of a Czechoslovakian performance from the BBC. They became converts, and Tucker arranged for *Katya Kabanova* to receive its British premiere on 10 April 1951 at Sadler's Wells Theatre, with Amy Shuard in the title role, in Tucker's own translation.<sup>107</sup>

The opera was well received by the public and most of the critics but the run was not well-attended. However the London opera audience began to warm to Janáček; Sadler's Wells revived *Katya Kabanova* in 1954-55, and Covent Garden presented *Jenůfa* in 1956. In November 1959 another revival of *Katya Kabanova* opened at Sadler's Wells with Marie Collier in the leading role, with William McAlpine as her indecisive lover Boris and Monica Sinclair as the Kabanicha, Katya's vicious mother-in-law.

Norman Tucker had heard Collier at Covent Garden and realised that she had the potential to sing psychologically complex roles like the Janáček heroines, not just because of her personality but because she had the type of voice needed. Janáček's use of speech rhythms made for very angular music, difficult for voices accustomed to creating a flowing Italianate *legato* line;<sup>108</sup> but Janáček's lyrical passages called for *legato* singing. The ideal Janáček voice could do both, and also had to have a strong

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<sup>105</sup> Desmond Shawe-Taylor succinctly describes Janáček's style in 'The Operas of Leoš Janáček', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 85th Sess. (1958-1959), pp. 49-64, especially pp. 53-57.

<sup>106</sup> Nancy Phelan, *Charles Mackerras: A Musicians' Musician* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 75-76.

<sup>107</sup> Phelan, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>108</sup> *Legato*: A series of notes sung without any breaks between them is said to be sung *legato*.

edge that could cut through the orchestra, where the woodwinds took more of the melodic burden than the customary strings.<sup>109</sup> Collier could do this, and she was hired.

Charles Mackerras, conducting the season, first met Marie at rehearsals, and was pleased at her suitability for the role of Katya. He was impressed by the rich, dark quality of her voice, and her nervous personality, especially 'the intense, almost staring quality of her eyes which seemed to bore right through you.'<sup>110</sup> It was an intensity that she applied to her singing and acting. One of the early performances in the run was broadcast on the BBC on 24 November 1959.<sup>111</sup> Her voice stands out from the others in the cast. We hear her characteristic tone, the rich, dark voice that Mackerras appreciated, with vibrato,<sup>112</sup> not always fast. She gives fullness to the note by favouring the overtones from the higher part of her range, making the sound sweet and rich but not heavy. It is an emotional tone, sometimes tremulous when the vibrato was faster, but with the strength to convey the intensity of the more dramatic scenes. In the second half of the opera her top notes become a little thin, which suggests a recurrence of her problems with breath support. But it helps the performance; the febrility of her tone reflects the anguish of her character, and at the climaxes her tone is solid and she has plenty of volume.

There was a degree of unanimity amongst critics on characteristics of Collier's performance. Her acting was dignified and moving, with 'finely judged emotional restraint';<sup>113</sup> and both the *Times* and *Financial Times* commented on the suitability of her voice for this material, her tone sombre and tragic, although the *Times* noted that her 'fluttering' top notes indicated the difficulty she had in producing the tone.<sup>114</sup> The *Glasgow Herald* described her dramatic approach at length: 'With Marie Collier we felt that Katya was much more the victim of the social circumstances in which she lived than of her own conscience... Both by her acting and gradations of tone quality she

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<sup>109</sup> Norman Tucker, *Norman Tucker, Musician* (London: J.A. Ellison, 1978), p. 63.

<sup>110</sup> Sir Charles Mackerras, letter to Kim Kemmis, 3 October 2006.

<sup>111</sup> Leoš Janáček, *Katya Kabanova*, radio broadcast, Charles Mackerras (conductor), Sadler's Wells Opera Company. Broadcast BBC Third Programme, 24 November 1959. (Private recording.)

<sup>112</sup> Vibrato is the rapid alternation of pitch, produced by the vibration of the vocal folds and/or the diaphragm. It is used for expressive effect and to sustain a note. It is commonly used by singers when performing works from about the late eighteenth century to the present, but currently unfashionable in works earlier than Mozart.

<sup>113</sup> Colin Mason, 'Idyll of family tyranny', *Guardian*, 20 November 1959, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> 'Katya Kabanova Revived', *Times* (London), 19 November 1959, p. 16; Andrew Porter, 'Katya Kabanova', *Financial Times*, 20 November 1959, p. 21.

made it fully apparent that Katya, although subjugated and frustrated, had pride and a will of her own.<sup>115</sup>

Collier never sang Katya again, although she kept it on her repertoire list. Janáček suited her timbre and diction, her acting style and her personality, and she was to have even greater success in his works. Collier's gift was in portraying characters whose sufferings on a banal level could be expressed and experienced as myth.

But initially Collier was not so successful in all the modern repertoire she attempted. In December 1960 she took on the role of Marie in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. The character of the doomed working-class mother with little emotional or financial support seemed a good choice after her success as Katya. But reviewers were divided over what Collier achieved in the role. The *Times* appreciated 'the remorseful, tempted, fundamentally decent girl that Büchner surely intended',<sup>116</sup> and Peter Heyworth of the *Observer* thought that it was 'a most striking study in which pathos is matched by animal vigour and conscience stirs uneasily beneath amorality.'<sup>117</sup> But Phillip Hope-Wallace thought that part of her performance lacked pathos.<sup>118</sup> Heyworth also appreciated that Collier sang accurately and with beautiful tone, but for others this was inappropriate, her lush tone making her 'a slum Musetta'.<sup>119</sup>

Another near miss occurred in April 1961 when Collier returned to the Sadler's Wells Theatre to sing the role of Concepción in Maurice Ravel's comedy *L'heure espagnole*. Collier had still not developed the lightness of touch that had been lacking in *La belle Hélène*; Andrew Porter thought she was 'a glamorous Concepción, certainly, but luscious rather than gay'.<sup>120</sup>

Although not everything she did was successful, the fact that Collier was willing to take on roles not in the standard repertoire was noted. It was as much for this ability as her growing stature as a principal singer that won her a role in the premiere of Michael Tippett's opera *King Priam*. The work received its premiere at the Coventry Theatre on 29 May 1962, with the performance broadcast live on the BBC Third Programme; after another performance in Coventry the production moved to Covent Garden for four

<sup>115</sup> 'Janacek Opera Returns to Sadler's Wells', *Glasgow Herald*, 23 November 1959, p. 5.

<sup>116</sup> 'Wozzeck With Assurance', *Times* (London), 3 December 1960, p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'Berg's Vision of Büchner', *Observer*, 4 December 1960, p. 27.

<sup>118</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, 'Little light on Wozzeck', *Guardian*, 3 December 1960, p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Wozzeck at Covent Garden', *Financial Times*, 5 December 1960, p. 7..

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Porter, 'The Prisoner – L'Heure Espagnole', *Financial Times*, 27 April 1961, p. 22.

nights. Collier played the role of Hecuba, the wife of Priam and mother of Paris and Hector. This was the first time she had created a role in the world premiere of an opera; there were no recordings from which to learn, no singers to whom she could turn for advice, just the close study of the score and coaching sessions.

According to Andrew Porter, at the first performance 'the opera was politely rather than enthusiastically received, by a house far from full.'<sup>121</sup> The critics understandably focused on the qualities of the new work rather than the performance or the production. Comments on the singers were jammed into the last paragraph,<sup>122</sup> usually grouped together, for example, 'There is cause for real pride in the fact that all four of the main women's roles are excellently sung.'<sup>123</sup> The recording of the broadcast of the premiere performance demonstrates that the role was a good fit for Collier's voice and temperament; Collier is full-toned and flexible, conveying anxiety, frenzy and anger without any vocal faults.<sup>124</sup>

By 1962 Collier was beginning to attract attention in overseas houses. Events such as *King Priam*, and reports of London performances in overseas press and magazines such as *Opera*, began to garner international attention for Collier. Kurt Herbert Adler, the director of the San Francisco Opera, had heard her at Covent Garden in early 1961 and was trying to find a place for her in future seasons.<sup>125</sup> Surely La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera would come knocking on her door. It was in another contemporary opera that Collier made her debut outside the Commonwealth. Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had premiered at the composer's festival at Aldeburgh in 1960, and received a season at Covent Garden in 1961. In the summer of 1962 a group of principals from Covent Garden flew to Buenos Aires to perform Britten's opera at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, with Collier singing the role of Helena. After almost two weeks of rehearsals the company of non-native singers gave four performances, which were well-received if sometimes unintelligible.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Andrew Porter, 'King Priam. Covent Garden, June 5', *Opera*, July 1962, p. 489.

<sup>122</sup> 'A Hero of Tragic Stature', *Times* (London), 30 May 1962, p. 5, Colin Mason, 'King Priam at Coventry', *Guardian*, 30 May 1962, p. 7, and Peter Heyworth, 'Second Thoughts on "King Priam"', *Observer*, 10 June 1962, p. 22 all follow this pattern.

<sup>123</sup> 'Tippett Opera Splits Opinion', *Times* (London), 6 June 1962, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> Michael Tippett, *King Priam*, radio broadcast, John Pritchard (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company. Broadcast BBC Third Programme, 29 May 1962. (Private recording.)

<sup>125</sup> 'Dr Kurt Adler's Operatic Pilgrimage', *Times* (London), 8 March 1961, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Curt B.M. Weisstein, 'Britten's Dream', *Opera*, October 1962, pp. 665-66.

By the time of her first international season in Buenos Aires Collier's repertoire had fallen into the pattern it would assume for the rest of her career. Traditional opera was the bread and butter, modern composers the icing on the cake. Collier could please both the average opera goer and the connoisseur; she was not only the lyric-dramatic soprano heroine of Puccini, but also the performer at the *avant-garde*, creating new repertoire and expanding the experience and expectations of opera goers.

### Controlling the image

In the 1950s and 1960s London was the music capital of the world, and the concentration of artists, entrepreneurs, administrators, journalists and onlookers made it a much harder environment in which to flourish than in Australia. A performer wanting to make her mark had to attract attention. Collier had always been aware of the importance of the image. In Australia she had cultivated a glamorous persona that played to the interests of newspapers and promoted herself and the performances in which she appeared. She continued that process in Britain, working with her management and opera companies to build a public persona based on personal characteristics: her role as an opera singer, her identity as a mother, and her sexuality. Collier was able to create an image that the public appreciated, but ultimately she could not dictate the terms on which it viewed her.

Collier's success in *Tosca* in October 1960 prompted an article in the *Melbourne Age* which trumpeted (incorrectly) that she would make history in December as 'the first British woman to sing the leading role' in Berg's *Wozzeck*.<sup>127</sup> The piece is notable in that it was the first appearance of a theme in many profiles of Collier, that of the housewife-diva. After extolling Collier's portrayal of *Tosca*, the writer listed the children's names and ages, then described how she 'manages to combine her operatic career and her domestic "chores" with success.' After the opening night party for *Tosca* she had driven home to Cookham to be up at six a.m: 'Before leaving to attend rehearsals, she had set the fires, dressed the children, cooked breakfast for them and her husband, done the dusting—and put in a couple of hours' work on the dress she will wear for her next broadcast concert.'<sup>128</sup>

The image of the singer combining her work with a happy and busy home life had been used before. In the early twentieth-century the German-American contralto Ernestine

<sup>127</sup> Incorrect on two counts: the Australian soprano Marea Wolkowsky had sung Marie at Covent Garden in 1952, and the leading role of the opera is of course *Wozzeck*.

<sup>128</sup> 'Melbourne Singer's Success in London', *Age* (Melbourne), 5 November 1960.

Schumann-Heink presented herself as a working mother of nine children, declaring 'Ich bin nichts als eine gewöhnliche deutsche Hausfrau' (I am nothing but an ordinary German housewife).<sup>129</sup> In the 1930s the soprano Florence Austral gave interviews to the Australian women's press presenting herself as the 'prima donna who sews and cooks... a simple, home-loving woman, happy in her work and glorifying in the many friendships and interesting experiences it has brought her.'<sup>130</sup> Her husband, the flautist John Amadio, declared that Florence was 'accomplished in all housewifely duties, even to the knitting of my cardigans and ties'.<sup>131</sup> Austral did all the cooking for her dinner parties herself, and her culinary skills became legendary; in his memoirs the recording producer Fred Gaisberg rhapsodised, 'Florence is a divine cook. Her suppers were famous. Shall I ever forget them?'<sup>132</sup> Austral publicised the housewife persona to counter adverse publicity; she had been named in court during her husband's divorce from his first wife in 1925, a disgrace that had cost her work as late as 1929.<sup>133</sup>

Collier never made any statement explaining her motivation for cultivating the image of the housewife-diva. But to combine the diva and the housewife was to join two areas of her life that were very important to her: to perform her profession at the highest rank, and to enjoy raising her family, which she had desired most of all. To publicly identify with both of these aspects was to display her aspirations and achievements, and it was an expression of agency as well as pride.

The opera companies highlighted the 'housewife-diva' theme in their marketing. A biography prepared by the Sadler's Wells press office in 1961 lists all Collier's musical achievements, and finishes 'With her busy career as a singer, Marie Collier combines that of housewife in Cookham-on-Thames and mother of three young sons' [sic].<sup>134</sup> At the time of her success in *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1952 newspaper features had focused on her life outside the theatre, and her experience in Australia had led her to be forthcoming with information about her life in Cookham—at first without disclosing

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<sup>129</sup> Rupert Christiansen, *Prima Donna: A History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 181. See also Joy H. Calico, 'Staging Scandal with *Salome* and *Elektra*', in Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds), *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 72-73.

<sup>130</sup> 'Prima Donna Who Sews And Cooks – Madame Austral Interviewed', *West Australian* (Perth), 6 April 1934, p. 7.

<sup>131</sup> 'Singer's Favourite Hobbies Cooking And Tapestry', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 29 May 1934, p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> Fred W. Gaisberg, *Music on Record* (London: Robert Hale, 1948), p. 131.

<sup>133</sup> 'Singer Banned. Miss Florence Austral. Incident in England', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1929, p11

<sup>134</sup> File, 'Collier, Marie', National Library of Australia, Call no. BIOG.

much detail, in later years becoming very open as the costs of her career became greater. At the same time she did not want to be categorised solely by her family status, and later criticised publicists who tagged women as ‘mother of two’.<sup>135</sup>

The prima donnas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrated the capacity of women to excel beyond the domestic;<sup>136</sup> the housewife-diva image asserted by Collier turned back to the domestic and added it to her list of triumphs. It contrasted with a parallel theme that had already emerged in the critics’ impressions of Collier. Reviewers noted her good looks from the beginning of her appearances at Covent Garden; in a 1957 production of Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* the critics had praised her with phrases such as ‘luscious-looking’ and ‘vivid beauty’ preceding evaluations of her voice.<sup>137</sup> With a role like the courtesan Giulietta it was arguably legitimate to make such statements, but later they took on a more prurient tone. When Sadler’s Wells staged Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* in 1959 it was difficult at first glance to ascertain from reviews how Collier’s voice sounded as Venus. The *Times* critic seemed to relish the ‘most lascivious portrayal’ of the Venusberg ballet at the beginning of the opera, and noted Collier was a ‘comely’ Venus, whose voice had a ‘seductive’ quality.<sup>138</sup> The *Musical Times* critic referred to her singing as ‘alluring’.<sup>139</sup> The hint of lust in these observations was no doubt encouraged by the way she was costumed and directed. The *Times* observed that ‘Miss Marie Collier made Venus more woman than goddess, but this was partly because of a costume that ignored the law of diminishing returns; the mysterious power of sensual love that inflamed Wagner’s imagination was never much in evidence in this production.’<sup>140</sup>

Not all critics approved of what they saw. When Collier performed *L’heure espagnole* for Sadler’s Wells in 1961 her gown exposed her cleavage, but no more than, say, the average gown worn by Tosca, and it was less revealing than her costume for Venus. However the *Opera* reviewer thought it ‘tarty’ and considered that it unduly influenced

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<sup>135</sup> Rappolt, ‘Opera Singer Would Like To Fly A Plane’.

<sup>136</sup> Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 33.

<sup>137</sup> H.D.R., ‘Covent Garden. The Tales of Hoffmann’, *Opera*, August 1957, pp. 526; Andrew Porter, ‘Tales of Hoffmann’, *Financial Times*, 15 July 1957, p. 9.

<sup>138</sup> ‘Tannhäuser at The Wells’, *Times* (London), 10 December 1959, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Cedric Wallis, ‘Tannhäuser’, *Musical Times*, February 1960, p. 98.

<sup>140</sup> ‘Opera changes on distaff side’, *Times* (London), 12 January 1961, p. 8.

Collier's interpretation into something 'immoral' rather than a more acceptable 'amoral'.<sup>141</sup> There is a hint of the diva as a Madonna who can never play the whore.

These comments were made in context of the production; but usually the observation was a non sequitur, or sneaked in as a witticism: 'Miss Marie Collier infused a more imperious, prima-donna like strain into the title role without any loss of voluptuousness, either of looks or tone'.<sup>142</sup> It was the casual sexism of the time, unrecognised by its practitioners, tolerated by its recipients, and it allowed men like David Cairns of the *Financial Times* to feel able to conclude an otherwise justifiable criticism of Collier's singing with, 'If somebody would only take her, musically speaking, over his knee and give her the vocal equivalent of a good spanking, she might still be one of the great sopranos of the day.'<sup>143</sup>

The verbal wolf-whistling had to be tolerated, because exposing her sexuality on stage was part of the unwritten contract for a woman in opera. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which the bulk of the standard repertoire was created, female sexuality held great appeal for opera audiences, and thus for librettists and composers.<sup>144</sup> Audiences preferred women who fought to keep control of their sexuality (Bizet's *Carmen*), women whose sexuality was fought over (Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*), women who were put in their place because of their sexuality (Fiordiligi and Dorabella in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*), or those who simply suffered for it (Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata*). The portrayal of sexuality was a requirement of the repertoire.

Collier accepted that part of the contract, and the consequence that her audiences defined her through her sexuality. Audiences first saw her as Musetta, then Giulietta, women using their sexuality as a weapon, confounding and controlling their lovers. They watched Cio-Cio-San base her whole existence on the return of her husband. They witnessed Marie's murder for her perceived sexual betrayal of Wozzeck. Collier willingly used her sexuality as a tool in creating the character; thus the sexually-assertive Concepción was attractive, and Venus as alluring as a goddess of Love should be.

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<sup>141</sup> J.W., 'L'Heure Espagnole and The Prisoner. (New Opera Company) Sadler's Wells, April 27', *Opera*, June 1961, p. 415. Photographs on both the page with this comment and the front cover of the issue show Collier in costume.

<sup>142</sup> 'Tosca Changes of Emphasis', *Times* (London), 4 October 1961, p. 3.

<sup>143</sup> David Cairns, 'Verdi's Requiem', *Financial Times*, 23 June 1964, p. 20.

<sup>144</sup> Rutherford, op. cit., pp. 42-45.



The philosopher Catherine Clément has discussed the manner in which male agents act upon female characters and singers in opera, claiming, 'The prima donna has to appear the way men want her'.<sup>145</sup> Clément focuses on the composer and librettist, but the critic also has his part in this. In their comments on a Tosca that confounded their expectations or a Concepción who appeared too tart, men were writing their own morality, puritan or otherwise, onto the singer. The presence of sexuality as a point of interaction between Collier and her audiences was to affect more than just the way she was seen on stage. It filtered the way she was perceived in her offstage life: how she was regarded by both continuing and casual colleagues, and by people writing and talking about opera. This type of discourse was to have consequences for the way Collier was perceived later in her life and afterwards.

### The costs of success

Marie had worked hard in her early years at Covent Garden, and the rewards were a high level of artistic achievement, acclaim from audiences and critics, and a growing demand for her services. But the by-products of success and achievement were also negative: greater conflicts between the personal and the professional, and the physical stresses placed on her instrument.

As Marie's success increased, her work commitments took her away from her family more and more, undermining not only what she could give her family, but also what her family could give her. An acute personal conflict arose in 1962 when she was sent to Rome for further training. It was a mark of her status that, instead of having to rely on scholarships and bursaries to fund her training as she had when she first arrived in England, the Covent Garden company was willing to pay for her to study with Luigi Ricci. In the 1920s Ricci had been a young conductor at the Teatro Reale dell'Opera di Roma and had worked closely for extended periods with Giacomo Puccini, Pietro Mascagni, Riccardo Zandonai and other early twentieth century opera composers. By the 1950s he was the vocal coach of preference for singers of Italian repertoire, and his students included well-established singers such as the tenor Beniamino Gigli and the baritone Tito Gobbi. Collier went to Ricci specifically to study Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*, a work she had first studied in Milan with Ugo Benvenuti Giusti, but also learned much about her other Puccini roles. Afterwards she was to point to Ricci's teaching as

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<sup>145</sup> Catherine Clément, *L'opéra ou la défaite des femmes* (Paris: Grasset, 1979); trans. Betsy Wing, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p.29. See Introduction for a discussion of Clément's thesis.

the definitive word on how Puccini should be performed.<sup>146</sup> The experience was clearly valuable.

Marie left for Rome having recently become pregnant again, but this was not a hardship for her; with her touring experience she was an old hand at travelling far from home while expecting a child. Her greatest challenge came in late March when news arrived that her father had been struck by a car in Melbourne. Marie put through a call to the Albert Hospital and was able to speak to his doctor. He confirmed that her father was dying, swiftly; if she was to fly home he may well die during the two or three days the journey would take. Marie was torn: to fly home to see her father one last time, or stay in Rome to fulfil her obligations to Covent Garden? Ultimately the doctor convinced her that the trip would be pointless, and Marie was still in Rome when Thomas Collier died of his injuries on 3 April 1962. Marie later spoke of this time as the worst in her career, where the professional and the private clashed intolerably manner.<sup>147</sup> The distance to Melbourne would never have allowed to see her father one last time whether she was in Italy or England; but had she been in Cookham she would have had the support of her family, instead of mourning her father alone a long way from home.

Other pressures developed over long periods. She was beginning to suffer from vocal strain because of her workload. Now that she was appearing alongside established stars such as Joan Sutherland, Jussi Björling and Victoria de los Angeles, she was at the top of her profession, and it was imperative to maintain momentum. At the beginning of 1960 she was working at both Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells, with eleven performances in January and eight in February, of five different roles: Venus in *Tannhäuser*, Flora in *La traviata*, Giulietta in *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Liù in *Turandot*, and her first London performances of Santuzza (*Cavalleria rusticana*). None of these roles were great challenges for her; there were no new roles, and no full-length roles. But the strain told. It was noticeable by the beginning of February when she began to lose pitch when singing softly, a mark of tiredness which was clearly noticeable.<sup>148</sup>

The long-standing problems with her vocal technique becoming apparent. As early as her first Musetta in 1956 the *Times* had noticed that poor breath support led to an

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<sup>146</sup> As recorded in Luigi Ricci, *Puccini interprete da se stesso* (Milan: G. Ricordi & Co., 1954). Interview with Thomas Cassidy, *Luncheon at the Music Center*, KFAC Los Angeles, Thursday 11 November 1965.

<sup>147</sup> Rappolt, 'Opera Singer Would Like To Fly A Plane'.

<sup>148</sup> Harold Rosenthal, 'Tannhäuser at Sadler's Wells', *Financial Times*, 5 February 1960, p. 17.

inexplicable loss of body at climactic moments.<sup>149</sup> Among the plaudits Collier received for her performance of *Katya Kabanova* in 1959 the *Times* noted that her ‘fluttering’ top notes indicated the difficulty she had in producing the tone.<sup>150</sup> After her *Tosca* at Sadler’s Wells in April 1960 the *Times* reported that ‘the climax of “Vissi d’arte” found her short of breath, and again and again a great moment was marred by weaknesses of breathing or pitch.’<sup>151</sup> Reviewing the *Madam Butterfly* LP in 1960 Andrew Porter noted that in performance ‘there has been an occasional tendency first to feel for the note, then “pump” it.’<sup>152</sup>

Collier’s performances of *Madama Butterfly* in early 1961 highlighted another problem, her inability to sing sustained phrases. The *Times* observed ‘an over-sectionalized approach to melodic phrases that should have soared with unbroken continuity’.<sup>153</sup> This had been noted since her Australian career, and even as recently as her performances of *Venus* in January.<sup>154</sup> Collier worked on what she and her teachers perceived to be the issues—not necessarily what the critics prescribed—and there was some improvement. By the time she returned to *Butterfly* in October her legato line had improved.<sup>155</sup> But the unevenness now became ‘rapidly fluctuating’. Edward Greenfield wrote in the *Observer*, ‘Sometimes last night—particularly after a pause—it disappeared completely, only to reappear and mar the dramatic impact of such moments as the opening of the Flower Duet with some ill focused bars.’<sup>156</sup> This was not the rapid vibrato which for some added excitement and for others became a distraction, but an unpredictable change of sound that was the sign of vocal chords under pressure. The basis of her sound production had remained unaltered. After Collier sang Lisa in Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* at Covent Garden in December 1961, *Opera* magazine noted that her appealing voice was produced using a ‘dangerously unorthodox technique’.<sup>157</sup> These problems were to continue into the future.

But it is worth noting the roles in which reviewers had had few quibbles about Collier’s vocal abilities, such as *Katya*, *Marie* in *Wozzeck*, and *Hecuba* in *King Priam*—roles which she sang in English, with a mixture of conversational and lyrical vocal lines, in

<sup>149</sup> ‘La Bohème’, *Times* (London), 7 November 1956, p.3.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Katya Kabanova Revived’; Porter, ‘Katya Kabanova’.

<sup>151</sup> ‘Puccini’s *Tosca* As Sardou Saw Her’.

<sup>152</sup> A.P., ‘PUCCINI. *Madama Butterfly* – excerpts’.

<sup>153</sup> ‘*Butterfly* Scores in Tragic Finale’.

<sup>154</sup> ‘Opera changes on distaff side’.

<sup>155</sup> ‘Failure to Reveal Spirit of Puccini’.

<sup>156</sup> Edward Greenfield, ‘*Madama Butterfly*. Covent Garden’, *Guardian*, 24 October 1961, p. 7.

<sup>157</sup> W.S.M., ‘*The Queen of Spades*. Covent Garden, December 5’, *Opera*, February 1962, p. 130.

which she was able to harness her expressiveness, her excellent diction, and the power she brought to Puccini, to have a dramatic impact upon listeners. Her decision to develop in this repertoire was a recognition that she had both weaknesses and strengths.

## Conclusion

By the end of 1962 Marie Collier had built her reputation to the point of breaking into the international opera circuit. Her time in Milan studying and observing the business had opened her eyes to the challenges she faced, and for the rest of the decade she worked hard to meet them. The break-through had happened in the 1959-60 season, when Collier had sung four major roles to acclaim at Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells, performing effectively in the music of composers as different as Puccini, Janáček and Wagner, and attracting the declaration, 'Marie Collier has become a star at both houses... the revelation of the season'.<sup>158</sup>

She had raised her visibility through her performances as a contract artist at Covent Garden; for much of the time she took her place in the ensemble, performing minor roles and touring to small theatres across Britain; but she also made an impact in leading roles in the Royal Opera House. The 'internationalisation' of the house forced English-singing artists into performing the original languages, but while this caused difficulties it also gave Collier with another calling card for the international circuit. She also made the best of the opportunities that came to raise her visibility outside Covent Garden, working as a guest artist with other companies—principally Sadler's Wells but also regional companies across Britain—and building a parallel career in concerts and broadcasting appearances. She actively cultivated an image that called on authentic elements of her personality and personal life, creating the appealing picture of the beautiful star who was also a mother and housewife.

She expanded her repertoire, revisiting the roles she had sung in Australia—Santuzza, Giulietta, and especially Tosca—and developing new roles in the Puccini repertoire such as Musetta, Cio-Cio-San and Liù. More importantly she had expanded her repertoire in an unexpected direction: works in a different, more contemporary idiom, such as *Katya Kabanova* and *Wozzeck*, a repertoire of which she had most likely not

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<sup>158</sup> A.P., 'Covent Garden. Cast changes in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* (February 24) and *Lucia* (March 2)', *Opera*, April 1960, p. 301.

even heard of, let alone considered, at the beginning of her career, but in which she was to make her greatest impact on the art form.

At the same time she retained some weaknesses in vocal technique and acting skills. Although she had achieved more control over her voice thanks to the training of Dawson Freer, Collier still produced the basic sound using Kathleen Wielaert's 'flat tongue' technique, and even at this early stage that process began to have deleterious effects on her voice. Her physical portrayals had their limitations, too; her imposing physical and vocal presence rendered it difficult for Collier to perform the more passive, self-effacing roles in Puccini's operas, and while she was applauded for many of her roles, the reviews indicated that she still needed more insight and technical skill to become more convincing.

On a personal level Collier had achieved some remarkable goals. She had had four children, and with Victor had established a comfortable domestic existence in Berkshire in which both were able to maintain their careers as well as a family life. It was important for Collier to maintain a distance between family and work; her father's death had shown her how great the conflict could be between the personal and the professional. Her home life gave her a stability that balanced the lack of control she had over how she was perceived and the physical toll that performing was beginning to take on her voice.

As Collier entered 1963 those challenges remained: to continue to develop her interpretations in traditional repertoire, and to consolidate her reputation in contemporary works. But she also had another challenge: to build her international career.

## Chapter 3      An international star: 1963-1967

By 1963 Marie Collier's 'apprenticeship' was over. She had established herself as a major singer in England and had started to make appearances in other countries. The next five years were to see her become an international star.

To maintain the momentum of her career she had to consolidate what she had already achieved, and to expand her presence on the international stage. Collier's main resource in this was her repertoire. She kept performing the traditional repertoire for which she was already known, one in which opera administrators knew she was reliable, establishing Tosca as a signature role and taking on new roles by Puccini and Verdi. She also became the 'go to' soprano for modern opera, her talent and temperament suiting the eastern European operas that were beginning to come to the attention of western audiences.

Marie also pursued opportunities to perform outside Covent Garden, making connections with other companies in England and in America. As well as opera performances she kept herself in the public eye with concerts and radio broadcasts and gained exposure through television appearances. She continued to develop the image of the housewife-diva in the increasing number of newspaper, magazine and radio interviews and other publicity events that accompanied her success.

In her pursuit of this path Collier carried out all the considered, calculated activities that any singer of talent and enterprise would do. But Collier experienced a unique event—the classic 'lucky break' that increased public awareness of her and increased the pace of her achievements—simply by substituting for an indisposed singer, not just another colleague, but one who happened to be the most legendary of her time. In doing this she began to cement her own legend.

Her increasing success entailed a change in the basis on which she worked. Collier moved from the security of a contract artist at Covent Garden towards the flexibility and freedom of the freelance guest artist. This called for a different kind of life, with challenges that tested her physical, vocal and emotional health.

## Consolidating in the UK

In 1963 Collier continued to develop her portrayals of the roles for which she had become known and to embark on new roles, to mixed effect and critical response. When she returned to the stage in January 1963 after having given birth to Andrew, her fourth child, she achieved two firsts: her first Tosca at Covent Garden, and her first Tosca in Italian. She was the first British singer to perform the role in Italian at Covent Garden for a decade;<sup>1</sup> since Joan Hammond had performed it in 1955 Sir David Webster had presented international artists such as Renata Tebaldi, Zinka Milanov, and Leonie Rysanek.

To the more girlish, sensual characterisation she had formulated with Dennis Arundell at Sadler's Wells two years earlier she added a greater element of assertion. But critics were still divided. Edmund Tracey lamented that 'Collier missed the flamboyant sweep that the part requires.'<sup>2</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace noted an absence of subtlety; in both acts 'the outline was better than the detail.'<sup>3</sup> These were reflections on her physical performance; but at this stage of her exploration of the character Collier's approach was to find the drama in the music rather than gesture. The *Times* noted that she 'caresses the phrases, even at the climax of "Vissi d'arte", where others may hurl them at the gallery.'<sup>4</sup> Porter found that although her phrasing was musically uninteresting, 'dramatically, some good points are made.'<sup>5</sup> This approach put the music at the service of the drama rather than itself; Collier was the actor before the singer, a performer and not just a musician.

Critics observed improvements in her vocal production, noting the ease and power with which she was now projecting.<sup>6</sup> Andrew Porter, a consistently sympathetic reviewer, appreciated her tone colour but noticed that it did not 'flow in a steady stream',<sup>7</sup> an observation which suggests that her breathing was still irregular. Porter observed that in the past Collier had taken several performances for her portrayal to fully bloom; Harold Rosenthal missed the first night and was pleasantly surprised by her performance on the second, declaring 'that there is no denying that this Australian

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<sup>1</sup> 'An Electric Tosca', *Times* (London), 29 January 1963, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Tracy, 'London Music', *Musical Times*, March 1963, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, 'Tito Gobbi in Tosca at Covent Garden', *Guardian*, 29 January 1963, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> 'An Electric Tosca'.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 30 January 1963, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> 'An Electric Tosca'.

<sup>7</sup> Porter, 'Tosca', 30 January 1963.

soprano possesses one of the most vibrantly exciting and Italianate voices now to be heard.’<sup>8</sup>

These were Marie’s first performances with Tito Gobbi, with whom she was to perform more than thirty times. They developed a close friendship, Collier calling him ‘Zio Tito’ (Uncle Tito) and turning to him for help in developing her roles and for personal support.<sup>9</sup>

Performances later in 1963 exasperated the critics. Marie was able to produce beautiful tone and exciting high notes, but in the next moment would have difficulty finding the correct pitch or maintaining a consistent approach to phrasing. Again her difficulty in maintaining a long line was noted, Andrew Porter remarking ‘her tendency instead to produce single notes in a way that somehow suggests the bloom without the peach.’<sup>10</sup> The reviewers tied her voice and acting problems together. The *Times* decided that ‘the root of the trouble’ was her highly-strung approach to the part; she needed greater composure to be able to pay more attention to the sounds she was producing.<sup>11</sup> Porter noted that in spite of her presence and her confidence, her ‘amateurish’ acting and poor phrasing marked a lack of engagement with the role.<sup>12</sup> Collier had made progress, but was still far from presenting the portrayal she was capable of giving.

Collier went into her next major role with a lack of confidence. While her mentors had foreseen her singing Verdi, she had not had much experience with the composer: two stage performances of *Aida*, some arias from *Aida* and *Il Trovatore*, and the *Requiem* in concert. In preparing the role of Elisabetta di Valois in Verdi’s *Don Carlo* there were few recent interpretations to which she could look for clues, as *Don Carlo* did not have the performance tradition of other Verdi operas; when Luchino Visconti’s production had premiered in 1958 it had been the first time the opera had been seen at Covent Garden in the twentieth century.

The working environment was also more difficult than usual. Success, talent and beauty breed envy, and while there had probably always been opposition towards Collier, it now became open. Comments were made about her suitability for the role of

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<sup>8</sup> H.D.R., ‘Tosca’, *Opera*, March 1963, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Tito Gobbi, ‘Marie Collier 1927-1971’, *Opera*, February 1972, pp. 118-19.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Porter, ‘Tosca’, *Financial Times*, 22 May 1963, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Scarpia Died Too Soon’, *Times* (London), 21 May 1963, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Porter, ‘Tosca’, 22 May 1963.



Elisabetta, so openly that Harold Rosenthal publicly ascribed Collier's nervousness to the 'rather cruel things' that had been said about her.<sup>13</sup>

With the revival inserted in the middle of a busy season there was not enough time for thorough rehearsal. The house producer, Ande Anderson, focused on reproducing Visconti's instructions, ensuring the performers knew where they should be standing on the stage rather than helping them explore their characters, and there was a discernible lack of subtlety in the character's interactions.<sup>14</sup> For Collier's colleagues Tito Gobbi and Boris Christoff, who had had much experience in their roles, this was not a problem. For someone new to their role it was; and for someone like Marie, who sometimes needed strong direction, doubly worrying.

When performances started Collier was thus still unsure of how to present Elisabetta, and there was a noticeable lack of focus and energy in her performance. Rosenthal described her as 'tentative',<sup>15</sup> Porter thought she was 'dramatically constrained',<sup>16</sup> and the *Times* thought her Elisabetta 'as yet only a pale shadow of a character who is not much more than that to start with.'<sup>17</sup> Collier left most of the acting to her voice; more than one critic noted an air of resignation appropriate to a woman forced at last to relinquish her love.<sup>18</sup> But the *Observer* heard an awkwardness in the way she sang the Italian, singing 'against' the language and therefore not being able 'to shape Verdi's melodies convincingly'.<sup>19</sup> both the *Guardian* and the *Times* reviewers noted that she was not able to give much sense of the line to long phrases.<sup>20</sup>

A hearing of the 11 April performance, broadcast live on the BBC Third Programme,<sup>21</sup> reinforces the perception of a singer not quite suited to the role. She can sing all the notes required, at times with great beauty and accuracy, with her tone full and thrilling in the climaxes. But she does not have the strong middle range of the traditional Verdi soprano; the longer phrases are uneven, appearing to be constructed note by note; and her fast vibrato sometimes interrupts the flow of the phrase. However she meets

<sup>13</sup> H.D.R, 'Don Carlos. Covent Garden, April 6', *Opera*, April 1963, p. 349.

<sup>14</sup> 'Miss Bumbry's Triumph in Don Carlos', *Times* (London), 8 April 1963, p.14.

<sup>15</sup> H.D.R, 'Don Carlos. Covent Garden, April 6'.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Don Carlos', *Financial Times*, 8 April 1963, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> 'Miss Bumbry's Triumph in Don Carlos'.

<sup>18</sup> H.D.R, 'Don Carlos. Covent Garden, April 6'; Philip Hope-Wallace, 'Don Carlos at Covent Garden', *Guardian*, 8 April 1963, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'Klemperer the Mighty', *Observer*, 14 April 1963, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Hope-Wallace, 'Don Carlos at Covent Garden'; 'Miss Bumbry's Triumph in Don Carlos'.

<sup>21</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *Don Carlos*, radio broadcast, John Pritchard (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 11 April 1963. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording.)

the dramatic challenges of the role. One difficulty of the role is that her major aria 'Tu che le vanita' is placed at the beginning of the last scene; after the performance has already gone for four hours, Elisabetta must sing a ten-minute aria expressing grief and resignation, with several shifts of mood. Collier's performance in the broadcast shows a hint of tiredness, but she is convincing. Her Elisabetta was not one of her great roles, but she was more than just competent in it, and she was right to keep it in her repertoire.

Collier's composure during the *Don Carlo* season was not helped by the fact that she was preparing another new role at the same time. Her performances of the Verdi opera overlapped with rehearsals for a revival of William Walton's *Troilus and Cressida*, which opened at the end of April. Walton's writing suited Collier's voice perfectly, as a recording of the broadcast on 29 April 1963 confirms.<sup>22</sup> Cressida's arias, especially 'At the haunted end of the day' in Act II, have the climactic phrases that show the richness of Collier's tone; as Crichton observed, she sings the role with 'a firm, creamy tone, dead in the middle of the note'.<sup>23</sup> In the love duet with André Turp (as Troilus) she enunciates the text clearly, conveying feeling in spite of the fact that the music sounds more like Walton's early, modernist idiom; but the climaxes are lush, built on effects which seem to have been derived from Ravel and Puccini, and Collier's voice soars out magically. The organisers of the Adelaide Festival were impressed, and they began negotiations to bring the opera, and Collier, to Australia the following year.<sup>24</sup>

In his review of Collier's *Tosca* in May 1963, Harold Rosenthal sympathetically noted that Collier had been 'grossly overworked this season'.<sup>25</sup> This was to a large extent Collier's own decision; she was building a career outside Covent Garden, singing her usual repertoire and adding new works with all the extra work that that entailed. After the *Tosca* performances she went to Scotland, first for a concert with the Scottish National Orchestra under Alexander Gibson at the Stirling Festival,<sup>26</sup> then to Glasgow and Edinburgh to sing with the recently-formed Scottish Opera. In the first half of the evening Collier sang the role of the wife of a missing pilot in Dallapiccola's opera *Night Flight* (*Volo di notte*), coming back in the second half as Concepción in Ravel's *L'heure*

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<sup>22</sup> William Walton, *Troilus and Cressida*, radio broadcast, Malcolm Sargent (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 29 April 1962. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording.)

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Crichton, 'Troilus and Cressida', *Financial Times*, 25 April 1963, p. 24; cf 'Cressida Seen as a Romantic Heroine,' *Times* (London), 24 April 1963, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter Six for this and her other Australian tours.

<sup>25</sup> H.D.R., 'Tosca. Covent Garden, May 20', *Opera*, July 1963, p. 491.

<sup>26</sup> 'Synopsis', *Guardian*, 4 May 1963, p. 5.

*espagnole*. The Dallapiccola work was receiving its British premiere, and was seen as a significant event by critics; that it was refused a radio broadcast was noted by one critic with indignation.<sup>27</sup> Collier's singing was 'outstandingly beautiful',<sup>28</sup> she was fortunate in that her music was the most lyrical, with the rest of the parts written more in *sprechgesang* than melody.<sup>29</sup>

Collier then returned to Covent Garden to sing the role of Guttrune in Hans Hotter's new production of *Götterdämmerung*. As one of the two Gibichung siblings drawn into Hagen's plot to take the Ring of the Nibelung, the role suited her better than any of the Wagner heroines she had considered at the beginning of her career: a fey, sensitive woman caught up in events over which she has no control. Rehearsals occurred throughout August, and the first fruits were offered at a Proms concert on 6 September celebrating the sesquicentenary of Wagner's birth, when the second half comprised *Götterdämmerung* Act III. The *Times* highlighted Collier's effectiveness when it contrasted Birgit Nilsson's 'superhuman poise and compassion' in Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene with 'Gutrune's more hysterical human emotion supplied with attractively sensuous tone by Miss Marie Collier.'<sup>30</sup> When the full production opened on 11 September reviewers focused on Nilsson and Wolfgang Windgassen as Siegfried, then the world's leading performers of those roles; like most of the rest of the cast, Collier was praised in single phrases, 'a fine Guttrune',<sup>31</sup> 'a warmly appealing Guttrune'.<sup>32</sup> A hint as to her dramatic approach comes in Peter Heyworth's comment that 'Marie Collier is not one of nature's wilting Gutrunes, but her big voice rang out most effectively.'<sup>33</sup> Wagner wrote softer accompaniment for Guttrune's lines, to suit smaller voices; but Collier's volume could match that of her *hochdramatische* colleagues. Both the Proms concert and the performance of 14 September were broadcast live on the BBC Third Programme,<sup>34</sup> and in both Collier's best moment occurs in her Act III monologue when she wakes suddenly, calls for Siegfried and expresses her fear about Brünnhilde, each phrase expressing a different emotion with full commitment.

<sup>27</sup> H.D.R., 'Don Carlos. Covent Garden, April 17', *Opera*, June 1963, p. 418.

<sup>28</sup> "'Night Flight" has Imaginative British Premiere', *Times* (London), 30 May 1963, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Hedges, 'Volo di Notte at Glasgow', *Guardian*, 30 May 1963, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> 'Proms Tribute to Wagner', *Times* (London), 7 September 1963, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Götterdämmerung', *Financial Times*, 13 September 1963, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> A.J., 'Götterdämmerung. Covent Garden, September 11', *Opera*, October 1963, p. 706.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'The new Ring takes shape', *Observer*, 15 September 1963, p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Wagner, *Götterdämmerung* radio broadcast, Georg Solti (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company at the Proms, 6 September 1963 (Act III only); Covent Garden Opera Company, 14 September 1963 (full opera). Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recordings.)

When the full cycle was presented the following year Collier sang three roles: the goddess Freia in *Das Rheingold*, the Valkyrie Gerhilde in *Die Walküre* and the Gibichung Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*. All these parts suited her voice well, especially the fey Freia, although the small size of the role led to the dismissive comment from the *Times* reviewer, 'Freia is a squirming beauty queen (Miss Marie Collier gives more than a hint of *The Perils of Pauline*)'.<sup>35</sup>

### *Katerina Ismailova*

At the beginning of October 1963 Collier sang Musetta in three performances of *La bohème*, when an indisposed Giuseppe di Stefano was replaced after one night by 'an attractive singer with a warm, easy, nicely focused lyric tenor voice and an expressive style' named Luciano Pavarotti.<sup>36</sup> Then she began to prepare for her part in the rediscovery of another twentieth-century masterpiece.

At its first appearance Dmitri Shostakovich's 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was a huge success, running for over 200 performances in two productions in Leningrad and Moscow, and appearing in Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia, London, Prague, Ljubljana, Zurich and Copenhagen within two years.<sup>37</sup> But in January 1936 a 'review' of the opera appeared in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* criticising the style of the music and declaring that the work was composed 'in an intentionally "inside-out" manner', calculated to undermine the artform, to appeal to the bourgeoisie and to offend the Soviet audience.<sup>38</sup> The article was most likely written at Stalin's order as part of a wider attack on unacceptable elements in music, with *Lady Macbeth* merely a convenient target.<sup>39</sup> The opera was withdrawn from Soviet stages, and further productions around the globe became impossible as the Soviet authorities maintained control over the copies of the score.

In 1954 Shostakovich began major revisions to the opera. The accepted story is that the rewriting was a response to a compromise offer from the Soviet authorities: if

<sup>35</sup> 'Imposing Settings For New Ring', *Times* (London), 4 September 1964, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> 'Puccini Revival Under Sille', *Times* (London), 23 September 1963, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Cooper, 'Introduction to "Katerina Ismailova"', *Opera*, December 1963, p. 794.

<sup>38</sup> P.M. Kerzhentsev, 'Muddle Instead of Music: Concerning the Opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*', *Pravda*, 28 January 1936, p. 3; reprinted in Kevin M.F. Platt and David Brandenburger (eds), *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 136-38.

<sup>39</sup> Simo Mikkonen, "'Muddle instead of music" in 1936: cataclysm of musical administration', in Pauline Fairclough (ed.), *Shostakovich Studies 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 233.

Shostakovich rewrote the unacceptable portions, the opera would be allowed to be performed.<sup>40</sup> However Shostakovich took the initiative himself to correct what he thought were musical errors, without consideration of a possible performance. He had already started rewriting soon after the opera first appeared, changing the music and toning down the sexual explicitness of the language and imagery, alterations which appeared in the vocal score published in 1935.<sup>41</sup> Now Shostakovich made Katerina's vocal line less difficult, and further reduced the vulgarity; one scholar suggests this may have been the act of a discreet middle-class father of teenaged daughters revising his youthful enthusiasm rather than a response to official disapproval.<sup>42</sup> However motivated, the changes were acceptable to the authorities, and although several planned productions fell through, the revised version was premiered in Moscow in 1962 with the more sympathetic title of *Katerina Ismailova*. Edward Downes secured the rights for a Covent Garden production, translated the libretto into English, and began rehearsals with the cast in September 1963.

The following month the composer himself came to London for the final part of the rehearsal period. Those working on the production were aware of the political background, but there was a tacit understanding that those issues were not to be discussed with Shostakovich.<sup>43</sup> It was a rare privilege for the cast and the conductor to learn what the composer had intended. Shostakovich's English was very limited—he and Downes got by in a mixture of Russian and German—and he had little direct interaction with the singers, but he was able to convey how he wanted them to perform the piece.<sup>44</sup> He criticised Downes's tempi as too slow, and insisted that the contrasts between the quiet and loud sections of music be extreme.<sup>45</sup> Collier had worked on the score with Dawson Freer,<sup>46</sup> and found that Shostakovich's metronome and expression marks coincided with her feeling for how the part should be sung. The composer did not have to give her much instruction; she told an interviewer, 'He must just say to you, "Not so much *ritenuto* there or a little quicker here, I *meant* this metronome marking",

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<sup>40</sup> The soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, who sang the role in the 1966 film of the opera, takes this line in her autobiography. Galina Vishnevskaya, *Galina: A Russian Story* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 352.

<sup>41</sup> Laurel Fay, 'From *Lady Macbeth* to *Katerina*: Shostakovich's versions and revisions', in David Fanning (ed.), *Shostakovich Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 163.

<sup>42</sup> Fay, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Mackerras, interview with Jon Tolansky, *I remember Shostakovich*, WFMT Chicago, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Edgar Evans, interview with Robert Little, October 2006. (Unpublished.)

<sup>45</sup> Edward Downes, interview with Jon Tolansky, *I remember Shostakovich*, WFMT Chicago, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Evans, interview with Robert Little.

when you say “This is terribly fast”. He says, “I really meant it at 112 to the crotchet” or something like that.’<sup>47</sup>

The first performance took place on 2 December. Shostakovich had been nervous before the opening night, but need not have been; at the end of the night he took a curtain call by himself, and a laurel wreath was placed around his neck.<sup>48</sup> He thanked each of the cast members, announcing that Evans had been the best Zinoviy he had ever encountered,<sup>49</sup> and telling Collier in halting English, ‘You—are—a Russian—woman—in—side.’<sup>50</sup>

Shostakovich’s review was the most poetic of a number of similar observations. Andrew Porter thought Collier gave ‘the performance of her life; her very demeanour is eloquent of the constraint imposed upon her, of the only flowering possible to her, eventually of her tragic fate. She looks, she moves, she is even shaped, in a way that seems particular to Shostakovich’s heroine.’<sup>51</sup> The *Sunday Times* noted her resemblance to the description of Katerina in Leskov’s original story and declared it ‘a great personal triumph’.<sup>52</sup> The *Times* simply said it was ‘much the best interpretation that this gifted singing actress has given us’.<sup>53</sup>

Collier’s singing was as well-regarded as her physical performance. A recording of the third performance on 13 December, broadcast live on BBC Third Programme,<sup>54</sup> supports Porter’s observation that that ‘Her singing is full and passionate, her tones responsive to each turn of the drama.’<sup>55</sup> From the beginning her intonation is accurate, more so than her colleagues, and her enunciation of the English text in the spoken passages makes these sections as compelling as the fully-sung passages. Collier chooses her effects carefully; where the score offers alternative notes she takes the higher option, and otherwise she departs from the score only to underscore the meaning of the words, for example moving between two notes in an unwritten

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Thomas Cassidy, *Luncheon at the Music Center*, KFAC Los Angeles, 11 November 1965.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Murderess who Demands our Sympathy’, *Times* (London), 3 December 1963, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Little, *Edgar Evans—Extempore* (St Albans, Herts: Bob Little Press & PR, 2005), p. 69.

<sup>50</sup> *Luncheon at the Music Center*.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Porter, ‘Katerina Ismailova’, *Financial Times*, 4 December 1963, p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Desmond Shawe-Taylor, ‘Explosion of genius’, *Sunday Times*, 8 December 1963, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Murderess who Demands our Sympathy’.

<sup>54</sup> Dmitri Shostakovich, *Katerina Ismailova*, radio broadcast, Edward Downes (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 13 December 1963. Broadcast BBC Third Programme.

<sup>55</sup> Porter, ‘Katerina Ismailova’.

*glissando*.<sup>56</sup> Her tone is full, but she adds vibrato so that it is both bright and tremulous at the same time, beautiful singing which is dramatic and unsettling when it accompanies lines such as 'Ah! This dreadful boredom... it's enough to make one hang oneself.' When she sings of life without love and sexual connection she conveys a longing and pain that inspired the *Times's* description of 'her eyes turned always to a sun that has never shone upon her.'<sup>57</sup>

Some of the later reviews found Collier less than ideal for the role.<sup>58</sup> But the initial positive response remained. Some of the London reviewers reprised their opinions in the American press, further raising her profile.<sup>59</sup> Kurt Herbert Adler of the San Francisco Opera realised that here was the perfect vehicle in which to present her, and Collier signed a contract to make her United States debut as Katerina the following year. After the first reviews had appeared Covent Garden announced four more performances of the opera for January, a longer run than *King Priam* had received in its first season; and as was the practice with new operas that had been well-received, Covent Garden brought *Katerina Ismailova* back for a short run at the end of the following year, after Collier's performances in San Francisco.<sup>60</sup>

Her Katerina was an example of how well Collier could perform with the right preparation. It consolidated her reputation in England and America, and her artistic achievement, of a level she had not before reached, gave her a momentum which flowed into her next role, which would become one of her most legendary.

### *The Makropulos Case*

At Sadler's Wells the exploration of Janáček's works had continued. In 1961 the company presented *The Cunning Little Vixen* with June Bronhill in the title role, and revived *Katya Kabanova* with Amy Shuard. The fourth major Janáček work to be performed in Britain, *The Makropulos Case* opened at Sadler's Wells Theatre on 12 February 1964 with Charles Mackerras conducting. The cast featured Marie Collier as

<sup>56</sup> A *glissando* is an even glide between two notes.

<sup>57</sup> 'Murderess who Demands our Sympathy'.

<sup>58</sup> John S. Weissmann, 'Shostakovich's *Katerina Ismailova*', *Tempo*, New Series No. 68, Spring 1964, p. 39; A.J. [Arthur Jacobs], 'Katerina Ismailova. Covent Garden, December 4, 10', *Opera*, January 1964, pp. 65-6.

<sup>59</sup> For example Andrew Porter, 'Shostakovich Sees London Acclaim His "Katerina"', *New York Times*, 3 December 1963, p. 52; and Peter Heyworth, "'Lady" in London', *New York Times*, 13 December 1963, p. 127.

<sup>60</sup> After the orchestral score of the original version was published in 1979 the opera became part of the repertory.

Emilia Marty, the charismatic opera singer with a life-or-death interest in the outcome of a one-hundred-year-old probate case, and the baritone Raimund Herincx and the Australian tenor Gregory Dempsey as Jaroslav Prus and Albert Gregor, the two plaintiffs.

The critics praised the opera as a piece of music theatre and hailed Collier. Andrew Porter thought it 'a brilliant, striking performance, one to set beside her Katerina Ismailova.'<sup>61</sup> Collier was singing at her best, with strength and clarity, and clear diction that cut through the sometimes overpowering orchestra, 'with a strength and sympathetic timbre that might well make one believe she had been perfecting her vocal technique for 300 years'.<sup>62</sup> Her personal charisma and physicality supported her characterisation. Phrases used by the critics describe a dominating stage presence: 'she towers raven-haired over time',<sup>63</sup> said one reviewer, and another noted Collier's 'capricious grandeur'.<sup>64</sup> In his review for *Opera*, penned after having seen two performances, Arthur Jacobs commented that in spite of the 'warmth and range of tone' that Collier brought to the role 'her performance could have been more varied in expression, more finely shaded'.<sup>65</sup> For once it was an interpretative issue in Collier's performance, not a structural weakness, that was in question. The only flaw in the staging seemed to be the way her decline in the last act was presented; Collier overplayed her drunkenness,<sup>66</sup> and the director's choice to turn Marty into an aged crone did not convince the critics.<sup>67</sup>

The performance of 21 February was broadcast live on the BBC Third Programme,<sup>68</sup> and the recording shows how well she sang. Throughout the opera her diction is very clear, and she hits each note accurately. From her first appearance in Act I her tone is strong, but light, a high voice without heft. She does not use the lower overtones in her voice, so that she sounds 'girlish'; but is convincingly manipulative and cruel. The speech rhythm of the dialogue does not allow her any lyrical passages until the final act;

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<sup>61</sup> Andrew Porter, 'The Makropulos Case', *Financial Times*, 14 February 1964, p. 28.

<sup>62</sup> 'Potent Brew of Janacek and Karel Capek', *Times* (London), 13 February 1964, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> J. W. Lambert, 'Janáček pursues fantasy at Sadler's Wells', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 February 1964, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> David Cairns, 'The Makropulos Case', *Spectator*, 21 February 1964, p. 23.

<sup>65</sup> A.J., 'The Makropulos Case. Sadler's Wells, February 12, 21', *Opera*, April 1964, p. 278.

<sup>66</sup> Colin Moore, 'Janacek First Performance at Sadler's Wells', *Guardian*, 13 February 1964, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Porter, 'The Makropulos Case'; Winton Dean, 'The Makropulos Case', *Musical Times*, April 1964, p. 281.

<sup>68</sup> Leoš Janáček, *The Makropulos Case*, radio broadcast, Charles Mackerras (conductor), Sadler's Wells Opera Company, 21 February 1964. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording.)



she sings in full voice when she confesses her extreme age, and her lower range gives an added profundity to her dying.

Collier's portrayal of Emilia Marty, following so closely that of Katerina, showed that at last she was capable of producing striking and convincing interpretations of varied characters, fully-formed instead of slowly-evolving. Andrew Porter was impressed by Collier's portrayal when the opera had first appeared; when she performed it again in 1965 he declared it to be 'the role of her career'.<sup>69</sup>

With modern operas Collier had found a niche that would make her different from other performers of her time. Joan Sutherland, for example, had been put off contemporary opera by her experiences performing the premiere of Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage* at Covent Garden in 1955.<sup>70</sup> But Collier enjoyed performing contemporary works, not so much for the style of music as for the opportunities for characterisation. 'I think I prefer modern roles because they give you a chance to be a real person and to stretch your acting ability,' she told an interviewer in 1968.<sup>71</sup> It was not her custom to intellectualise her work, and Collier did not position herself as an evangelist for modern opera. In her comments to journalists she spoke mainly of the practical performance aspects rather than extolling their virtues as art; but she gave as equal attention to modern operas as to the more traditional roles in her repertoire.<sup>72</sup>

### *Tosca*, America and television

In January 1964 David Webster had lured Maria Callas back to Covent Garden with a new production of *Tosca*, replacing the decaying sets that had served the Royal Opera House since the work was first produced there in 1900.<sup>73</sup> The critics enjoyed the realism of the new settings, but even more they appreciated the fireworks provided by the performers, especially Callas in the title role and Tito Gobbi as Scarpia.<sup>74</sup>

Expectations were lower when the company brought the production back in May with a different cast. But the critics were surprised by the improvement in Collier's

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Porter, 'The Makropulos Case', *Financial Times*, 7 May 1965, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> Brian Adams, *La Stupenda* (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, rev. ed. 1993), pp. 63-65. After this experience Sutherland only performed in or recorded one post-Puccini opera, Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, at Covent Garden in 1958 and in Sydney in 1984.

<sup>71</sup> Alan Blyth, 'Marie Collier', *Opera*, December 1968, p. 957.

<sup>72</sup> See for example *Luncheon at the Music Center*.

<sup>73</sup> Directed by Franco Zeffirelli, with sets by Renzo Mongiardino and costumes by Marcel Escoffier, the production received over 230 performances at Covent Garden, the last in 2004. The sets and costumes were then sold to Chicago Lyric Opera. See Rupert Christiansen, 'The opera that made history', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 1 July 2004.

<sup>74</sup> 'Tosca New, Realistic and in Detail', *Times* (London), 22 January 1964, p. 17.

performance. They applauded her musical decisions, how Tosca's Act II aria 'Vissi d'arte' 'grew very naturally and expressively from the situation of the moment, instead of sounding like an inserted set-piece',<sup>75</sup> and how the ensuing negotiations between Tosca and Scarpia in Act II were sung as effectively as the more lyrical sections.<sup>76</sup> There were no problems with pitch or tone, and the *Times* felt that 'the generosity of Miss Marie Collier's best singing and the creamy warmth of her tone every now and again allowed the performance to take wing.'<sup>77</sup> Her acting choices received conflicting evaluations. Where the *Times* appreciated that Collier played the role with her customary girlish interpretation, Arthur Jacobs in *Opera* found the gaucheness unnatural for Collier and unbelievable for the type of person he thought Tosca should be. The *Times* found her sudden grabbing of the knife consonant with her impulsive characterisation; but *Opera* found that it 'neither revealed her mind nor seemed plausible as an action.'<sup>78</sup> But at other time she was convincing in the way she responded to the drama. Jacobs noted, 'When Cavaradossi burst out with his "Vittoria! Vittoria!", her alarm conveyed splendidly her fear that her lover's reckless declaration of his revolutionary principles would lead him straight back to the torture chamber.'<sup>79</sup> While in comparison with the Callas and Gobbi performances the season may merely have been of a 'distinguished repertory standard',<sup>80</sup> it was becoming evident that Collier's portrayal was finally reaching its potential.

But Marie had found the experience difficult. The pressure in following Callas was enormous. John Higgins summarised the problem: 'It was all very well to say at the time [of Callas's performances], as we all did, that here was the standard for generations to come, but was a sympathetic thought spared for those who had to follow in due course Callas, Gobbi and Cioni?'<sup>81</sup> A year later Marie confessed to a journalist that she had 'ended up in a nursing home for two weeks. You have no idea what it is like trying to live up to someone else's image.'<sup>82</sup> That Collier resisted the temptation to alter her portrayal and stayed with the one that allowed her to display her own strengths is testament to her resilience, but it came at a cost. The 'two weeks' may have been an exaggeration, as she had concert commitments and rehearsals for a

<sup>75</sup> 'The Splendours Are Visual', *Times* (London), 14 May 1964, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> A.J., 'Tosca. Covent Garden, May 15', *Opera*, July 1964.

<sup>77</sup> 'The Splendours Are Visual'.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Splendours Are Visual'; A.J., 'Tosca. Covent Garden, May 15'.

<sup>79</sup> A.J., 'Tosca. Covent Garden, May 15'.

<sup>80</sup> 'Briefing: Opera and Ballet', *Observer*, 17 May 1964, p. 22.

<sup>81</sup> John Higgins, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 15 May 1964, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> Sydney Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie', *Evening Standard*, 1 July 1965.

regional tour coming up; but it is possible that she did have to take a few days rest under medical supervision. Perhaps Collier might have found Arthur Jacobs's assessment of her Tosca gratifying; although he did not find her acting as convincing as Callas's, he had thought that Collier's was 'the better sung performance'.<sup>83</sup> But that review did not appear for another month.

Marie Collier's American debut in October 1964 combined the excitement of high culture with the chill of the Cold War. The once-banned Soviet opera *Katerina Ismailova* was now appearing in the land of the free, for two performances in San Francisco and one in Los Angeles. Critics concentrated on the work rather than the singers, praising the music and condemning the clumsy libretto.<sup>84</sup> They praised the singers in brief, broad terms: as Zinoviï, Jon Vickers had 'appropriate brutishness and ringing vocalism', and in parallel phrasing, Collier's portrayal was 'superlatively acted and forcefully sung';<sup>85</sup> an audience recording of the first performance confirms the latter.<sup>86</sup>

Collier had made an impact as a 'superb singing-actress'<sup>87</sup> but carried out publicity in order to ensure that she was widely visible. As in England she called upon the elements of her domestic and professional lives in order to create a similar image, but with subtle differences reflecting the different opera environment in America. Just before the Los Angeles performance an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>88</sup> The article explicitly presented the 'diva and mother' image, emphasising the points of identification with female readers while opening a window into a glamorous world. Starting with the declaration, 'Marie Collier's favourite role is being a mother, her next favourite being an opera star', it examined the two aspects in that order and priority. It described the enforced absences from her family ('usually of 3 weeks' duration') and listed the children (with their ages), the dog and two cats. The diva preferred to spend her free time with the family and thought of going to Covent Garden as "'going to the office'". Then came a cooking hint: 'In her role as mother she likes "throwing together

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<sup>83</sup> A.J., 'Tosca. Covent Garden, May 15'.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander Fried, 'Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth" Is Now "Katerina"', *New York Times*, 1 November 1964, p. X11.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Riley, 'Soviet opera given U.S. premiere', *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 November 1964, p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Dmitri Shostakovich, *Katerina Ismailova*, in-house recording, Leopold Ludwig (conductor), San Francisco Opera Association, 23 October 1964. (Private recording.)

<sup>87</sup> Fried, 'Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth" Is Now "Katerina"'.  
<sup>88</sup> Kim Blair, 'Free Time With Family: Opera Singing Is 9-to-5 Job With Australian Diva', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1964, p. B1.

something tasty in the kitchen." The children's favourite treat is lamingtons, a rich buttery sheet cake cut into squares and dipped into runny chocolate and then in coconut.' The soprano had to watch her weight, but still enjoyed steak and potatoes with chives and cream.

A list of Collier's achievements underlined her role as the artist, and the writer's language underlined her status. The phrase 'opera star' was sprinkled liberally throughout the piece, and a further element of glamour came from the use of the formal 'Miss Collier': 'Miss Collier will leave Tuesday', 'Miss Collier, who says...', 'Miss Collier is making her American debut...' It reminded the readers that she was a diva, distant from the audience.

This was not the informal 'Marie' portrayed in an interview that appeared in the Australian women's magazine *New Idea* a few months earlier. Collier had been interviewed by Jo Harvey in May in between *Tosca* rehearsals in the Nag's Head pub, a few yards away from the stage door of the Royal Opera House in Floral Street, a detail providing a point of location for Australian and British readers. The piece was typical of the women's magazine interview of the time, describing her personality, appearance, and domestic life amongst details of her busy career. After a short description of her Australian career to jog the reader's memory, and a reference to her approaching US debut, Harvey declared her theme: 'The biggest problem in Marie's life is combining motherhood with a career in opera.' The article described her family, her home in Cookham, and how 'she has a girl to help her with the cooking and housework.' Harvey drew a comparison with Joan Sutherland: where Sutherland had only one child and was married to someone in the business, Marie had four children and her husband was not an opera lover. But he still supported her, 'bravely' sitting through performances of operas like *Tannhäuser* and *Götterdämmerung*, except for occasional visits to the cinema and the Nag's Head, in order to drive her home after the last train had left.

Harvey described Collier as 'a radiant, friendly woman, easy to talk to', with 'flashing eyes and wonderfully manageable black hair, longer than shoulder length, which she wears loosely coiled at the back of her head' and 'a long-legged, good figure'.<sup>89</sup> Accompanied by a photo of Marie and her four children, the article drew a picture of a caring mother and successful artist about to embark on a new chapter of her career,

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<sup>89</sup> Jo Harvey, 'The Darling of Covent Garden', *New Idea*, 24 June 1964, pp. 5-7.

someone you might meet in the pub down the road, in contrast to the successful middle-class mother who was also the exalted diva that Americans read about. The same image was tailored for a different audience, crafted to match the market and its expectations.

Collier was now taking every opportunity to work during the breaks between operas. After the season of *Tosca* in May 1964, for example, she went north to Scotland for a recital at the Stirling Festival, then travelled to Glasgow to record excerpts from Richard Strauss's *Guntram* with the BBC Scottish Symphony for a broadcast marking the centenary of Strauss's birth. A week later she travelled to Liverpool to sing the Penitent in Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the combined Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and BBC Northern Orchestras under Charles Groves. After a few weeks' break she sang in Verdi's *Requiem* at Westminster before joining the Covent Garden touring company to sing Musetta and Butterfly in northern England.<sup>90</sup>

Television viewers had the opportunity to see Collier perform at greater length than in her variety-show appearances. Tito Gobbi had joined forces with the BBC producer Patricia Foy to create a series for BBC Television on *Great Characters in Opera*. In each of seven episodes Gobbi examined one of the characters in his repertoire, with excerpts in costume enacted in the television studio to a recorded soundtrack.<sup>91</sup> Marie Collier joined him for two instalments exploring Puccini's *Il tabarro* and *Tosca*. The *Il tabarro* episode<sup>92</sup> was recorded when Collier was still developing the role for a season at Covent Garden. The film is entertaining rather than exciting, reflecting a lack of engagement with the role that was to become evident in the stage performances in April 1965, when critics were unconvinced by her portrayal even though her vocal performance was technically good.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> 'Stirling Festival Fortnight', *Glasgow Herald*, 29 October 1963, p. 6; 'Richard Strauss: excerpts from some less familiar operas' (BBC Programme Number 14SX5482); BBC Scottish Symphony, Norman del Mar (conductor). Recorded 22 May 1964 in Glasgow; broadcast on the BBC Third Programme on 26 July 1964; *Radio Times*, 21 May 1964, p. 60; 'Chorus of 600 voices' (advertisement), *Times* (London), 20 June 1964, p. 2; J.H. Elliot, 'La Boheme in Manchester', *Guardian*, 25 June 1964, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> 'Productive new line', *Observer*, 21 November 1965, p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> *Great Characters in Opera*, 5: *Il Tabarro*, television broadcast, BBC1, 18 February 1966. Recorded 1965. (BBC Programme Number LMA7011W).

<sup>93</sup> Mosco Carner, 'Il Trittico. Covent Garden, April 12, 23', *Opera*, June 1965, p. 451; Andrew Porter, 'Trittico', *Financial Times*, 30 April 1965, p. 28; see also Giacomo Puccini, *Il Tabarro*, radio broadcast, John Pritchard (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 23 April 1965. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording.)

The *Tosca* episode is a far greater revelation.<sup>94</sup> In the film Collier's way of making sense of Tosca's situation is to demonstrate that she does not consider Scarpia to be unequivocally repellent. In the Act I excerpt when Scarpia offers her holy water Tosca is clearly aroused by his attention. In the Act II scene she is conflicted when Scarpia sings of his passion for her. Collier presents a woman who is perhaps not the 'highly sexed' Tosca of reviews, but one who is responsive to love and attention. With the advantage of the close-up we can see that every reaction has been carefully considered and flows out of the text. This is not the kind of performance Collier would have given on the stage; she has made her gestures more subtle for the television camera, and her movements are constrained by the physical limits of the studio set; nevertheless, as no film exists of Collier performing on the opera stage, this is a valuable document of the way she approached one of her major roles.

## Replacing Callas

The *Tosca* episode of *Great Characters in Opera* went to air in November 1965. By that time television viewers were already aware of Collier's *Tosca*, because in July it had been in newspapers across the world: Collier had become a star by replacing Callas.

David Webster, the administrator at Covent Garden, adored Callas, and had made many attempts to get her to return to the house after she had sung Luigi Cherubini's *Medea* in 1959. Callas withdrew from the opera stage for several years in the early 1960s, but Webster kept asking, finally succeeding with the promise of a new production of *Tosca* in 1964 to be directed by her friend Franco Zeffirelli. Although her voice was in decline she was acclaimed for those performances.<sup>95</sup> Webster convinced Callas to return the following year, but by then Callas's voice was in tatters; a month before the season she withdrew during the last act of Bellini's *Norma* at the Paris Opéra, unable to finish the performance.<sup>96</sup> In the last week of June Callas advised Webster that she must withdraw. Webster flew to Paris to try to persuade her otherwise, but managed only to convince her to appear at the royal gala evening that had been arranged for 5 July.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> *Great Characters in Opera, 1: Scarpia in Tosca*, television broadcast, BBC1, 26 November 1965. Recorded 8-9 February 1965. (BBC Programme Number LMA7001E).

<sup>95</sup> 'Tosca New, Realistic and in Detail', *Times* (London), 22 January 1964, p. 17.

<sup>96</sup> 'Month's Rest For Mme. Callas.' *Times* (London) 1 June 1965, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Scott, *Maria Meneghini Callas*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 1991), p.239.

Collier had been preparing for another difficult role as Renata in the British premiere of Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel*. At the end of June she received a piece of good news: Francesco Siciliani, artistic director of the Teatro alla Scala, had been impressed by reports of her *Makropulos* performance in Paris in May and wanted to hear her.<sup>98</sup> She arranged to meet him during a break in rehearsals.

On Wednesday 30 June Marie had had a long day's rehearsal at Sadler's Wells. When she got home to Cookham at 8.30pm she was greeted by Victor with the message that Covent Garden had called and wanted her to ring back as soon as she arrived. She felt too tired, but rang anyway. Webster explained that Callas had cancelled and that he wanted Collier to go on in her place in two days' time. Collier felt it was impossible; but Webster convinced her. There would have to be a drastic rearrangement of her schedule, and the meeting with Siciliani, planned for the next day, would have to be postponed until the weekend.<sup>99</sup>

Marie got to bed late, then rose at 6am. She boiled an egg but wanted to vomit, so she went without breakfast. The rehearsal was at 10am; Marie took the train to Paddington and went through the part with the score. Later she told a journalist, '[I] must have been using all the facial expressions necessary because I looked up and there was a business gentleman looking at me in a very surprised way.' She got to Covent Garden, still early, and sat quietly in her dressing room. A cleaning lady asked her if she would like a cup of tea. That was the only sustenance she could manage before the rehearsal.<sup>100</sup>

Part of her nervousness was due to her temperament; she approached stressful demands with nervous energy instead of calm. But she was afraid of being found to be not good enough. Later that day she sat down for an extended conversation with Sydney Edwards of the *Evening Standard* and shared her feelings in detail:

I am terrified of the public tomorrow night. They will expect Callas and they are not really interested in me. There will be this terrific Callas image in front of their eyes. I had to take over from Callas last year when the production was revived and I ended up in a nursing home for two weeks. You have no idea what it is like trying to live up to someone else's image.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> 'Stand-in Gets Milan Offer', *Daily Mirror* (London), 2 July 1965.

<sup>99</sup> Betty Best, 'Australian singer in limelight', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 21 July 1965, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Sydney Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie', *Evening Standard*, 1 July 1965.

<sup>101</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'.

The 'Callas image' was 'terrific' in the original sense. Callas's reputation was a fearsome thing to have to live up to: she was the operatic artist *par excellence*. In the 1950s she had become legendary for bringing a dramatic soprano's sensibility and power to coloratura roles previously thought of as 'light', showing depths in the roles that had not been seen in living memory and revitalizing the *bel canto* repertoire. She married a deep understanding of the text and the music with a highly responsive voice and the ability to convey feeling and expression across the orchestra into the auditorium. She fulfilled the public's perceptions of the diva; the artistic impact of her performances created excitement amongst audiences and the press, and she was a celebrity, known for controversy as much as art.<sup>102</sup> Some despised the enthusiasm that surrounded her performances, a *Times* critic once describing 'the noisy, vulgar, artificial, vacuous philistinism of a hyper-typical Callas first-night audience'.<sup>103</sup> But a Callas night was an event, and any singer replacing her faced a formidable psychological challenge. After the cancellation was announced the seat prices were reduced: the £24 seats became £10 15s, six guinea seats became £2 10s 6d and 12s 6d seats became 8s. Audience members collected their refunds at the box office when they arrived, and could also return their tickets for a full refund if they did not wish to see Collier.<sup>104</sup> Even though the prices for Callas had been unnaturally high, the message that Collier was not worth as much as Callas could not have been encouraging,

In ordinary circumstances the revival would have been directed by a house producer, but Zeffirelli had returned to Covent Garden to help Callas. He watched the rehearsal from the stalls. Although Collier had performed in the production the year before she had not worked with the tenor Renato Cioni or the conductor Georges Prêtre. Fortunately her friend Tito Gobbi was playing Scarpia, and he provided crucial advice, quietly reminding Marie of her stage business before each entrance. But she still made musical mistakes, coming to a dead stop at one point during Act I. She had still not mentally adjusted to performing Puccini; as she explained later, 'All this morning the Prokofiev music has been getting mixed up with the Tosca music.' Cioni gave her a hug to calm her, and she continued, with growing confidence.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> For assessments of Callas's reputation see Raymond Ericson, 'Maria Callas, 53, Is Dead of Heart Attack in Paris', *New York Times*, 17 Sep 1977, p. 49; and Harold C. Schonberg, 'Soprano Led Bel Canto Revival', *New York Times*, 17 Sep 1977, p. 49.

<sup>103</sup> 'Tosca New, Realistic and in Detail', *Times* (London), 22 January 1964, p. 17.

<sup>104</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'.

<sup>105</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'.



After the first act Zeffirelli sent an encouraging note from the stalls, but an even better piece of paper arrived in the second interval. Francesco Siciliani had also been watching; after Act II he appeared in Collier's dressing room and offered her a contract to sing at La Scala, in *Pagliacci* and *Tosca*.<sup>106</sup> A life-long dream was coming true.

When the curtain finally came down at the end of the rehearsal Collier did not have a chance to relax. Her agent Sandor Gorlinsky had ensured that several journalists were in the audience for the rehearsal. The announcement of the contract made a good story even more newsworthy. Collier posed for press photos with Gobbi in her dressing room, then got away for lunch at *La Dolce Vita*, a favourite Italian restaurant in Soho, where she talked with journalists about her experiences of the last eighteen hours.<sup>107</sup> Then it was back to work for coaching with Zeffirelli, after a photo opportunity outside the stage door with two of the performers in that evening's presentation of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, two donkeys allegedly named Moses and Aaron.<sup>108</sup>

The story was broken in London by the *Evening Standard* that night, but it was already spreading around the world. The Melbourne *Herald* ran a piece the next day, the London *Times* reporting it a few hours later, and other Australian newspapers reporting it in their Saturday editions, just about the time that Collier was going on stage for her first performance.<sup>109</sup> Although the reports had a by-line or were by a 'Staff Correspondent', most had the same information and often the same wording, supplied by Gorlinsky or the Covent Garden press office. But regardless of the source, it is significant that the information was used; it was a newsworthy event.

All reports presented the contract as a surprise, as a 'star is born' moment: the artistic administrator of La Scala just happened to be in the theatre that day and was so thrilled by what he heard he hurried backstage with a blank contract he just happened to have in his pocket. The true story, that Siciliani had already had an appointment to hear Collier, did not emerge until Collier gave an interview to the *Australian Women's Weekly* after the season.<sup>110</sup> The news of the contract provoked press speculation about Callas's cancellation, already being called 'one of the strangest affairs in opera

<sup>106</sup> 'Offer by La Scala To Callas Stand-in', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 2 July 1965.

<sup>107</sup> D.F. Colquhoun, 'Another Opera Star Is Born', *Sun* (Melbourne), 3 July 1965, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> Jenny Rees, 'La Scala sign up Callas stand-in', *Sun* (London), 2 July 1965.

<sup>109</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'; Noel Hawken, 'La Scala's latest Australian', *Herald* (Melbourne), 2 July 1965; 'La Scala Offer To Miss Collier', *Times* (London), 2 July 1965, p. 12; 'La Scala contract to Aust. Soprano', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July 1965; Colquhoun, 'Another Opera Star Is Born'.

<sup>110</sup> Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.

history'.<sup>111</sup> The story had been put about that she had withdrawn because of 'low blood pressure'.<sup>112</sup> But it was noted that Callas was expected to be well enough to sing one performance, the gala event which by tradition would not be reviewed. The implication could only be that Callas was nervous about the critical response to her singing.<sup>113</sup> The speculation boosted Collier at Callas's expense.

Marie passed the Friday quietly, resting her voice. For her the performance would begin not when the curtain went up but when she arrived at the opera house. The BBC sent a film crew for a segment to be shown on the 9pm bulletin. It followed Marie in through the stage door and along the corridors to her dressing room, which was smothered in gifts and flowers that continued to arrive as they filmed.<sup>114</sup> Marie played up for the cameras, but probably would have preferred to be left alone.

Tosca's first appearance is offstage, as she sings to her lover, 'Mario! Mario! Mario!' then comes on for a scene with him. It was designed to be a prima donna's entrance, bringing all attention to the singer. For Marie it became the worst part of the performance. The moment she set foot on stage the audience burst into a storm of applause and cheers, so loud that she could not hear the orchestra; she could only follow the conductor's cue and trust that she had the correct pitch.<sup>115</sup> The enthusiasm continued; at the end of Act I the audience brought her back for seven curtain calls.<sup>116</sup> Webster was pleased, and made a point of phoning her in her dressing room to tell her so.<sup>117</sup> In the Act II encounter between Tosca and Scarpia the *Times* observed that Collier was 'sparing nothing in tone or temperament to bring tension to breaking point';<sup>118</sup> she became so involved that she worried that she would not be able to sing 'Vissi d'arte'.<sup>119</sup> But she pressed on, and the storm of applause when she finished brought the opera to a halt. Tosca stabbed Scarpia, the second interval passed, and Tosca and Cavaradossi sang their way to their deaths in Act III. For Collier the greatest satisfaction of the night was to know that, as she threw herself over the battlements, she still had plenty of voice left.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'.

<sup>112</sup> 'La Scala contract to Aust. Soprano'.

<sup>113</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'.

<sup>114</sup> *BBC TV News*, 2 July 1965 (BBC Programme Number ANB5434A).

<sup>115</sup> Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.

<sup>116</sup> 'Callas Substitute Wins Big Ovation in London', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 1965, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.

<sup>118</sup> 'Triumphant Revival of Tosca', *Times* (London), 3 July 1965, p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> 'Stand-in for Callas triumphs in "Tosca"', *Halifax Courier and Guardian*, 3 July 1965.

<sup>120</sup> Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.

With the final chords the excitement that had been building throughout the performance finally exploded. The audience cheered, called 'Bravo' and stamped their feet. Collier was brought out before the curtain again and again, for a total of fourteen times. She curtsied, spread her arms to the audience and blew kisses. Behind the curtain she exclaimed, 'It is almost like sleepwalking in a way. You can't believe the audience wants you back again.' Bouquets were brought on to the stage, and roses and gladioli were thrown from the stalls and the boxes. Collier had given them the triumph that they wanted, and they applauded for twenty minutes until only the diehard fans were still in the house.<sup>121</sup>

Marie and Victor celebrated the night with a supper at the Savoy with Gorlinsky, Gobbi, Cioni, and their wives,<sup>122</sup> then with the car loaded with bouquets Victor drove her home to Cookham at 3am. Marie was up again at 8.30 and had to wash in the sink because the bath was full of flowers. As she was reading the glowing reviews in the Saturday papers the phone began to ring. Newspapers wanted a quote, and the BBC wanted to make a film that would be shown in Australia – could they come to her home this morning? She agreed, and arranged for the boys to get out of boarding school half a day early. She did some washing, got the meals, and enlisted the help of the children to pin up the telegrams, including one from Callas, one from her mentor Mina Shelley, another from the widow of Ugo Benvenuto-Giusti, her teacher in Milan. For one day the two worlds of the housewife diva met.

A press photographer arrived and took photos of the diva in her domestic element: standing at the kitchen sink washing cups, and hanging the washing in the yard (see frontispiece). They took the children down to the Thames and photographed the family with the swans and in other picturesque settings around the village (Figure 4). There was none of the 'sexy star' approach that had accompanied her first success in 1952; here she was the mum who was also the glamorous star, an image that presented her sexuality without salaciousness, and preserved the dignity becoming the diva.

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<sup>121</sup> '20-minute ovation for Miss Collier', *Guardian*, 3 July 1965, p. 1; 'Roses all the way for Callas stand-in', *Sun* (London), 3 July 1965; Gwen Morgan, 'New "Tosca" Dims Callas' Glory', *Chicago Tribune*, 4 July 1965, p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.



Figure 4. Marie and children, 3 July 1965 (Alamy)

Marie was pleased with how the performance had gone—she not overtaxed her voice and had finished with plenty in reserve. But she knew she had not sung as well as she could have.<sup>123</sup> Marie had perhaps had a sharper perception of her achievement than the audience. The advance publicity had prepared them for an event—not Callas, whose significance came from past glories, but Collier, whose significance came from what was unfolding before their eyes. They had been prepared for a triumph, and their critical capacities may well have been less acute. In Andrew Porter's words, 'The applause which greeted Marie Collier's entrance—and blotted out her first phrase—was witness more to the public's warm hearts than to their musical sensitivity.' But he went on to say, 'Thereafter the house was held by a performance captivating in its own right, fascinating, individual and unfailingly vivid.'<sup>124</sup> The performance actually was the one they had wanted.

<sup>123</sup> D.F. Colquhoun, 'A bath full of bouquets', *Sun* (Melbourne), 5 July 1965, p. 6; Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.

<sup>124</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 3 July 1965.

Collier's interpretation of the role did not differ from her customary portrayal: the vulnerable, affectionate and sexual woman rather than the imperious diva of tradition. In the first act her nervousness took the edge off this, making her characterization appear exaggerated and undeveloped.<sup>125</sup> But when changing circumstances called forth Tosca's passion and compassion she began to make her mark. She displayed anger, sexuality and love in turn in response to Cioni and Gobbi. The latter took extra care with his performance, the *Times* noting that 'he seemed particularly finely attuned to Miss Collier'.<sup>126</sup> For Andrew Porter, one of her strongest supporters and firmest critics, it was the best performance he had ever seen from her. 'Her physical beauty, her grace and dignity of bearing, her natural theatricality are all factors that weigh. So are the suppleness of inflexion, and the quickness of response to the ever-changing situations.'<sup>127</sup> Her ability to act with her voice made up for its technical shortcomings. The critics observed that 'Vissi d'arte' was less than perfect.<sup>128</sup> Porter noted that although it was 'movingly and beautifully sung', it did not have the smooth legato line it needed; her voice still lacked 'the solid core of pure tone one would like.' But she had the mark of the superlative Puccini performer: 'an elusive style which transcends mere realistic acting (both with body and voice)', which somehow corresponds to whatever it is that makes Puccini, after all, and however reluctantly one admits it, a great composer.'<sup>129</sup>

After dealing with the media Marie was able to relax and rest until she resumed rehearsals for Sadler's Wells. She did not have to perform again until the following Thursday. By then she realized that she was not just a local sensation. The story had spread around Great Britain and Australia, places which knew already her; but it had also reached America, through reports by the Reuters and Associated Press news agencies which appeared in newspapers in New York, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles.<sup>130</sup> This was not the kind of coverage normally given to an established singer substituting in a role she had performed before, and she was embarrassed by it.<sup>131</sup> The

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<sup>125</sup> 'Triumphant Revival of Tosca', *Times* (London), 3 July 1965, p. 5; Edward Greenfield, 'Tosca at Covent Garden', *Guardian*, 3 July 1964, p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> 'Triumphant Revival of Tosca'.

<sup>127</sup> Porter, 'Tosca', 3 July 1965.

<sup>128</sup> Greenfield, 'Tosca at Covent Garden'; D.S.-T. [Desmond Shawe-Taylor], 'Collier and Callas', *Sunday Times* (London), 4 July 1965, p. 40.

<sup>129</sup> Porter, 'Tosca', 3 July 1965.

<sup>130</sup> 'Stand-in for Callas Wins Cheers at Covent Garden', *New York Times*, 3 July 1965, p. 10; 'Callas Stand-in Scores Triumph', *Washington Post*, 4 July 1965, p. A8; 'Callas III; Her Stand-in Is Cheered', *Chicago Tribune*, 3 July 1965, p. 15; 'Callas Substitute Wins Big Ovation in London'.

<sup>131</sup> *Luncheon at the Music Center*.

media could not report the simple story that a professional singer had performed well under difficult circumstances. Much of the reporting depended on tropes already familiar to the readership. Many headlines were variations on 'Callas's stand-in achieves triumph'.<sup>132</sup> In one sense they recorded the truth; but the image on which they depended for their force was that of the 'overnight star' in the tradition of *42nd Street*. Callas was cast as the great star who had had her day, Collier as the previously unknown singer who was thrust into the limelight and proved that she was just as good. That was far from the truth, as Collier pointed out a few weeks after the event: 'But when people pretend that this sort of thing comes to pass because of a chance thing like Friday, they have no idea what really goes on.'<sup>133</sup> Another trope was 'the ever-popular spectacle of "Local girl makes good"'<sup>134</sup> Articles cited her origins as evidence of a background that could not have predicted stardom: 'the girl from Melbourne standing in for Maria Callas'.<sup>135</sup> In Melbourne, the 'girl from Melbourne' became 'a railwayman's daughter'.<sup>136</sup> Then there was the old stand-by for any woman who had achieved something noteworthy, her status as a housewife or mother, appended illogically: 'Huge bouquets were hauled on the stage to surround Miss Collier, 34-year-old mother of four children.'<sup>137</sup> The *Guardian* questioned the relevance of such an image: 'How can we justify nowadays the label "housewife" for a woman who can be offered a contract by the Scala of Milan in spite of her domestic commitments and is thought of at Covent Garden to be a proper deputy for Maria Callas?'<sup>138</sup>

Callas's performance the following Monday was well-received, but was almost an afterthought as far as the press were concerned.<sup>139</sup> Collier sang two more performances, with interest sustained by follow-up stories in the press and a BBC Radio interview broadcast on 10 July.<sup>140</sup> After the last performance on 12 July she was able to concentrate again on *The Fiery Angel*. But that was not the end of it. Her agent Sandor Gorklinsky exploited the publicity after the event by issuing a press kit of reviews

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<sup>132</sup> For example Nicholas Light, 'Bravo! Cheers greet Callas stand-in', *Daily Mail* (London) 3 July 1965; 'Stand-in for Callas Wins Cheers at Covent Garden'; 'Callas Stand-in Scores Triumph'

<sup>133</sup> Best, 'Australian singer in limelight'.

<sup>134</sup> D.S-T., 'Collier and Callas'.

<sup>135</sup> Edwards, "'I'm terrified" says Marie'.

<sup>136</sup> Noel Hawken, 'La Scala's latest Australian', *Herald* (Melbourne), 2 July 1965.

<sup>137</sup> Nicholas Light, 'Bravo! Cheers greet Callas stand-in', *Daily Mail* (London) 3 July 1965.

<sup>138</sup> 'London Letter', *Guardian*, 3 July 1965, p. 8.

<sup>139</sup> For reviews of Callas's performance on Monday 5 July 1965 see 'Mme. Callas's 'Benevolent' Tosca', *Times* (London), 6 July 1965, p. 15, and 'Diva Callas Is Back, But Critics Are Not', *Chicago Tribune*, 6 July 1965, p. B9. Scott, *Maria Meneghini Callas*, p.239, gives a personal account of the night, her last appearance on the operatic stage.

<sup>140</sup> *In Town Today*, BBC Home Service, 10 July 1965 (BBC Programme Number 28SX5943).

and news stories from all over Britain.<sup>141</sup> EMI released a 45rpm single in the UK on the HMV label with Collier's recordings of 'One Fine Day' as the A-side and the 'Death of Butterfly' on the B-side.<sup>142</sup>

It had been both a manufactured and a genuine triumph, the result of an unusual coincidence of elements. The circumstances of her appearance were extraordinary; Collier had not substituted for one of her Covent Garden colleagues but for the most famous opera performer of the day, and it was the involvement of Callas that brought such attention to Collier. The situation had created an opportunity for publicity that had been exploited by Covent Garden and Collier's agent. Their efforts were successful; by the time of the performance the audience wanted Collier to be good, 'and even if she had not been, the Covent Garden audience last night would have insisted she was.'<sup>143</sup>

It should not be overlooked that the performance was of a very high quality. Andrew Porter started his review with the exclamation, 'I doubt whether an opera *can* be better performed than *Tosca* was at Covent Garden last night!', and praised the 'exceptionally high level' of the 200 or so individuals—the performers, the players, the designers, the technical staff, and the director—that contributed to the performance.<sup>144</sup> And foremost of these was Collier herself, who for seven years had been developing her *Tosca* into an interpretation that portrayed the character with the best of her abilities and characteristics. Nevertheless, as she described it, 'I was suddenly found to exist.'<sup>145</sup>

Most subsequent appreciations of Marie Collier mention the Callas substitution to the point of cliché, but the event was the crucial point in Collier's career. By distinguishing her from the pack of excellent but otherwise unnoticed singers her 'overnight success' made her a household name. She already had a very successful career singing Puccini and new repertoire. But it should be noted that the substitution in *Tosca* did not give her an international career—it merely expanded the one she already had. Collier had already attracted the attention of La Scala before she replaced Callas, and had Callas been able to sing all of her performances, Collier would probably have gone to Milan, and her career would have developed in a slightly different way.

<sup>141</sup> 'Marie Collier in *Tosca* July 1965' (File 'Papers, 1968-1972 [manuscript]', National Library of Australia, Call no. NLA MS 4727).

<sup>142</sup> With the credit 'Marie Collier and the Sadler's Wells Orchestra', the single was released in the 'Your Kind of Music' series, with 'One Fine Day', catalogue number 7P 378.

<sup>143</sup> Greenfield, 'Tosca at Covent Garden'.

<sup>144</sup> Porter, 'Tosca', 3 July 1965.

<sup>145</sup> *Voices for the World*, Ian Engelman (producer/director), BBC 1 TV, 13 May 1968. (BBC Programme Number LMA7132Y).

Now opera houses saw Collier and gave her more opportunities. But replacing Callas was both her making and her undoing; by taking as many of these opportunities as possible Collier damaged herself and probably her career. In the mid-1960s, for example, Joan Sutherland averaged thirty to forty performances per year, many of which were concerts with the works programmed for the singer's comfort as much as to display her artistry.<sup>146</sup> In comparison, Collier performed over fifty times in both 1965 and 1966, mostly opera, where the vocal demands were not always congenial; and this pace was to place physical and emotional pressures on her for which she was ill-prepared.

### *The Fiery Angel*

Sergei Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* presented a greater challenge for Collier than *Tosca*. The role of Renata, the woman obsessed by a vision of the fiery angel Madiel, calls for a singer with the ability to convey sexuality, terror, obsession, compassion and contempt. Her voice must have a large range, from B flat below the stave to C natural above ('high C'); and with every scene a 'mad scene', she must have the stamina to sustain high volume hysterics for five out of seven scenes, 'making her role one of the longest and (in terms of range and volume) most demanding in opera.'<sup>147</sup> Collier had all these qualities; her suitability for the role had already been noted after a performance of the work by another singer the previous year.<sup>148</sup>

This production was the first British stage performance of the Prokofiev work.<sup>149</sup> Aficionados were the main audience for the New Opera Company, and would have gone regardless of who was in it. But Collier's success in *Tosca* influenced the decision of many who might have hesitated over an obscure and challenging work, and *The Fiery Angel* became the only production by the company to completely sell-out.<sup>150</sup>

Collier's performance was the centre of every review. Arthur Jacobs heralded as an achievement ranking with her *Tosca* and *Emilia Marty*: 'From the opening narration,

<sup>146</sup> See the performance chronology in Joan Sutherland, *A Prima Donna's Progress* (Milton's Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1997), especially pp. 446-453.

<sup>147</sup> Richard Taruskin, 'Fiery Angel, The', in Stanley Sadie (ed.) *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed 30 July 2014).

<sup>148</sup> Arthur Jacobs, 'The Fiery Angel and Zoroastre in Paris', *Guardian*, 30 November 1964, p. 7. The production at the Opéra-Comique featured Floriana Cavalli.

<sup>149</sup> A studio performance of Dennis Arundell's translation was conducted by Stanford Robinson and broadcast on the BBC Third Programme on 2 February 1959, with a repeat on Thursday 16 April 1959.

<sup>150</sup> Rodney Milnes, 'The fruits of experience', *Opera*, May 2000, p. 23.



sung in tones of ecstasy as she described her first encounter with the “angel of fire”, to the final look of demented satisfaction with which she heard the Inquisitor’s sentence of torture and burning, Miss Collier was all-compelling.<sup>151</sup> In the *Financial Times* Ronald Crichton commended ‘her sure command of movement and—even more important—of stillness.’ Her vocal tone was solid throughout the opera, and her diction clear, which can be heard in the recording of the broadcast the BBC made of the last of the three performances.<sup>152</sup> Again there were comments on her physical appearance, but these were not gratuitous; it was a role in which good looks were essential for the believability of the character. The *Financial Times* commented that Collier had ‘the physical appearance to make Ruprecht’s abject slavery credible.’<sup>153</sup> Collier should have been pleased with these reviews. Some months later she told an interviewer, ‘I think it is *the most difficult role I have ever done, both vocally and dramatically. If one wants to sing it as well as it should be sung and performed the way I think it should be performed, it’s practically an impossible role.*<sup>154</sup>

## Negotiating with the Met

At the beginning of September 1965 Collier flew back to the United States. Basing herself in San Francisco, she had three months of appearances in a schedule that took her to Los Angeles, San Diego, Houston and Connecticut. Her repertoire was to include *La bohème*, *Tosca* (in performances booked before her success in July), and *Don Carlo*. But her first challenge was to play Minnie in Puccini’s then little-performed opera *La fanciulla del West*. She was to perform it four times in the season, twice in San Francisco and once each in San Diego and Los Angeles. She had studied the part in Milan with Benvenuto-Giusti and later with Luigi Ricci in Rome; but her preparation also including learning how to sit on a horse, something she found ‘the most terrifying part of the opera; in fact in some respects it’s like childbirth, once you start it has to finish.’<sup>155</sup>

At first glimpse the gun-totin’, Bible-reading saloon keeper was not a conventional Puccini heroine, but the melodramatic plot, which includes a bar room brawl, blood dripping from the attic, a card game in which the heroine cheats to save her lover’s life,

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<sup>151</sup> A.J., ‘The Fiery Angel. Sadler’s Wells (New Opera Company), July 27’, *Opera*, September 1965, p. 675.

<sup>152</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *The Fiery Angel*, radio broadcast, Leon Lovett (conductor), New Opera Company, 31 July 1965. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording.)

<sup>153</sup> Ronald Crichton, ‘The Angel of Fire’, *Financial Times*, 29 July 1965, p. 24

<sup>154</sup> *Luncheon at the Music Center.*

<sup>155</sup> *Luncheon at the Music Center.*

and an attempted lynching, suited Collier's temperament, and she balanced the flamboyant elements of the role 'with an underlying thread of tenderness that made her performance all the more poignant.'<sup>156</sup> For the *Opera* critic, Collier had the true Puccini voice, 'Huge, warm and pulsating in tone... It has that crackling vibrancy which makes for haunting emotionalism. Miss Collier lives her music dangerously, but she keeps her production under control, and the result is a maximum of excitement.'<sup>157</sup> In San Diego and Los Angeles her tenor partner was Franco Corelli, whom she had seen in the role of Johnson in her early days in Milan, playing opposite the Jack Rance of Tito Gobbi. Corelli was rumoured to have objected to working with Collier, but her strong personality seemed to bring out the best in him.<sup>158</sup>

A recording of the first performance was made from the audience.<sup>159</sup> The role suits Collier's voice, ringing and clear when she admonishes the miners for their unseemly behaviour in her bar and as she recalls the love between her parents. The nervous quality of her voice adds drama to the poker game where she tries to save her lover's life. As well as the vocal capacity she had the appearance: young, slim and tall, believable as an athletic and able frontierswoman. Although Minnie was one of the most demanding roles in the spinto repertoire she decided it was her favourite, 'because she is most like me. I was brought up almost entirely with boys, and in a gold mining town, too.'<sup>160</sup> If Collier had been able to perform it more often, Minnie could have become as much a signature role for her as Tosca and Emilia Marty,

In *La bohème* and *Tosca* Collier took the portrayals that she had developed in Europe. Singing Musetta with Renata Tebaldi as Mimí, Collier's big voice was appreciated, but she played the role broadly as she was accustomed.<sup>161</sup> Martin Bernheimer's review of *Tosca* echoed English critiques; while Collier had the appearance and stage presence for an ideal Tosca, she did not know how to underplay and to conserve her resources,

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<sup>156</sup> Martin Bernheimer, "'Girl of the Golden West" Reigns as Grandest Horse Opera', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 November 1965, p. D23.

<sup>157</sup> Arthur Bloomfield, 'San Francisco', *Opera*, December 1965, p.880.

<sup>158</sup> Martin Bernheimer, email to Kim Kemmis, 17 April 2006.

<sup>159</sup> Giacomo Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*, in-house recording, Francesco Molinari-Pradelli (conductor), San Francisco Opera Association, 21 September 1965. (Private recording.)

<sup>160</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 956. Her birthplace Ballarat was a major centre in the Victorian gold rush of the 1850s, and gold mining is still carried out today.

<sup>161</sup> Martin Bernheimer, "'Bohème' Fails to Stir Any Excitement', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 November 1965, p. D24.

'and one worries about the ultimate effect of the pressure she exerts upon her vocal chords.'<sup>162</sup>

By the time she returned to England in December she had achieved another goal: a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. An examination of the stages by which Collier's engagement with the Met was arranged shows the complexity of the process.

Negotiations had started a year before when Collier had become a client of Nelly Walter, a vice-president at Columbia Artists Management Inc (CAMI) whose roster included singers such as Montserrat Caballé, Renata Tebaldi and Leontyne Price. Collier now saw in action a more aggressive, active method of dealing with entrepreneurs than she was accustomed to. Walter contacted Robert Herman, the Artistic Administrator of the Met, proposing Collier for the role of Marie in the Met's planned performances of *Wozzeck* in January 1965; however the Met had already signed Helga Pilarczyk to sing the role of Marie. In March Walters wrote to Herman to suggest that Collier might be able to make herself available to the Met when she was in the United States for her San Francisco engagements. Walter listed the operas that Collier would be performing and added that further negotiations were under way for her to perform the leading female roles in Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* and Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. These roles did not eventuate, but the mention of them served to notify Herman that Collier was a versatile artist with a wide repertoire who would be useful to the company.<sup>163</sup>

Although the Met could not use Collier during that time, they did arrange for her to audition after her initial performances in San Francisco. In a letter confirming the arrangement Walter asked Herman, 'Please mention to Mr Bing our conversation that Miss Collier is mainly a "performer" and personality on stage—not merely a singer.'<sup>164</sup> Rudolf Bing, the General Manager of the Met, was able to see this for himself on the afternoon of 1 October 1965, when he met with Herman and Walter to hear Collier sing. He was immediately impressed, and Herman proposed that she might perform with them in February to April 1967, in two performances of *La bohème* and six of a new

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<sup>162</sup> Martin Bernheimer, 'Exuberant "Tosca" Lacking in Discipline', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 November 1965, p. J5.

<sup>163</sup> Nelly Walter (CAMI), letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 16 March 1965; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>164</sup> Nelly Walter (CAMI), letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 9 September 1965; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

American opera, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, by Marvin David Levy. Collier took away with her the vocal score of the opera to see if she could sing the role of Christine, and promised to check her availability.<sup>165</sup> In the meantime Walter kept Collier in Herman's mind. After discovering that the Met had scheduled performances of *La fanciulla del West* with Dorothy Kirsten during the coming December, she wrote to advise him that, in case of an emergency, Collier was 'simply fabulous in this role.'<sup>166</sup> Three days later she had to tell Herman that Collier would not be available for the whole period that the Met wanted, as Covent Garden wanted her to sing *Tosca*.<sup>167</sup> But the problem disappeared; Covent Garden dropped the planned *Toscas*, and Collier signed a contract with the Met two weeks later.

Collier was contracted for a minimum of eight performances between 13 March and 13 April 1967, with Collier to be available for rehearsals between 13 Feb and 12 March. For each performance she would receive \$1000, with an additional \$1000 for travel and rehearsal expenses. A schedule attached to the contract specified the repertoire she was to sing: Musetta in Italian and Christine (*Mourning Becomes Electra*) in English.<sup>168</sup>

This exchange of documents and phone calls illustrates the complicated nature of Collier's professional arrangements. Although Collier was technically still under contract with Covent Garden, the company did not have much to offer her, and freed her to pursue opportunities with other companies. As a freelance artist negotiations with opera companies and travel and accommodation arrangements were more complex than those of the contract principal, requiring skills and a temperament that Collier did not have and laying a further burden on the woman trying to develop her art and have a domestic life. She recognised this, and in early 1966 she took on the services of a manager, Henry Mathieu, to handle the business of opera while she got on with the art. Little can be uncovered about Mathieu, and it is difficult to ascertain his qualifications for the job. Colleagues remember his presence around the Royal Opera but had little to do with him; they assumed that he was also her lover.<sup>169</sup> Some who

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<sup>165</sup> File note, Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives; Robert Herman, letter to Marie Collier, 5 October 1965, Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>166</sup> Nelly Walter (CAMI), letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 8 October 1965; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>167</sup> Nelly Walter (CAMI), letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 11 October 1965; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>168</sup> 'Standard Principal's Contract', 28 October 1965; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>169</sup> Gregory Dempsey, phone interview, 28 January 2007; Sir Charles Mackerras, letter to Kim Kemmis, 3 October 2006.

saw a lot of him with Collier in informal situations did not like him.<sup>170</sup> Mathieu served as a middle-man, standing for Collier in dealings with her agent and with opera administrators. He was to become very important to Collier; because he was able to concentrate on her professional wellbeing, she could have a greater element of control over her professional life, and was able to be more selective about her engagements and to earn higher fees, with her manager taking a percentage as well as her agent.

### The stress of the freelance life

After Collier terminated her formal relationship with Covent Garden she was able to increase the number of appearances she made. From between thirty to forty performances per year in the 1960s, Collier performed over fifty times per year in 1965 and 1966. After a run of performances as Liù in *Turandot* at Covent Garden Collier spent the first months of 1966 performing in new places, mostly in the role for which she was now known. She did single performances of *Tosca* in Athens, Monte Carlo and the Vienna Staatsoper, and longer runs in both Montreal and back at Covent Garden. By replacing Callas she had opened doors in the rest of the world; but the cost of the increasing workload became evident.

The regular criss-crossing of continents and oceans that was to become customary for Collier was a recent phenomenon. The development of the jet airliner had made possible travel between continents at a rate that could only have been dreamed of by previous generations of singers. In the nineteenth century many singers toured the world during their careers, but the difficulty and speed of ocean travel made long stays mandatory. When the English soprano Anna Bishop first visited the Australian colonies she arrived in December 1855 and departed nearly two years later.<sup>171</sup> Eighty years later the Australian soprano Marjorie Lawrence was able to make shorter visits to her home country thanks to the airplane, but they could still last longer than three months.<sup>172</sup> Collier's international itineraries were to be much more complicated and at times even frantic.

In March 1966 Collier made her Italian debut at Palermo with five performances of *La fanciulla del West*. During that season Collier was also preparing a new role, and the

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<sup>170</sup> Lesley Skilney, phone interview, 14 October 2016.

<sup>171</sup> For an account of this tour see Alison Gyger, *Civilising the Colonies* (Sydney: Pellinor, 1999), pp. 80-103.

<sup>172</sup> In 1939 Lawrence stayed in Australia from mid-June to mid-September; in 1951 from February until July.

stress of performances, rehearsals and travel finally had its effect. At the beginning of April she had to withdraw from the first two performances of Strauss's *Elektra* at Covent Garden in which she was to make her debut as Elektra's sister Chrysothemis. An announcement was made in the major papers, as a Collier cancellation was now newsworthy.<sup>173</sup> Marie recovered for the final two performances. Because she missed the beginning of the run, her Chrysothemis had not been reviewed by the daily papers, and was not discussed until the June issue of *Opera* appeared. Arthur Jacobs thought 'Marie Collier proved herself an apt Chrysothemis—presenting, by supple voice and supple movement, the femininity and youth which are the main determinants of Electra's sister as Hofmannsthal and Strauss have depicted her.'<sup>174</sup> The recording broadcast on the BBC on 17 May indicates that she was confident in the role, singing with a tone that was at times opulent, and with none of the tiredness that was soon to be heard.<sup>175</sup>

The critics had not been dazzled by the spectacle of the Callas substitution; they noted Collier's strong points and pointed to the weaknesses that she had carried forward. Describing one of her Montreal *Toscas* Conrad Osborne noted that Collier's voice was 'pressured and driven', that she could not sing quietly, and that her lower range was not balanced with the rest of her voice.<sup>176</sup> When Collier returned to Covent Garden in the role in April and May 1966 John Higgins of the *Financial Times* thought 'she sounded as though she had been singing the part too often', with poor control at less than full volume and an intrusive vibrato. He concluded, 'Miss Collier is one of our best sopranos; she must not overtax herself.'<sup>177</sup> A hearing of the performance of 10 May, broadcast by the BBC later that year, bears this out; when not singing at full volume the tone was thin, and Collier tried to fill out the sound with vibrato more than was appropriate for the music.<sup>178</sup> Collier had been working too hard, she was physically tired, and her vocal technique was not strong enough to maintain quality under the pressure; so she was forcing her voice.

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<sup>173</sup> Collier was replaced by the Swedish soprano Berit Lindholm. See 'Debut At Short Notice', *Times* (London), 31 March 1966, p.17; 'Swedish Stand-in for Marie Collier', *Financial Times*, 31 March 1966, p. 26.

<sup>174</sup> A.J., 'Elektra. Covent Garden. April 12', *Opera*, June 1966, p. 71.

<sup>175</sup> Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, radio broadcast, Edward Downes (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, April 1966. Broadcast BBC Third Network, 17 May 1966. (Private recording.)

<sup>176</sup> Conrad Osborne, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 15 March 1966, p. 24 (review of 17 February performance).

<sup>177</sup> John Higgins, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 28 April 1966, p. 28.

<sup>178</sup> Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca*, Edward Downes (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 10 May 1966. Broadcast BBC Third Network, 25 December 1966. (Private recording.)

From London Collier went to Cardiff for two performances of *Il tabarro* with the Welsh National Opera. In Buenos Aires in June and July she sang *The Fiery Angel* and *Aida* in Italian. Recordings of both works indicate that she was trying to do something about her vocal problems. In *The Fiery Angel* her tone had the same thinness as the *Tosca* from May, and she was slightly off-pitch. But in slower passages one can hear her try a new way of producing the note, by hitting the pitch and then adding the overtones. The effect is of 'filling up' the note, rather than immediately trying to produce the full range of frequencies within the note, and was intended to reduce pressure on the voice.<sup>179</sup> In the *Aida* recording the effect is less noticeable. The voice sounds less tired, but there is still a lack of body in the recitatives, and at times in duets she seems to be saving her voice for the more important phrases. The climaxes of the quiet 'O patria mia' in Act III are full, but she lacks the ability to sing the pianissimos that the aria needs.<sup>180</sup> These were the last performances of *Aida* that Collier sang; she seemed to have been aware that the role was not a good fit for her, and a contemporaneous repertoire list on her Met file omits the opera although three other Verdi works are shown.<sup>181</sup>

In October she placed herself under more pressure. She flew to Vancouver for five performances of not only *Cavalleria rusticana* but its partner opera Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. The decision to sing both Santuzza and Nedda may have seemed a sound one when it had been made, but that was before her vocal troubles commenced. In an audience recording of *Cavalleria* we do not hear the tired Collier of the London *Tosca*, but she is still not back in good vocal condition. The higher part of her voice is full, but in mid-range the tone sometimes fails due to poor breath support.<sup>182</sup> Although she seemed to be through the worst of the vocal stress the fundamental flaws remained. Nevertheless her ability to project vocally and dramatically was still in evidence.<sup>183</sup>

Collier returned to San Francisco in November for the US premiere of *The Makropulos Case*. With Emilia Marty Collier seemed to be on safer ground than the other roles she had recently performed. Her physical and vocal characterisation was secure and convincing; for Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times* she acted with a greater discipline than he had expected from her appearances as *Tosca* and *Musetta* the

<sup>179</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *The Fiery Angel*, in-house recording, Bruno Bartoletti (conductor), Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, June 1966. (Private recording.)

<sup>180</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida*, in-house recording, John Pritchard (conductor), Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, July 1966. (Private recording.)

<sup>181</sup> 'Marie Collier Repertoire', [c. June 1966], Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>182</sup> Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, in-house recording, Otto-Werner Mueller (conductor), Vancouver Opera, October 1966. (Private recording.)

<sup>183</sup> David Watmough, 'Vancouver', *Opera*, February 1967, pp. 147-8.

previous year. Her voice was still showing stress, Bernheimer noting that it was 'healthy if sometimes rough-edged'; but the performance was received enthusiastically.<sup>184</sup>

At the beginning of December Collier returned to *Tosca* at Covent Garden. In the six months since she had performed the role there she had thought deeply about her approach and made some changes. While keeping the general aim the same—to portray *Tosca* as a woman rather than a diva—she scaled down her stage movements, pacing herself to allow maximum physical effort for singing. The change was noticeable, in both voice and acting. She was in better voice than in May, 'just as attentive to musical beauty as to dramatic truth',<sup>185</sup> but her more subdued action disappointed some.<sup>186</sup>

After the third *Tosca* Collier flew to Rome to start a season of the same opera. *Opera* magazine found her first Rome performance worthy 'though she was visibly nervous'.<sup>187</sup> But that nervousness may have been exhaustion; from mid-December into the new year she and co-star Gobbi flew between Italy and Covent Garden, performing eleven *Toscas* in thirty-two days, on average one every three days for nearly five weeks, with four days' break for Christmas. After a hard year, this was too much. At a function in January where she received the Harriet Cohen International Music Award<sup>188</sup> for the outstanding opera singer of 1966 she admitted to a journalist, 'I must admit at the moment that I am feeling thoroughly exhausted.'<sup>189</sup> A few days later she was diagnosed with 'nervous exhaustion'; and had to withdraw from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* in Monte Carlo and a charity concert in Paris. After a week in a London clinic she rested for several weeks at Cookham. An Australian Associate Press report described the problem as a throat infection.<sup>190</sup> But a few months later Collier freely admitted to a journalist that she had been suffering from anxiety.<sup>191</sup> She started to slow the pace, giving only thirty-eight performances in 1967 compared with the previous year's fifty-four.

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<sup>184</sup> Martin Bernheimer, 'Janacek Premiere in S.F.', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 November 1966, p. E20.

<sup>185</sup> 'Subtle villainy of Mr. Gobbi', *Times* (London), 3 December 1966, p. 13.

<sup>186</sup> H.D.R., 'Tosca. Covent Garden, December 2', *Opera*, January 1967, p. 77.

<sup>187</sup> William Weaver, 'Rome', *Opera*, March 1967, p. 206.

<sup>188</sup> See Chapter Four.

<sup>189</sup> Philippa Johnson, 'Top honor for Marie', *Herald* (Melbourne), 19 January 1967, p. 18.

<sup>190</sup> 'Marie Collier ordered to rest', *Times* (London), 20 January 1967, p. 6; 'Throat troubles singer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1967, p. 10.

<sup>191</sup> Joan Peyser, 'But "Electra" Has Two Brilliant Sopranos', *New York Times*, 9 April 1967, p. 111.



Her friendship with Gobbi provided an intermittent source of support, but this kind of relationship was a rare one. The freelance singer did not enjoy the consistency in relationships enjoyed by the artist tied to a single company. While Collier needed the support, she may not have been affected by this as much as other artists might be. When working in the theatre her relations with colleagues would always tend to the professional rather than the informal. At Covent Garden she would have a cup of coffee with her fellow artists, but otherwise it was all business.<sup>192</sup> Outside the theatre was different; she attended the after-show parties for the productions she appeared in, and socialised with her contemporaries such as Joan Sutherland when their paths crossed in other countries.<sup>193</sup> But with rare exceptions personal intimacy was saved for people outside the opera house.

Her workload in other media had increased since she substituted for Callas. In November 1965 the television version of *Tosca* with Gobbi had gone to air,<sup>194</sup> with the *Il tabarro* episode broadcast the following February.<sup>195</sup> In December she had appeared on ITV's live variety show *The New London Palladium Show* with comedian Jimmy Tarbuck and pop singer Frank Ifield.<sup>196</sup> For radio Collier performed Berg's *Three Fragments from Wozzeck* twice, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under conductors Pierre Boulez and Gary Bertini.<sup>197</sup>

While appearing in *Fanciulla* in California in November 1965 she was the guest on *Luncheon at the Music Center*, a weekly broadcast on the commercial classical music radio station KFAC Los Angeles, in which the presenter Thomas Cassidy interviewed prominent personalities live from the Pavilion Restaurant at the newly opened Music Center in downtown Los Angeles. Aimed at a musically-knowledgeable audience, the conversation covered Collier's work in depth, examining for example what it was like for Collier to work with the composer on *Katerina Ismailova*, and the demands of singing Puccini.<sup>198</sup> The depth of the discussion contrasts with a radio appearance she made three months later in London, when she became the 'castaway' on *Desert Island Discs*.

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<sup>192</sup> Lauris Elms, phone interview, 4 September 2006.

<sup>193</sup> Richard Bonyngé, letter to Kim Kemmis, 1 September 2006.

<sup>194</sup> *Great Characters in Opera, 1: Scarpia in Tosca*.

<sup>195</sup> *Great Characters in Opera, 5: Il Tabarro*.

<sup>196</sup> *The New London Palladium Show*, television broadcast, ITV, 12 December 1965.

<sup>197</sup> *Boulez Conducts*, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Boulez (conductor). Broadcast BBC Home Service 4 May 1966 (*Radio Times*, 28 April 1966, p. 52); *Haydn, Prokofiev, Berg*, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Gary Bertini (conductor). Broadcast BBC Network Three, 19 July 1966 (*Radio Times*, 14 July 1966, p. 10).

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Thomas Cassidy, *Luncheon at the Music Center*, KFAC Los Angeles, Thursday 11 November 1965.

Guided by host Roy Plomley the conversation passed swiftly from one topic to another, touching on significant issues but not exploring any in depth. This may have been due to the nature of the show as light entertainment and possible reticence to be open on Marie's part. After a description of her future plans Plomley asked, 'Now, all this globetrotting must be a little complicated by the fact that you have four children.' Marie replied, 'Yes, it is. They're in *very, very* good hands and I miss them *awfully*, I miss contact with them. But also another problem you know in this globetrotting is suitcases and wardrobe, and enormous bills for excess baggage.'<sup>199</sup> She could have dwelt on an issue on which she felt deeply, but in keeping with the tone of the conversation she moved quickly to a more practical observation. She was demonstrating her ability to tailor her performance to the intended audience.

## Family life

Excess baggage was definitely a problem. In 1966 she travelled for six weeks from January to March, between Athens, Montreal and Palermo. She took eight pieces of luggage, containing not only costumes but clothes for travelling, rehearsing and socialising, for three different climates. At Montreal she paid \$223 in baggage fees.<sup>200</sup> But a bigger problem was not the number of bags but the number of weeks she was away from home. In Europe a trip would last three weeks. Her first American trip in 1963 lasted three months, and this became the regular duration for work in the United States.<sup>201</sup> The time away from her family was a heavy cost. On *Desert Island Discs* she had said that she missed contact with the children, but she was also missing out on their lives. 'I missed my daughter's theatrical debut,' she told a journalist in 1967. 'I'm told she was a hit in the village pantomime the nativity play and the village concert at Christmas, and she is only nine.'<sup>202</sup> When at home she tried hard to keep up with their interests. To another journalist she confessed, 'I have to tolerate the Monkees at the moment. I don't like them so much, I like them, to watch them visually, 'cause I think

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<sup>199</sup> *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Home Service, 21 February 1966 (BBC Programme Number 28SX8324). Marie's favourite piece was a recording of Ravel's *Sheherazade* by the soprano Victoria de los Angeles, but her choices also included Yves Montand singing *Les feuilles mortes* (Autumn Leaves), Édith Piaf's *Non, je ne regrette rien*, the slow movement of Rodrigo's *Concierto d'Aranjuez*, and John Raitt singing *They Call The Wind Maria* from the Lerner and Loewe musical *Paint Your Wagon*. Her nominated book was Marguerite Young's *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, and her luxury item was an Etruscan frieze of horses that she had seen at an exhibition.

<sup>200</sup> 'Globetrotting Opera Singer Here For Tosca Role', *Montreal Gazette*, 3 February 1966, p. 14.

<sup>201</sup> Kim Blair, 'Free Time With Family: Opera Singing Is 9-to-5 Job With Australian Diva', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1964, p. B1.

<sup>202</sup> Michael Clowes, "'It's like walking on a bed of nails,' says Marie", *Australian*, 18 March 1967, p. 7.

they're quite clever. But to listen to them, this eternal, sort of, beat, is just a little bit too much.<sup>203</sup>

Collier had been especially aware of the extraordinary pressures her career placed on her family since her international career had started to bloom in 1963. In the car to Heathrow one day Barbara was so upset she vomited on her mother's hat boxes. While Collier was away the children were looked after by the housekeeper Gina, and when their mother returned there was difficulty adjusting to her being there: Gina had become more important to the household.<sup>204</sup>

The absences were a consequence of her workload, and the workload was a necessary evil. She had to make as many appearances as possible to consolidate her career and promote herself, to make enough to cover the considerable expenses of earning that living, and to earn the money she and Victor needed to give their family a good life, education and experiences such as the family vacations to Italy and Majorca.

But when she was at home Marie was totally focused on her children. To preserve her home life she tried to keep a sharp demarcation between home and work. In the early years at Covent Garden she had practiced at home; that stopped when she became a star.<sup>205</sup> 'The train between Cookham and London is my transition from home life to the life of an artist', she said in 1967. 'And vice versa.'<sup>206</sup> To another interviewer she said, 'I never allow music or singing to intrude into my home. I never practice at home. I don't even talk about singing or my career.'<sup>207</sup> Likewise she rarely discussed her home life with colleagues. While the family attended the opera at Covent Garden and went backstage to meet her co-stars, many of her colleagues were not aware that Collier was married and had a family.<sup>208</sup> In conversation one day with her sister-in-law Margaret, Marie explained that she had a double life:

She said she had two lives, she had a family, her husband and her four children, she'd leave London and go back to them, and then someone would be minding them, the housekeeper, and then she'd go back to London and be singing or going overseas. But she'd say that one life gave her a rest from the other.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>204</sup> Barbara Kosinski, phone interview, 25 March 2007.

<sup>205</sup> Michael Vorweg, phone interview, 13 June 2017.

<sup>206</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>207</sup> Pat Rappolt, 'Opera singer would like to fly a plane', *Advertiser*, 23 March 1968, p. 17.

<sup>208</sup> Shirley Germain, interview, Dulwich Hill, NSW, 25 January 2007.

<sup>209</sup> Margaret Collier, phone interview, 15 March 2007.

On rare occasions the two lives crossed over. Sometimes the children, now aged from five to twelve years, went with her to coaching sessions in London. In later years the whole family went to the opera, going backstage or out to dinner after the performance. One night the family left the Royal Opera House very late; the Covent Garden market was open, with porters bustling around carrying produce in round baskets on their heads.<sup>210</sup> Marie took the eleven-year-old Michael to see her perform in Florence and Hamburg, trips that would have been more enjoyable for her than usual.<sup>211</sup> Back in Cookham she assumed her role as the diva at home in May 1967 as the honorary president of the inaugural Cookham Arts Festival. For one week the village saw presentations of opera, chamber and organ music recitals in the parish church, poetry readings in the King's Arms pub, and a lecture and exhibition remembering the town's most celebrated resident, the painter Stanley Spencer. Collier made her artistic contribution with a song recital at Pinder Hall, the local community hall for Cookham Rise, a short walk from her home in Burnt Oak.<sup>212</sup>

### *Electra and Elektra*

The period from March 1967 to early 1968 saw some of Collier's most impressive achievements: debuting at the Met in a world premiere, securing a contract at Bayreuth, and releasing a highly-acclaimed recording that would become legendary. These achievements were marks that she was at the top of her profession; but flaws in her voice and acting betray that she was not at the top of her form. The stress that had seen her hospitalised at the beginning of the year continued, and the costs of her considerable achievements were becoming very high.

In 1966 Collier had sung in Strauss's setting of the Elektra myth. The following year she made her Met debut in another version, Marvin David Levy's opera of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Where in the Strauss opera she had sung Chrysothemis, in Levy's work she was to sing the Klytämnestra role of Christine Mannon, opposite Evelyn Lear as the vengeful Lavinia (representing Electra) and John Reardon as the son Orin (Orestes).

When Collier arrived in New York in mid-February for four weeks of rehearsals she proved to be an amiable colleague and employee. Rudolf Bing, a man not given to insincere reflections on artists, praised her talent and hard work, and said, 'She is also

<sup>210</sup> Andrew Vorweg, letter to Kim Kemmis, 18 June 2007.

<sup>211</sup> Michael Vorweg, phone interview.

<sup>212</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Festival at Cookham', *Financial Times*, 22 May 1967, p. 30.

pleasant, in addition, which doesn't apply to all our artists.'<sup>213</sup> Evelyn Lear later recalled, 'Marie Collier was such a wonderful singer and a sweet lady, but there was a great insecurity about her.'<sup>214</sup>

Marie was insecure because the role was new and untested, and she had a growing awareness that her vocal technique was seriously flawed and could let her down. As a contemporary work *Mourning Becomes Electra* was demanding to sing; but as a new work it was also fluid and indefinite. Sections were cut and adjusted as their strengths and weaknesses became evident in rehearsal and performance. Collier was accustomed to carrying her score everywhere, but with this work it was especially essential for her to study constantly. Coaching calls, sessions with the singer working through the role with a piano accompaniment, were demanding because the piece changed as they worked on it. Collier and her colleagues had an opportunity to shape their roles that is not available to most singers. The composer and librettist were present to negotiate tempo and phrasing in line with the singer's particular characteristics and interpretation, and the director Michael Cacoyannis was on hand to advise how long the singers needed to move about the stage, and thus how many bars Levy needed to cut or add.

More pressure came from the presence of a BBC film crew, shooting material for a forty-minute profile on Collier for *Voices for the World*, a series on British singers scheduled to air in 1968. The crew followed Collier around New York, to rehearsals and to a lunch with Levy and Cacoyannis at the Russian Tea Room where the three held an animated discussion about the ways audiences and critics responded to new music.<sup>215</sup>

Collier's insecurity was evident in comments she made to journalists during the run. Michael Clowes of the *Australian* interviewed her in her dressing room during the dress rehearsal. She had just finished her part of the performance, Christine having committed suicide at the end of Act II, and was simultaneously excited and exhausted: excited about working on a new work with great potential for success, and exhausted by its demands. 'It has been like walking on a bed of nails', she told Clowes. 'The role is the most difficult, both vocally and dramatically, I have ever performed... It exhausts

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<sup>213</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>214</sup> Brian Kellow, 'On The Beat', *Opera News*, October 1998, p. 14.

<sup>215</sup> *Voices for the World*.

me. I have two acts and I finish with a terribly demanding aria.' She openly admitted that she was 'terrified' about the opening performance.<sup>216</sup>

In a talk with Joan Peyser of the *New York Times* Collier talked openly of her anxiety. She attributed it to her inadequate training: 'This is my specific path and I am insufficiently prepared for it. I *hate* to be insufficiently prepared.'<sup>217</sup> Possibly she was wishing that she had another kind of career altogether. She told Peyser of her lack of drive in building her career, how it all happened almost in spite of her: 'I had no determination. I have no determination. Everything has happened to me as a result of accident and circumstance. Not one person have I ever approached. Not one move have I ever made in my own behalf.'<sup>218</sup> At the time of a significant success in her career, when other divas would have been reveling in the plaudits, Marie was dwelling on her weaknesses.

Some critics noted faults in her performance. The London *Times* thought her acting and singing 'tended to fly out of control',<sup>219</sup> and the *Washington Post* observed 'a wobbling vibrato' and poor enunciation.<sup>220</sup> To Conrad L. Osborne in the *Financial Times*, her acting seemed driven by the need for effect rather than by character, and her voice had 'some sort of unsettlement or extraneous noise in it almost all the time, and one never has the feeling that its production is truly reliable or easy.' To Osborne she had 'a large but undisciplined talent'.<sup>221</sup>

There is some evidence of vocal problems in the Saturday matinee broadcast on 1 April.<sup>222</sup> At times in Act I her tone is sometimes thin; some notes in the middle of her voice are pitched incorrectly; and her high notes are not always finished cleanly, but seem 'torn off'. However in Act II these problems are not as noticeable, especially in her closing aria. Collier could hear these defects, and so could some of the critics; but

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<sup>216</sup> Clowes, "It's like walking on a bed of nails," says Marie'.

<sup>217</sup> Joan Peyser, 'But "Electra" Has Two Brilliant Sopranos', *New York Times*, 9 April 1967, p. 111.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Peter Davis, 'Two contemporary American operas in New York', *Times* (London), 30 March 1967, p. 10.

<sup>220</sup> Paul Hume, 'Electra' Becomes The Met', *Washington Post*, 26 March 1967, p. H5.

<sup>221</sup> Conrad L. Osborne, 'Mourning Becomes Electra', *Financial Times*, 19 April 1967, p. 30.

<sup>222</sup> *Mourning Becomes Electra*, radio broadcast, Zubin Mehta (conductor), Metropolitan Opera, 1 April 1967. (Private recording.)

others did not, and spoke of the richness and clarity of voice Collier shared with Lear.<sup>223</sup>

Collier now sought entry to another legendary opera house. In July Collier flew to Florence to perform *Tosca*, but also went to Bayreuth to audition for Wolfgang Wagner, director of the Bayreuth Festival, and the conductor Pierre Boulez, for whom she had sung Berg in 1966. She had meant to take the music for an aria from *Katerina Ismailova* and one from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, which she was preparing for performance, but by mistake left the first aria at home. She watched Boulez conducting a performance of *Parsifal* from the lighting box, and in the first interval Wolfgang Wagner asked her to his office and offered her the role of Parsifal's ageless, seductive and tortured antagonist Kundry. Marie was stunned; she had thought that she might get a small part as a Flower Maiden, and was unsure. But after a long discussion in Wagner's private garden she accepted a contract for the 1968 Festival.<sup>224</sup>

Collier soon returned to America, not only to sing with the Met in a second season of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but also to appear with an entirely new company. Collier had been booked to sing *Tosca* with the Lyric Opera of Chicago in its fall season. But at the beginning of March the company announced that it was unable to meet the contract demands of the Chicago Federation of Musicians, and days before the opening of *Mourning Becomes Electra* the company formally cancelled the 1967 season.<sup>225</sup> When a planned production of *Wozzeck* was postponed at La Scala,<sup>226</sup> Collier was free to join the American National Opera Company, formed by the Boston conductor and impresario Sarah Caldwell to fulfil outstanding engagements of the Metropolitan National Company, the Met's junior touring company, which had been disbanded.<sup>227</sup>

During rehearsals a photographer took pictures to be used by news outlets and services. In one photo Collier is seen deep in conversation with Caldwell and another person out of shot, possibly the repetiteur. In another Collier is shown singing, with her hands drawn near to her face, expressing passion or anguish. In both Collier is wearing

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<sup>223</sup> See Thomas Willis, 'Met triumphs with "Electra"', *Chicago Tribune*, 19 March 1967, p. A4; Joseph E. Evans, 'The Theater: The Dead Stand Between', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 March 1967, p. 18.

<sup>224</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 956.

<sup>225</sup> Thomas Willis, 'Lyric Opera Cancels Season', *Chicago Tribune*, 2 March 1967, p. D1; Thomas Willis, 'Lyric Cancels Artists' Pact', *Chicago Tribune*, 14 March 1967, p. B4.

<sup>226</sup> Peyser, 'But "Electra" Has Two Brilliant Sopranos'.

<sup>227</sup> 'Form National Touring Company', *Chicago Tribune*, 15 February 1967, p. B1.

her hair up in a more up-to-date and informal hairstyle than her traditional one. She is wearing darker makeup, and her face is thin, her cheekbones standing out even more prominently. Her brother Maurice had noticed her weight loss when she had visited Melbourne in May, and had become concerned that she was working too hard.<sup>228</sup>

It was obvious to her colleagues that Collier was feeling under pressure. Caldwell's biographer records an appalling display of rudeness in a *Tosca* rehearsal when Collier criticised conductor Jonel Perlea's beat by commenting on his stroke-damaged arm.<sup>229</sup> However a short break helped her gather her resources for the tour; after Collier performed the first *Tosca* in Indianapolis on 19 September her cover Beverly Bower stepped in for the rest of the month. Collier returned in Brooklyn on 7 October for the first of eleven *Toscas* in one month, travelling through Ohio, Wisconsin, Chicago, St Louis, Little Rock and through Tennessee and Alabama to New Orleans on 11 November.

Reports of the Brooklyn performance suggest that Collier's heart was not in it. One critic thought that her acting was 'overwrought at times', with her singing expressive but insecure;<sup>230</sup> another judged on the basis of a single performance that she had 'a total lack of vocal and dramatic discipline'.<sup>231</sup> A week and a half later in Chicago she seemed to have recovered her enthusiasm. After her first performance Thomas Willis wrote that she 'had some of the cream and phrasing which make great singing'; and a matinee three days later found her acting more effective.<sup>232</sup>

In between Columbus, Ohio and Madison, Wisconsin Collier travelled to Expo 67 at Montreal to make her long-delayed debut with the La Scala company. It was a disappointing experience; not only was it not at the legendary opera house in Milan, but she was not allowed to give her own interpretation. Conductor Herbert von Karajan imposed his will on the performance, forcing Collier to sing her Act II waltz 'so slowly

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<sup>228</sup> Margaret Collier, personal communication, 27 January 2015.

<sup>229</sup> Daniel Kessler, *Sarah Caldwell: The First Woman of Opera* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. 72.

<sup>230</sup> Allen Hughes, 'National Opera's "Falstaff" and "Tosca" in Brooklyn', *New York Times*, 9 October 1967, p. 57.

<sup>231</sup> Peter Davis, 'American Government backs touring opera', *Times* (London), 19 October 1967, p. 9.

<sup>232</sup> Thomas Willis, 'Caldwell's "Tosca": Two Birds with One Stone?', *Chicago Tribune*, 19 October 1967, p. C2; Thomas Willis, 'Operas Better Second Time Around', *Chicago Tribune*, 23 October 1967, p. B11.



that it scarcely waltzed at all.<sup>233</sup> For a singer in poor voice the tempo was disastrous. La Scala did not offer Collier any more engagements; the demand for her after replacing Callas made it difficult for both parties to find the right combination of production and timing. Thus ended the episode that had commenced so excitingly two years earlier when Francesco Siciliani had entered her dressing room at Covent Garden with a contract in hand.

Early 1968 saw the release of Georg Solti's recording of *Elektra*, with Birgit Nilsson in the title role. Solti called on Collier to sing Chrysothemis after Gwyneth Jones refused the part.<sup>234</sup> Recording had commenced in June 1966, with the initial sessions involving the entire cast; after these were assessed by the production team, the singers were called back individually to re-record sections, interacting with the other performers on tape in performances they had recorded up to a year earlier. While this did not present any musical challenges for Collier, it affected her spontaneity; she was at her best with her colleagues performing beside her. But the studio had advantages too. The ability to record mere sections of the role over a three-hour session, phrase by phrase if need be, allowed her to concentrate on how she sounded without the pressure of a theatrical performance.

The release of the two-record set in early 1968, the first complete recording of *Elektra*,<sup>235</sup> was a major event, with Decca placing double page advertisements in the trade magazines.<sup>236</sup> Reviews understandably focused on Nilsson's performance, praising it, and the recording as a whole, as the high achievements they were. For Collier the reviews were not so good. The recording is a fair indication of the unevenness with which Collier was singing at the time. In her first scene with Elektra Collier's tone is thin, and she fills it out with more vibrato, as she did with the *Tosca* performances of the previous year; it is clearly a voice under strain, and she sounds best when singing high and at volume. But at other parts of the recording she is in much better voice. In her monologue before Klytämnestra's entrance, in her solo passage when announcing Orestes's death, and in her appearance after the death of Aegisthus the tone in more conversational passages is much better. Although her high notes are not as opulent as they had been a few years earlier they still ring. It is not a

<sup>233</sup> Allen Hughes, "'Boheme' At Expo Led By Karajan', *New York Times*, 13 October 1967, p. 31.

<sup>234</sup> *Billboard*, 24 December 1966, p. 47.

<sup>235</sup> Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, studio recording, Sir Georg Solti (conductor), Wiener Philharmoniker, Decca, 1968 (recorded 1966-67). CD: Decca 417 345-2 (1998).

<sup>236</sup> For example *Opera*, October 1967, pp. 46-47.

‘legendary’ performance, but neither is it a poor one. It is competent, and perhaps not for all tastes.

In *Opera* magazine Harold Rosenthal thought it was ‘one of the truly great recordings of any opera’, with no weaknesses in the cast. In comparison to Nilsson’s Elektra and Regina Resnik’s Klytämnestra, Collier did not seem ‘really inside the part; but she gives a highly sympathetic account of the role, even if the gramophone does not record her voice too kindly.’<sup>237</sup> The *New York Times* thought the warmth of Collier’s voice was a needed contrast to Nilsson’s voice, and noted that ‘she knows how to suggest the character’s frailty and weakness.’<sup>238</sup> One critic noted one undoubted flaw of Collier’s portrayal: her poor German pronunciation.<sup>239</sup> It was not a language in which she ever sounded comfortable.

These criticisms appeared while Collier was rehearsing her third major Janáček role, the title part in a Covent Garden revival of *Jenůfa*. In what had become a regular occurrence, Collier worked in the presence of a television crew, filming a segment for the BBC’s *Music International* programme on the production’s conductor Rafael Kubelik. Appearing halfway through the run, the programme had a short interview with Collier, and showed Collier and Astrid Varnay, playing the Kostelnička, in a coaching call with Kubelik. As with her other Janáček roles she had learned this one in English, but would have preferred to have sung it in Czech, because the translation placed the stresses on the wrong notes.<sup>240</sup>

A recording of the BBC’s live broadcast on 24 February reveals that Collier was in good voice, singing the difficult vocal lines expressively, on pitch and with good enunciation. The febrile quality of her voice made her convincing in her delirium in Act II, with her full dramatic capability in good use in the lyrical passages of forgiveness and reconciliation at the end of the opera.<sup>241</sup> But critiques of Collier’s performance tended to start with adverse comments on her acting, obscuring the positive responses to her singing. In an echo of responses to her portrayal of Liù in *Turandot*, some critics felt that Collier projected a more sophisticated persona than was appropriate for the role; for the

<sup>237</sup> H.D.R., ‘Magnificent “Elektra”’, *Opera*, January 1968, p. 51.

<sup>238</sup> Raymond Ericson, ‘Recordings: A Versatile Nilsson Tackles Three Demanding Roles’, *New York Times*, 7 January 1968, p. D25

<sup>239</sup> Martin Bernheimer, ‘Aida, Tosca, Anna, Elektra: Four Faces of Nilsson’, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 1968, p. O34.

<sup>240</sup> *Music International*, BBC 2 TV, 25 February 1968 (BBC Programme Number LMA6656K)

<sup>241</sup> Leoš Janáček, *Jenůfa*, radio broadcast, Rafael Kubelik (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 24 February 1968. Broadcast live BBC Radio 3. (Private recording.)

*Musical Times* 'her demeanour suggested suburban rather than rural tragedy.'<sup>242</sup> Andrew Porter echoed this in his review for the *Financial Times*, but also noted that Collier's *Jenufa* was 'a carefully studied and in its way sensitive interpretation' that needed the aid of a better producer.<sup>243</sup> Another predicted that Collier's interpretation would develop with further performances.<sup>244</sup> This was in fact a common pattern for Collier; she tended to discover a role's possibilities throughout the run, finding what she could make of a role by doing it rather than approaching it with a completely pre-conceived and developed characterisation. Her acting was instinctive rather than intellectual, her first priority to master the words and music and only then to find the nuances in both as she performed them.

## Conclusion

Marie Collier's success in replacing Callas as Tosca in 1965 was the turning point of her career. With the increased attention of opera companies more performing opportunities became available; Collier became a worthy subject of coverage in the general news, a 'household name' like Sutherland and Callas; and the incident became a defining element of the way she would always be perceived.

The event was a combination of artistic accomplishment and manufactured enthusiasm that gave her extra impetus in the direction she was working towards. It was a lucky break, but the luck consisted in having the necessary capacities and being in the right place at the right time. These elements were already in place because Collier had worked at them. She had consolidated her interpretation of traditional roles, developing Tosca as a signature role, but also maintaining and discovering new roles by the composers of the standard repertoire. Some of these were not so successful; she moved away from Verdi after realising that roles like Aida and Elisabetta in *Don Carlos* did not suit her abilities; and although her interpretation of Chrysothemis in *Elektra* was effective, it would never receive great enthusiasm from the critics.

Collier's achievements as a specialist in modern opera have been largely obscured by the substitution for Callas and by the circumstances of her death. Her reputation in critical circles had received its greatest advances from her specialisation in non-standard and modern roles, works which she loved to perform.<sup>245</sup> Her ability to perform

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<sup>242</sup> Ronald Crichton, 'Covent Garden Revival', *Musical Times*, April 1968, p. 353.

<sup>243</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Jenufa', *Financial Times*, 17 February 1968, p. 14.

<sup>244</sup> J.W., 'Jenufa. Covent Garden, February 16', *Opera*, April 1968, pp. 333-4.

<sup>245</sup> Lesley Skilney, phone interview.

roles like Katerina Ismailova, Emilia Marty, Minnie and Jenůfa in 'rediscovered' works, and her capacity to take on roles in less successful recent works such as *Troilus and Cressida* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, had given her a niche in the opera world for which the majority of singers were unsuited. Her performances in *Katerina Ismailova* and *The Makropulos Case* brought attention to the works and helped them become widely known and regularly performed. Her achievements in modern operas are more significant than those elements of her career for which she is remembered.

Although Collier was at the peak of her career, she was still a developing artist. Her skills as an actress had advanced markedly by the end of this period. Collier's way of creating a character is best seen in the development of her interpretation of Tosca. Her portrayals were most convincing when she based them on the music and text rather than imposing another approach. Based on instinct rather than intellect, the process of producing a convincing interpretation was one of evolution, not ready creation. This meant that sometimes she required direction when establishing an interpretation, but once she had found a way to portray the character she preferred to develop it on her own terms. By the time of Callas's cancellation Collier's unique take on Tosca had achieved its richest form. She had learned to balance the physical, emotional and vocal aspects of performance.

But even while the world was acclaiming her for replacing Callas, Collier knew that her singing could have been better. She was aware of her irregular breathing and that her legato line was often uneven. At times she lost control of the tone, relying on vibrato to complete the note instead of steady breath. Individual performances could be improved upon, but Collier also knew that her technique had fundamental flaws that could not be entirely corrected, and that if she continued to sing in that way it would damage her vocal apparatus irretrievably.

Her success drew partly from and fed into the image she had deliberately cultivated. She appeared the classic opera diva, with her triumphs, with attractiveness and glamour, with an international career, and with the appeal, responsibilities and costs of a thriving family life. This picture drew on Collier's personality and circumstances, deliberate and targeted publicity, and the response of the public and critics.

The cost of success was the undermining of the elements that had been the foundation of it. In 1964 and 1965 Collier began to perform fifty times per year. The time spent travelling increased, and more significantly so did the time away from home.

Hospitalisation for physical and emotional exhaustion was inevitable, and the decision to reduce her performances from 1967 was a necessary evil.

After her performances in *Jenùfa* in early 1968 Collier returned to Australia to show off her Tosca at home. There she would discover that her relationship with the country had changed, that the myth-making that surrounded Callas would now surround her, and that the new stresses of her career were to cost her even more professionally and personally.

## Chapter 4      An Australian singer: 1964, 1967, 1968

At the end of 1966 Collier won the Harriet Cohen International Music Award for the outstanding opera singer of that year. She was presented with the award from the Australian Deputy High Commissioner in London at a ceremony at Australia House in January. Although the award had no specific Australian significance, Collier's acceptance speech had a strong patriotic flavor: 'I feel extremely proud to have won the award—and more so than that, being an Australian... I shall always carry the tradition of character, endeavor and the songs of Australia wherever I go, and in whatever I do.'<sup>1</sup>

Beyond a superficial acknowledgement of Collier's origins, or a claim of ownership, Collier's identity as an Australian singer is generally underplayed and its significance unacknowledged. Between the singer and her home country there existed a different kind of relationship to that with the opera houses and audiences of her international career.

Her history in Britain and in the United States was that of Collier the professional performer. Her national identity was of little consequence, and the media regarded her with professional courtesy. In Australia she had family and other long-standing relationships, accompanied by expectations and demands reflecting her early experience and the local setting, rather than the person she had become and the milieu in which she now moved. This mismatch became evident in her relationship with the media.

In her home country she performed the additional of cultural figurehead: as a marker of Australian achievement, as a model for local performers, and as a muse inspiring creativity. Her Australian tours saw her representing the best of western culture for the benefit and pleasure of Australians, and taking a new role in developing Australian culture and expressing it to the world. She represented a standard of quality and professionalism that could lift that of the local performers with which she would appear. Finally, her ability as a performer inspired local artists to create works expressing Australian identity.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Award to Marie Collier', *Canberra Times*, 13 January 1967, p. 11.

This chapter examines Collier's three journeys to Australia in the 1960s: her return in 1964 to sing in William Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* at the Adelaide Festival; her involvement in Australia's Expo 67 activities; and her Australian season in *Tosca* for the Elizabethan Trust Opera Company in 1968. With these visits she brought the glamour and business of international opera—the professionalism, the image, and the drama—and took it back to the world under Australian colours, but at a cost.

### **A world singer to Australia: *Troilus and Cressida***

Marie returned to Australia in 1964 after an absence of almost ten years. During the decade she had been away the country had changed. No longer an outpost of empire, Australia held a new, confident view of itself and its place in the world. The country now saw the arts as an assertion not only of its connection to the old world but of its new identity, and it actively encouraged and supported the development of artistic standards and expressions to declare that identity.

Australia emerged from World War II with a new geopolitical focus. During the war Australia had found its interests were advanced more through cooperation with the United States than with the Mother Country; post-war foreign policy came to be more independent of Britain and more closely aligned to the United States. At the same time a more confident cultural identity for Australia also began to be seen. In the early 1930s and 1940s scholars described the history of European culture in Australia in a series of comprehensive studies;<sup>2</sup> by the 1960s such overviews focused on the distinctive Australian character of that culture. Books such as Geoffrey Dutton's *The Literature of Australia*, Roger Covell's *Australia's music: themes of a new society* and Geoffrey Serle's *From deserts the prophets come: the creative spirit in Australia 1788-1972* were issued by commercial publishers for a general audience.<sup>3</sup> Opera was not neglected; Covell's book dedicated a chapter to the history and current state of the art in Australia, and in 1967 Barbara and Findlay Mackenzie produced *Singers of Australia*, surveying the careers of Australian singers from Amy Sherwin to Sutherland and her contemporaries, including Collier.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From deserts the prophets come: the creative spirit in Australia 1788-1972* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1973), p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Dutton (ed.), *The Literature of Australia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964); Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967); Serle, *From deserts the prophets come*.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Mackenzie and Findlay Mackenzie, *Singers of Australia* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1967).

One thing these works indicated was that the emergence of a strong Australian cultural identity had been a long time in the process. Since the late nineteenth century Australians had sought to describe themselves in comparison with the British identity which they had inherited from the colony's founders. A series of 'national types' were described and achieved mythical status. The bush myth, espoused by Francis Adams, 'Banjo' Paterson, Henry Lawson and other writers in the *Bulletin*, saw the characteristics of the itinerant bush worker as an ideal: equality, mateship, practicality and suspicion of the intellectual.<sup>5</sup> An alternative was the pioneer myth, finding virtue in the values of those who had settled the land and thus built the nation: 'courage, enterprise, hard work and perseverance'.<sup>6</sup> Both of these ideals achieved popularity, but for people committed to the arts neither the bush myth, emanating from the political left, nor the pioneer myth from the conservative side held much appeal. High culture offered an alternative narrative of national identity: the stories and artefacts of high art declared status and taste, focusing on what Australians were now, not what they had been a century before. The pursuit of high art displayed Australia as a nation of mature cultural expression; in looking to 'the best which has been thought and said in the world',<sup>7</sup> Australians could engage with the sophistication and complexity of the world rather than reacting to it with the simplistic nostalgia the bush and pioneer myths represented.<sup>8</sup>

Cultured citizens had founded and supported orchestras, theatres, and choral societies since the 1830s, and a century of enthusiasm and hard work now resulted in exponential growth. Organisations which had emerged in the 1930s expanded. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), established in 1932, not only firmly established radio broadcasting as a continuing enterprise but also provided a strong basis for the continuing existence of orchestras. The Commission formed the ABC (Sydney) Symphony Orchestra in 1932 and took control of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1934.<sup>9</sup> Stage and cinema players and in-house musicians provided good

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<sup>5</sup> Russel Ward, 'The Australian Legend re-visited', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 71 (Oct. 1978), p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> John Hirst, 'The pioneer legend', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 71 (Oct. 1978), p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Arnold's definition of culture, in Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Waterhouse, 'Australian Legends: Representations of the Bush, 1813-1913', *Australian Historical Studies*, 115, October 2000, p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Phillip Sametz, *Play On! 60 years of music-making with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra* (Sydney: ABC Enterprises, 1992), p. 14.



quality performances for broadcast when commercial recordings of classical repertoire were still rare.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of its identification with elites opera had always appealed across all classes in Australia. Reports of Melba's tour with the Melba-Williamson Grand Opera in 1924 describe an audience comprising people from a range of social groups and backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> This following provided the basis for the emergence of local companies. Gertrude Johnson founded the National Theatre Movement in 1935; after World War II that company, and Clarice Lorenz's National Opera of New South Wales, established home-grown opera where audiences had depended on touring companies, now with the support of a moneyed middle class that had benefited from the growth of the post-war economy and who looked to opera and the arts to provide a measure of status and exclusivity.<sup>12</sup>

With the wave of European immigration after World War II came a new population for whom high culture was a necessity and who contributed to its growth. Chamber music was boosted with the founding of Musica Viva by the Romanian violinist Richard Goldner in 1945. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust emerged in 1954 to support the development of drama, opera and dance, its most lasting achievements the establishment in 1956 of the Elizabethan Trust Opera Company (ETOC), eventually to become Opera Australia, and the Australian Ballet in 1962.

The economic growth of Australia in the post-war period was thus matched by the growth of artistic enterprise. By the 1960s the quality of Australian artists had begun to be acknowledged internationally, with Robert Helpmann acclaimed in ballet and theatre, Patrick White in literature, Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan in the fine arts, and Malcolm Williamson, Charles Mackerras and Joan Sutherland in music. It was an exciting time to be a creative artist in Australia; the composer Peter Sculthorpe recalled the collection of talent present in the South Australian Hotel one night during the 1964 Adelaide Festival:

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<sup>10</sup> K.S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932-1983* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1983), p. 13; Martin Buzacott, *The Rite of Spring: 75 Years of ABC Music-Making* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2007), p.10.

<sup>11</sup> 'In The Gallery', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 June 1924, p. 14, and 'The Dresses', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 June 1924, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> See Frank Van Straten, *National Treasure: The Story of Gertrude Johnson and the National Theatre* (Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1994).

Marie [Collier] was sitting at the table in the lounge with William Walton. I walked in with Tass Drysdale, George Johnston, David Campbell. Oh, and Patrick [White] was there, glowering in the corner. And Nugget Coombs was sitting at the table with Jean Battersby. And he said to Jean, he told us later, 'Isn't this amazing, this collection of Australian creative people. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could form something like an Australia Council for the Arts?' He told us about that later. So it began...<sup>13</sup>

Collier and her creative peers in the hotel that night represented the standards to which Australian art aspired. Australians were moving beyond the 'cultural cringe' that regarded home-grown product as innately inferior to overseas product.<sup>14</sup> Now they looked to world centres of art not because they were 'better' than Australia, or simply somewhere else than Australia, but because the standards these places set were those by which Australians wanted to judge their work and have their work judged. Australians wanted to be better, not 'not Australian'. The success of Collier, Sutherland and their contemporaries in other fields confirmed to the Australian public not only that they could produce artists of the highest quality, but also that they had the discernment to appreciate the arts at that level.

Since its establishment the ETOC had invited overseas artists to sing principal roles with the company. Overseas guests had been a feature of every professional opera company since the 1850s, but now the guests were more often than not Australians who had proved their worth overseas. In 1957 Joan Hammond, Elsie Morison and Ronald Dowd had returned to Australia; Dowd came back the following year with Sylvia Fisher and Raymond Nilsson, and Hammond made another visit in 1960 along with the tenor Kenneth Neate. By 1964 the returning Australian star had become a feature of the ETOC's seasons. For audiences the appeal was in the glamour they represented. For the company members it was the excitement of working with people who had made their name overseas and had come back bringing professional expectations and advice to help develop the home company. It gave them confidence they were building something good.<sup>15</sup>

The invitation to Collier came in 1963 after the revival of William Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* at Covent Garden. The Adelaide Festival committee decided to make Walton's works a feature of their 1964 Festival, programming them in a number of concerts and scheduling an all-Walton concert with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra

<sup>13</sup> Peter Sculthorpe, interview, Woollahra NSW, 5 February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> For the classic description of the cringe see A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', *The Australian Tradition* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 2nd ed. rev. 1966), p.112.

<sup>15</sup> Shirley Germain, interview, Dulwich Hill, NSW, 25 January 2007.

conducted by the composer. The opera was a logical addition to the programme and became the centrepiece of the opera season, which also included Verdi's *Macbeth* and Bizet's *Carmen*.

For Collier the opera was a good choice, not just because it suited her vocally and dramatically but because it demonstrated the kind of singer that international audiences perceived her to be: a star in the centre of the operatic universe performing in contemporary opera. Publicity material for the Festival gave equal space to her abilities in both traditional and modern works, but the souvenir programme displayed her in a full page photograph in costume as Katerina Ismailova,<sup>16</sup> and it was the modern opera that journalists focused on. Newspaper reports mentioned her position as a principal soprano at Covent Garden, 'specialising in modern roles',<sup>17</sup> and 'renowned for her singing versatility and aptitude for mastering difficult roles.'<sup>18</sup> Collier was quick to assure the journalists that although *Troilus and Cressida* was a modern opera, it was lyrical and romantic, with 'singing sort of music, a marvellous story and glamor.'<sup>19</sup> Although she had performed Puccini more than any other composer, it was not in his works that she had made her reputation. Collier returned to Australia as a specialist at the cutting edge of the art form.

When Collier went to Europe she left an optimistic movement of enthusiasts; ten years later she returned to a flourishing, confident professional scene. The standard of opera, in the craft of production as well as singing, had improved. While Collier brought a professionalism that her Australian colleagues could emulate, the ETOC was a far more accomplished operation than she realised. Recalling the well-meaning amateurism of her National Theatre days, she preferred to trust in her own competence, and thus became a victim of her low expectations.

Shirley Germain, the wig mistress, found her easy to work with in the dressing room, because Collier was well-prepared and 'knew what she was doing'.<sup>20</sup> So did Germain; she had commenced her career as a hairdresser and had been wig mistress of the company since 1958, preparing wigs not only for the opera but for ABC television.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Third Adelaide Festival of Arts: 1964 Souvenir Programme* (Adelaide: Executive Committee of the Adelaide Festival, 1964), pp. 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> 'Soprano Back To Take Lead In Opera', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 1964, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> 'Back After 9 ½ Years', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 2 March 1964, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Shirley Germain, interview, Dulwich Hill, NSW, 25 January 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Collier was clearly unaware of Germain's expertise. The singer had brought the wig she had used in the Covent Garden production the previous year; when Germain asked if she could dress and clean it, Collier rebuffed her with the reply that it was a London wig, made by Albert Sargood in the Covent Garden production department, and did not need much dressing. Germain let the matter rest. But before the dress rehearsal she noticed that the wig's ponytails seemed insecure. When she suggested that she could reattach them Collier again insisted that there could not be a problem. The assistant stage manager, Moffatt Oxenbould, witnessed what happened next:

In the wings, with hairpins in her hands, Shirley told me what had happened and waited with me as we watched Marie onstage. She was very physical in her acting and certainly impressive. Suddenly she flung her head in the air in a wild, dramatic gesture. The two ponytails kept flying, leaving her wig and landing on a little altar, downstage centre. Shirley and I broke into giggles when Marie uttered her next line, 'Will I please him thus, hair loose and flowing?'<sup>22</sup>

Collier was humble enough to join in the laughter when she came offstage.

In spite of her high standards Collier could not control everything; and there were occasional lapses in her own discipline. As Collier did not arrive until towards the end of the rehearsal period, costume fittings were delayed until the last few days before the season began. At the fitting the costumes, chiffon robes in Grecian style, were adapted to Collier's figure, the individual pleats stitched into place on the bodice by the head cutter. The following day when Collier put them on they did not look right; she was wearing a different foundation garment to the day before. Tension increased, the pleats were re sewn, and the diva was placated.<sup>23</sup> One night during the run Collier forgot to take Cressida's scarf onstage. Had it been any other prop the omission would not have been serious; but the scarf represents Cressida's fidelity to Troilus and plays a fateful part in the plot. When Collier realised her error she beckoned furiously to the bass Alan Light, standing in the wings waiting for his cue as Calkas, to bring it on.<sup>24</sup> It was a small mistake, of the type that bedevils every production. But saddest for posterity was an error by the ABC. The national broadcaster filmed one of the performances and scheduled it for broadcast after the season was over, but it did not appear. An ABC technician had accidentally erased the tape of Act II, rendering the whole recording unusable.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, *Timing Is Everything* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2005), p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Light, phone interview, Sydney, 1 December 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, interview, Ultimo NSW, 27 July 2006; see also Moffatt Oxenbould, *Timing Is Everything* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2005), p. 65.

The loss of the recording is one reason why it is difficult to assess whether Collier's performance was of her usual standard; another is the quality of the local reviews. The initial impression seems to be that they responded to the returning star rather than the professional performer, noting her stage presence—'sensuous' according to the *Herald*,<sup>26</sup> "'star" quality' according to the *Advertiser*<sup>27</sup>—rather than her skill. The most detailed assessment of her acting and singing came from *Opera* magazine's Veronica Haigh, who observed that Collier's singing had its customary warmth yet was 'rightly reserved and somewhat withdrawn in character.'<sup>28</sup> After the Covent Garden performances the previous year Ronald Crichton had commented that 'she doesn't do much to suggest the complexities of the girl's nature',<sup>29</sup> perhaps her subsequent experience in *Katerina Ismailova* and *The Makropulos Case* had enabled her to find more depth in *Cressida*. She appeared to have overcome one weakness observed in the London performances, critics noting that her quieter singing 'was perfect and carried beautifully',<sup>30</sup> but she still lacked stamina, the climax of the final act 'perhaps a little beyond her powers of sustained roundness of tone.'<sup>31</sup> The opera did not show Collier to advantage as much as the Shostakovich and Janáček works would have, but Adelaide audiences had seen a contemporary star in a contemporary work: the world had come to Australia.

## Encountering the media

The new cultural outlook reflected a new confidence in Australian society, and in some areas a new arrogance. The Australian media's attitude towards celebrity, and particularly towards visiting opera singers, had fluctuated between respect and aggression over the previous one hundred years. In her study of nineteenth-century prima donnas, Susan Rutherford notes that images of the prima donna appeared in three main forms, the '*demi-mondaine*, professional artist and exalted diva.'<sup>32</sup> Australian attitudes reflected these categories. Even highly regarded performers were deemed no better than prostitutes; in 1850 the *Geelong Observer* criticised the controversial churchman John Dunmore Lang for having sailed from England in the same ship as the contralto Sara Flower. Lang defended himself by emphasising that he

<sup>26</sup> R.C., 'Walton's Opera In Adelaide', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 1964, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> John Horner, "'Troilus" Is A Winner', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 9 March 1964, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Veronica Haigh, "'Troilus" in the Antipodes', *Opera*, July 1964, p. 461.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Crichton, 'Troilus and Cressida', *Financial Times*, 25 April 1963, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Horner, op. cit..

<sup>31</sup> Haigh, op. cit..

<sup>32</sup> Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 31.

had no connection with her, and that 'I was not aware of her musical abilities till we had got within the tropics.'<sup>33</sup> But at the same time singers were adored. When the Irish soprano Catherine Hayes visited Australia in 1854-55 audiences were moved to extremes of enthusiasm at her performances, 'waving hats and handkerchiefs, stamping, knocking, shouting and endeavouring in every possible manner to express their delight',<sup>34</sup> and dragging her carriage to her hotel after the concerts.<sup>35</sup> These demonstrations of affection might have been held merely to be the enthusiasm of the vulgar; however it was noted that many people 'moving in our highest circles' not only attended her concerts but entertained Hayes 'as an addition to their society, and an ornament to their circles'.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of the century the press treated the prima donna with respect, and even reverence. Press encounters resembled royal audiences when Nellie Melba toured Australia in 1911; the diva held forth on a variety of subjects, the journalists laughed at her *bons mots* and uncritically recorded her pronouncements for their readers.<sup>37</sup> In subsequent decades the coverage became less reverential, but still respectful. When Marjorie Lawrence returned to Australia in 1939 after a decade of triumphs in Paris and New York her progress across the country was recorded in minute detail in much the same way as Melba's;<sup>38</sup> in 1946 Joan Hammond was accorded similar attention.<sup>39</sup> On the rare occasion when controversy occurred the newspapers took the diva's side. When in 1939 Lawrence's promoter cancelled a concert in Sydney due to low ticket sales, blaming the ABC for flooding the concert stages with overseas artists at the expense of Australian performers, the Sydney newspapers criticised the ABC instead of the promoter.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 'Advancement of Christianity', *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer*, 23 March 1850, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> 'Miss Catherine Hayes' First Appearance In Opera', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1854, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1854, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 28 October 1854, p. 328.

<sup>37</sup> See for example 'Mme. Melba's Return', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December 1911, p. 8; 'Melba's Return', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 11 December 1911, p. 10. John Norton's campaign against Melba in the *Truth* from 1903 was unusual for its time; see John Hetherington, *Melba* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1967), pp. 119-25.

<sup>38</sup> See for example 'Cheers From Geelong To Winchelsea', *Sun* (Melbourne), 17 June 1939, p. 9; 'Singer Visits Birthplace', *Sun* (Melbourne), 19 June 1939, p. 14; and 'Hometown Girl Who Made Good', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 14 July 1939, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> 'Joan Hammond Tells Of Life In Britain', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 July 1946, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> 'Cancellation of Concert. Sympathy For Miss Lawrence. A.B.C. Criticised', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1939, p. 13; and 'Concert Boost Successful', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 3 August 1939, p. 5.

It is often difficult to ascertain where the press actually reflects public opinion and where it tries to form it. But in Collier's case we can see a public demand for what the media were producing. When Collier returned in 1964 the mostly print media dealt with her in their own style and with their own emphases. Newspapers treated her as the daily news, while magazines gave a longer, more detailed examination along the lines of themes which they regularly presented to their readers. Collier proved a source of good material for both kinds of approach, and both sides benefited.

On her arrival at Adelaide airport on 1 March 1964 she was greeted by reporters from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Adelaide Advertiser*, the latter putting the story on page one with a photo of her in a wide-brimmed hat, 'carrying the score of the opera', while being greeted by her long-time colleague John Shaw, who was appearing at the Festival in Verdi's *Macbeth*. Collier handled the reporters with assurance, playing the diva and giving them usable quotes. 'In nine-and-a-half years since I left Australia,' she said, 'I have produced a large family and sung a large number of operatic roles. The roles I cannot count. The children I can. Four.'

Later that week a longer piece appeared in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, based on an interview Collier had given in London with staff journalist Betty Best.<sup>41</sup> The article recalled Collier's history with the National Theatre and *The Consul*, and brought the story up to the present day, with her busy schedule in London, singing in four languages, and now having the desire to learn Russian "because Shostakovich told me that I was a Russian woman inside after he heard me sing in his *Katerina Ismailova*."

Collier reinforced her image of the housewife-diva by supplying Best with a description of a typical day. At 7:30am she would get the children's breakfast and see Michael and Barbara off to school. Then she would spend time with Christopher and Andrew before leaving them with the nanny and catching the train from Cookham at 8:45. The train arrived at Paddington at 9:30, and she travelled to Covent Garden for rehearsal at 10:30. After work she travelled home to cook dinner for the family—"it gives us a peaceful time together." The diva's domestic life could be just as stressful as the readers':

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<sup>41</sup> Betty Best, 'For Marie Collier: A Brilliant Role', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 4 March 1964, p. 9.

Everything goes smoothly as long as we are all fit, but in the last few months it has been murder with scarlet fever and chicken-pox, a gashed hand which put Christopher into hospital for a nerve operation, and Michael with a sudden appendix operation. Barbara had her tonsils out, and to put the cap on it the baby got bronchitis on Boxing Day.

And like most mothers, she stressed that 'I don't like to be away from the children for too long.' It was a busy life, but Collier was clear that career and family combined happily: 'It [singing] still has this power over me in spite of the fact I have a very happy marriage and four marvellous children. Fortunately my husband understands and it all works in beautifully.'

The article finished with Collier comparing the relative ease of the coming Adelaide trip with one several years before when she had performed *Butterfly* in Dublin in English, knowing she had to fly back immediately for an emergency performance at Covent Garden. 'I rushed on, sang it, then hopped on a plane [and] was singing it again at the Garden—but this time in Italian. By midnight I had no idea where I was or what language I spoke.'<sup>42</sup>

The relationship between Collier and the media was mutually beneficial: the singer gave the media good copy for their readers, and the media gave the singer good publicity. They presented the image she had cultivated in England: the hard-working musician, specialising in difficult roles and flying back to London to fill in in an emergency; the sexy and alluring diva, fashionably dressed and dispensing quotable lines; and the capable and conscientious mother concerned about her children. In England she may not have had quite the star status the Australian newspapers projected onto her, but that did not matter. For Collier the image was a promotional tool, keeping public interest in her while presenting different facets that would appeal to different sections of her audience. The daily press needed stories about the Festival, and the opera diva image was one that their readers had recently embraced in stories about Joan Sutherland. The magazine used the housewife-diva image because it gave their readers a point of identity that enriched the vicarious experience of glamour.

By the time Collier next came to Australia the press had begun to behave differently. In 1965 Joan Sutherland had come home with the Sutherland-Williamson Grand Opera Company. The sheer size of the company, the number of performances it gave, and

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<sup>42</sup> Collier claimed it was to replace another *Butterfly*, but the Covent Garden performance actually replaced a scheduled *The Silent Woman* (Richard Strauss) cancelled due to illness. See 'No Strauss Opera Tonight', *Times* (London), 8 December 1961, p. 17.



the number of cities it visited guaranteed a huge impact on the public awareness. The company gave 104 performances over three months in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane, and at times inspired scenes of dignified middle-class mayhem on a par with the teenage hysteria that had occurred on the Beatles's tour of Australia and New Zealand in June 1964. The response at the opening night in Melbourne, featuring Sutherland in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, was repeated throughout the tour:

Excitement was in the air from the opening and it reached its peak at the end of the mad scene when Miss Sutherland was recalled ten times in front of the curtain to thunders of applause and optimistic shouts of 'encore.' Hundreds of the audience rose to give her a standing ovation, others stamped and screamed. The singer threw back her head and raised her arms to the 'gods', then kissed her hands.<sup>43</sup>

But the press openly mocked the elitism they perceived. 'Batman' in the *Bulletin* noted that only one in ten gentlemen at the Melbourne opening responded to the appeal to wear white tie and decorations, the rest wearing black tie.<sup>44</sup> On the Sydney season's first night the front page of the *Sydney Sun* reported on the gowns and jewellery and the 'hundreds of top-hats, white ties and tails' that had been hired so Sydney society could show itself off.<sup>45</sup> The usually conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* drew a comparison between those attending the theatre and those drinking at the working-class pub across the road.<sup>46</sup>

The press had been assertive and aggressive towards Sutherland and her husband Richard Bonyngé from their arrival in Sydney, when photographers and journalists had besieged them at the airport. At a press conference several days later Bonyngé declared that the press had behaved 'like a herd of orang-outangs', and when a journalist answered back rudely the conductor took his wife's arm and marched out of the building.<sup>47</sup> Relations were strained for the rest of the tour.

Sutherland's visit established a template for press coverage of the visiting diva, offering journalists three potential themes for stories: high art, glamour and controversy. When Collier returned in 1967 to perform in preparation for appearances at Expo 67 she gave them all three.

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<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Hutton, 'Glory night of La Stupenda', *Age* (Melbourne), 12 July 1965, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> 'Batman', 'Around Melbourne', *Bulletin*, 17 July 1965, p. 27

<sup>45</sup> 'Biggest Night Since Melba', *Sun* (Sydney), 31 August 1965, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> 'Before The Curtain Rose', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1965, p. 8. Coincidentally the pub was called the Covent Garden Hotel.

<sup>47</sup> 'Joan And Richard Walk Out Of Press Reception', *Australian*, 30 August 1965, p. 1.

Collier flew into Australia on the morning of Sunday 21 May 1967, having flown for two days from London via San Francisco. She arrived in Sydney at 6am and immediately faced the press, who greeted her with their latest preoccupation. The design and construction of Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House was a subject of controversy and politics from when the design was announced in 1957 until the building was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1973.<sup>48</sup> The ABC used its influence to ensure that the main hall was used for symphony concerts, with opera relegated to a smaller, inadequate theatre. For many this decision negated the point of the project. Cost overruns and Utzon's inability to compromise led to the designer's forced resignation in 1966. By then the Opera House had become a symbol of national prestige even though it was still only a concrete shell. The building became a press conference staple when overseas celebrities arrived in the country. Most of the visitors were ill-qualified to comment, but in the week Marie arrived journalists were able to ask some visitors who actually knew about the music business and were able to make informed judgements.

When asked if she would one day perform in the new building Collier gave her forthright opinion. 'What kind of opera can be performed in a small hall with reduced orchestra space and an inadequate stage area?' she asked rhetorically. 'In my opinion chamber works. I am not a singer of chamber opera.'<sup>49</sup> She had already expressed her opposition by sending a telegram to the NSW premier, Robin Askin, who advised her that she was misinformed. 'I found out later I was nothing of the sort.'<sup>50</sup> Collier's opinion had validity because it was formed out of years of professional experience; but the journalists focused on the strength of feeling and the pithy lines with which she expressed herself. 'It's ridiculous to even call it an Opera House. I don't know why they persist,' she declared.<sup>51</sup> 'Australia has been made the laughing stock of the opera world.'<sup>52</sup> The journalists had the headline for their story.

Before Collier next appeared before the press that afternoon in Melbourne the story had gained momentum. The tenor Giuseppe di Stefano had arrived in Melbourne that morning for a recital tour, and was asked about the Sydney Opera House. He declared that the project was 'futile', because Australia did not have the tradition and

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<sup>48</sup> An unsensational account of the challenges and politics can be found in Philip Drew, *Sydney Opera House: Jørn Utzon* (London: Phaidon Books, rev. ed. 2002).

<sup>49</sup> 'Opera star says Opera House futile', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 May 1967, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> 'Singer says Opera House made the world laugh at us', *Australian*, 22 May 1967, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> 'Two singers slate that Opera House', *Age* (Melbourne), 22 May 1967.

opportunities needed to create an operatic culture.<sup>53</sup> His critique set up the press for a hostile meeting with Collier that afternoon.

Tired and stressed from the flight and the early morning encounter, she made an effort to appear bright and smiling for the photographers at Essendon airport, but she was not in good shape for the press conference. It was clear to the journalists that she was nervous and exhausted.<sup>54</sup> She admitted that she was anxious about singing in her home town after thirteen years away; 'What will the people think of me?' she asked.<sup>55</sup> But most of her anxiety came from anticipation of the press reaction. They opened with questions about the Opera House. Afraid of a publicity disaster, and probably mindful of their role in the design change, a public relations officer from the ABC had advised Marie that the smaller hall would seat 1400 people rather than the 900 that was her understanding.<sup>56</sup> But that was still too small, and the original intentions for the building had not been fulfilled. 'You don't start off to build a bridge and end up with a tunnel,' she commented.<sup>57</sup> The journalists' persistence on the subject annoyed Collier. The questions became speculative. Would she have advised them to build a bigger auditorium had she been asked? Did she have any idea how the project would finish? Collier refused to answer. 'That is a trap into which I will not fall,' she snapped.<sup>58</sup> She accused the reporters of deliberately 'needling her' and that some questions were 'unfair and unkind'.<sup>59</sup>

Collier was not a political person, once calling herself 'a political ostrich'.<sup>60</sup> She was merely expressing a sincere, well-considered opinion, and was shocked at the negativity she received. Her judgement of the Opera House was already on record in the Australian press. Two months previously she had told the *Australian* in almost the same words, 'What sort of opera could you present in the minor hall? We'll be the laughing stock of the operatic world if we try that.'<sup>61</sup> Her statements had not excited any

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<sup>53</sup> 'Opera star says Opera House futile'.

<sup>54</sup> David Cook, 'It left Marie so flat...', *Sun* (Melbourne), 22 May 1967, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> 'Singer says Opera House made the world laugh at us'.

<sup>56</sup> 'Two singers slate that Opera House'.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Cook, *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> 'Two singers slate that Opera House'.

<sup>60</sup> Pat Rappolt, 'Opera singer would like to fly a plane', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 March 1968, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Clowes, "'It's like walking on a bed of nails,' says Marie", *Australian*, 18 March 1967, p. 7.

comment when they were published, and she was genuinely surprised at the ire they attracted now.

The antagonism towards Sutherland and Bonyng had been personal, but with perhaps the exception of the Melbourne *Sun* that was not the case here. Nor were the media expressing a generalised resentment of 'elitist' high art. The Sydney Opera House had become a symbol of Australia's cultural identity, and the journalists were therefore asking about an issue that was important to them. It was likely that none of them had considered that the building might be inadequate for its declared purpose; criticism by people who did not have any tie to it came as a surprise and could be regarded as an insult to the country. That made a good story, and they pursued it aggressively. The Melbourne press conference was the confluence of several innocuous factors—Marie's exhaustion, journalistic enthusiasm, and a strongly expressed opinion upon a sensitive subject—that happened to turn out badly. If there was any malice it was in Melbourne's laughter at Sydney's expense.

Marie spent Monday sleeping off the flight in her suite at the Southern Cross Hotel, and faced the media again on Tuesday. While noting her tiredness and irritability, most reports of the press conference had focused on her statements; but the Melbourne *Sun* accused her of going 'all "prima donna"'.<sup>62</sup> On Tuesday Marie presented herself as calm and personable. She let a photographer from the *Australian* take a photo of her sketching the Collins Street building in which her teacher Madame Wielaert had had her studios.<sup>63</sup> In the afternoon, while preparing for a reception in her honour at the Melbourne Town Hall, she spoke to more journalists in her hotel suite, but these were fashion writers eager to see the wardrobe she had brought for her concerts in Melbourne and Montreal. Marie showed off her Kenneth Rowell concert gowns, the first she had had made to order, then laid out on the bed some of her everyday clothes and modelled them.<sup>64</sup> While admitting that, left to herself, she would rather get around in slacks and a shirt, Collier impressed the journalists with labels from New York, Rome and Paris on skimmer dresses, culottes and 'shoes, shoes and more shoes!'<sup>65</sup> She also did a short interview for radio station 3XY with Binny Lum, who described the gowns for her radio listeners and condemned the press for their treatment of the singer. Marie's response was cool but angry: she had been misquoted, she had been asked

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<sup>62</sup> Cook, op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> 'Sketching the changes', *Australian*, 24 May 1967, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Jane Nugent, 'Famous opera star returns', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 7 June 1967, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Sandra Franks, 'Marie style', *Sun* (Melbourne), 25 May 1967, p. 35.

‘some very, very below-the-belt questions.’ She described her approach to interviewers with a sense of betrayal: ‘I don’t understand it because one likes to—I speak to the press as though they were, well, just you and I having a conversation. And I will reply as directly as I can, and as truthfully as I always do, without trying to hurt anybody.’<sup>66</sup>

The Australian press had been unlike anything Collier had experienced. Stories and interviews in the UK and the US were even-tempered and respectful, looking for the positive and praiseworthy. The only time Collier had received ‘diva’ treatment from the media was when she had replaced Callas, and that was a positive ‘star is born’ story. Although she tried to control the story by presenting herself in various images, the Australian press would make whatever story they wanted. After the press coverage, the concerts with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra were almost an anticlimax; Collier completed them to lukewarm reviews, and flew to Toronto to perform for Australia at Expo.

### **An Australian singer to the world**

Since she had moved to Europe Collier had always had a strong sense of being a representative for her country. In Europe and America she spoke to journalists about her Australian origins and reported on the state of music-making in the country.<sup>67</sup> In 1961 she performed in an Australia Day broadcast for the BBC, singing Isaac Nathan’s ‘She walks in beauty like the night’ with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Charles Mackerras.<sup>68</sup> Reciprocally the country was prepared to utilise her, not just to represent her country but to express its new cultural confidence to the world. Collier’s achievements as an artist were tied to her identity as an Australian and thus became a catalyst, even muse, for artistic expression.

Stefan Haag,<sup>69</sup> now the executive director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT), thought the opening of the Sydney Opera House would be the perfect occasion to premiere a new Australia opera—a new artwork in a new building expressing Australia’s mature cultural identity. In 1963 Haag invited a number of

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Marie Collier by Binny Lum, 22 May 1967, Melbourne. National Film and Sound Archive Title No: 1108374, <https://soundcloud.com/nfsaaustralia/marie-collier-interviewed-by> [sic], (accessed 24 July 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Thomas Cassidy, *Luncheon at the Music Center*, KFAC Los Angeles, Thursday 11 November 1965; *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Home Service, 21 February 1966 (BBC Programme Number 28SX8324).

<sup>68</sup> Nancy Phelan, *Charles Mackerras: A Musician’s Musician* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> See Chapter One.

prominent artists to become involved: the composer Benjamin Britten to write the music, the painter Sidney Nolan to design the settings, and the novelist Patrick White to write the libretto. White proposed the story of Eliza Fraser, an Englishwoman who in 1836 had survived a shipwreck and six weeks of 'captivity' with Aborigines in Queensland, and had become a figure of sensation after her return to London. White was seized by the potential of the project; when looking over the Opera House site in March 1963 as a guest of the architect Jørn Utzon he imagined himself 'at the opening of the [Benjamin] Britten-Nolan-White opera with Marie Collier singing Mrs Fraser.'<sup>70</sup>

The AETT had decided on Britten because they did not consider any Australian composer suitable. However Peter Sculthorpe had been independently approached about a possible opera commission for the AETT by Sir Bernard Heinze, then Director of the NSW Conservatorium of Music. Sculthorpe had also been thinking about Eliza Fraser, and when Britten became unavailable Sculthorpe and White began to collaborate.<sup>71</sup> It was not a successful partnership.

White had decided that Collier was the only singer for his opera, but while Sculthorpe loved her voice and was excited by the prospect of having a big name to sing the role he was not convinced that she suited the part. To him Eliza Fraser was waiflike; Collier was tall and striking, and specialized in playing strong, un-waiflike characters. Were he to write for Collier it would not be out of empathy with the role but specifically tailored to Collier's vocal style and skills, which would be a challenge.<sup>72</sup>

After the four collaborators met during the Adelaide Festival in March 1964 White sent Sculthorpe the text for the first two scenes. White had set out the story as a sequential series of events and facts in a historical style, but Sculthorpe was opposed to that approach.<sup>73</sup> Over some months the relationship deteriorated, until White withdrew on the grounds that they were 'temperamentally unsuited as collaborators'.<sup>74</sup> Both later completed their own projects on the subject,<sup>75</sup> but Sculthorpe had the last word; using

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<sup>70</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 1992), p. 413.

<sup>71</sup> Graeme Skinner, *Peter Sculthorpe: The Making of an Australian Composer* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), p. 316.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Sculthorpe, interview.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick White, letter to Geoffrey Dutton, 5 December 1963; in David Marr (ed.), *Patrick White Letters* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1994), p. 245.

<sup>74</sup> Skinner, op. cit., p. 363.

<sup>75</sup> White published the novel *A Fringe of Leaves* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), while Sculthorpe created a music theatre piece, *Eliza Fraser Sings* (1978), to a text by Barbara Blackman.

White's text for the abandoned opera, in 2012 after White's death he completed the *Patrick White Fragments* for soprano and piano.<sup>76</sup>

The project exemplified the new robustness and energy in the expression of a specifically Australian identity. That it failed was not because of a lack of talent or opportunity or money or infrastructure—the things that had hampered previous attempts at culture building—but conflict between collaborators, a characteristic of culture around the world. Patrick White had been driven by a vision of Collier performing an Australian work on an Australian subject staged by an Australian company in an Australian opera house. Collier thus represented the possibility of great Australian art, the ultimate means by which it could be expressed to the world.

It was in this capacity that Collier represented Australia at Expo 67 in Montreal. In May that year she returned to Australia for four concerts with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra under the conductor Willem van Otterloo, in preparation for two concerts they would give the following week in Montreal. Two separate programmes were offered, the only common element being Collier's performance of Ravel's song cycle *Shéhérazade*. Collier was apprehensive about the work; she had sung very little in French, and the work did not suit her voice, calling for a smooth, even tone and a slow sensuality. But she chose it over the other work offered, Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été*, as 'the lesser of two evils'.<sup>77</sup> While audiences applauded, at least one critic agreed with her reservations, the Melbourne *Herald* commenting on her uneven line, poor tone in the lower register and her poor enunciation.<sup>78</sup>

The concerts at Expo were presented as part of Australia's 'National Day' on 6 July. Organisers of Australia's presentation tried to balance Australia's uniqueness with its similarities to the Old World.<sup>79</sup> The country was represented by a programme of events at the Australian pavilion demonstrating aspects of Australian popular culture: a boomerang throwing exhibition, sheepdog trials, wood-chopping contests, a tennis tournament between Australian and US players, and a variety show called *Pop Goes Australia* with Rolf Harris, the Seekers and Bobby Limb.<sup>80</sup> The similarities were

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<sup>76</sup> A previous version was completed in 2009 but withdrawn. Graeme Skinner (ed.), *Sculthorpe Worklist*, <http://www.petersculthorpe.com.au/worklist.htm> (accessed 29 January 2015).

<sup>77</sup> John Cargher, 'French with tears', *Bulletin*, 3 June 1967, p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> John Sinclair, 'Marie was so lifeless', *Herald* (Melbourne), 27 May 1967.

<sup>79</sup> James Curran, "'Australia Should Be There": Expo '67 and the Search for a New National Image', *Australian Historical Studies*, 39, 2008, p. 77.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 88.

represented by the orchestral concert featuring Bach's Suite No. 2 in B minor, Sculthorpe's *Sun Music IV*, Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 and Collier in *Shéhérazade*. The day's events were telecast by satellite to Australia, and the concert was broadcast live on ABC Radio to a home audience listening at ten o'clock the next morning Australian time. The success of the day was celebrated with a 'swinging midnight party' hosted by Prime Minister Harold Holt at the newly-opened Chateau Champlain hotel.<sup>81</sup> The composer and critic Felix Werder recognised the significance of the concerts in an article for the *Age*. History judged a nation's worth, he said, 'by its gentle humanism and the merry measure of its arts.' Musical performers were 'our real ambassadors, the unofficial representatives of this country who have given this small nation such a vast cultural image.'<sup>82</sup>

A recording of the ABC's broadcast of the Montreal performance confirms Collier's doubts about the Ravel work. Her tone is rich, and she sings with feeling, but the meaning of the text is lost under the weight of the sound and her poor enunciation.<sup>83</sup> Howard Klein of the *New York Times* observed correctly that 'Miss Collier could have better represented her homeland in repertory more suited to her considerable operatic gifts.'<sup>84</sup>

The success of the rest of the day was also equivocal. The *Australian* was embarrassed by the predominance of gum trees and kangaroos in the television broadcast and lamented that other countries would think of Australia in such images.<sup>85</sup> But the other countries did not seem to think anything of Australia at all. The *New York Times* commented only on the tennis tournament and the orchestral concert.<sup>86</sup> The paper politely observed that the Melbourne Symphony was 'not a virtuoso orchestra of the first magnitude', and noted the same faults in Collier's performance as the Melbourne *Herald* critic.<sup>87</sup> Neither country nor artist was well-served. Simply to appear on the world stage was not a guarantee of acclaim, because you must be judged by the world's standards.

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<sup>81</sup> 'Party ends our Expo day', *Age* (Melbourne), 8 June 1967, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> Felix Werder, 'Expo Exports', *Age* (Melbourne), 30 May 1967, p. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Maurice Ravel, 'Asie' from *Shéhérazade*, radio broadcast, Willem van Otterloo (conductor), Montreal, 6 June 1967. Broadcast ABC Radio, 7 June 1967 (private recording).

<sup>84</sup> Howard Klein, 'Music: 2d Australian Night at Expo 67,' *New York Times*, 8 June 1967, p. 53.

<sup>85</sup> 'Roos with everything', *Australian (Canberra)*, 12 June 1967, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> 'Emerson Defeats Ashe', *New York Times*, 7 June 1967, p. 54.

<sup>87</sup> Klein, op. cit.



## *Tosca in Adelaide*

Collier's 1968 tour of Australia in *Tosca* reprised the themes of her earlier visits. As the representative of world art she performed the role of the celebrity diva. As the Australian singer she was the local artist being celebrated. She had to negotiate a mutually beneficial relationship with the demanding media. All this was in addition to the physical and psychological stresses of touring and performing. The tour was a professional success for her; but that success had a personal and professional cost.

From the beginning of the tour Collier behaved like a diva for her public and for her colleagues. When her plane landed at Adelaide airport on 8 March she appeared at the top of the stairway in a silver-grey mink coat with matching hat. When she disembarked she spoke to journalists and posed for photographs, 'sparkling and vivacious'.<sup>88</sup> Then she went into seclusion. Staff for the ETOC were told that she had arrived and would not be seen in public or private for two days. It was exactly the sort of thing they expected. Moffatt Oxenbould, now stage manager for the company, later described the impressions of his colleagues:

We all got our background of theatre and opera from Mario Lanza films, he'd be on a fishing boat one day and then singing at La Scala the next - that it was all champagne in slippers and things like that. She was the sort of person who fitted the image. She was flamboyant, she was a star who behaved like a star.<sup>89</sup>

The truth was less exciting; Collier was resting from the two-day flight from London before she faced another Australian press conference. On Monday when she spoke to the media the event was carefully controlled; her friend Tito Gobbi, in Adelaide to sing *Scarpia*, shared the podium, and it was a far more orderly affair than her experience the previous year.<sup>90</sup>

The production was old; designed by Tim Walton in 1952 for the National Theatre, it was in fact the production in which Collier had sung her first *Tosca*. Even when it was new it had looked bad, Linda Phillips commenting that the sets 'appeared to have been collected in a hurry'.<sup>91</sup> The production survived seasons around the country, including one in 1957 with Joan Hammond. After a brief exhumation for a short season with the ETOC in 1967 the sets were refreshed with a coat of paint, but still looked 'rather tired

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<sup>88</sup> 'Marie here—in mink', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 9 March 1968, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, interview, Ultimo, NSW, 27 July 2006.

<sup>90</sup> *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 12 March 1968, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Linda Phillips, *Sun* (Melbourne), 5 March 1952.

old sets, painted up, stuck up with Band-aids and things.<sup>92</sup> This was not a mark of amateurism, but a reality of the opera world. The Covent Garden *Tosca* sets that Franco Zeffirelli's staging replaced in 1964 had been in service since the opera's first London performance in 1900. It was an economic necessity; if the production worked, why spend scarce money on replacing it? Collier exercised the privilege of the visiting diva by bringing her own costumes.<sup>93</sup>

The company had rehearsed for several weeks. Of the three principals, only the Australian tenor Donald Smith was present when rehearsals started in Sydney. By arriving only a few days before the first performance, Collier and her Scarpia, Tito Gobbi, were following what had become the jet-age practice: already experienced in their roles, the overseas stars arrived at the last minute, slotting into the production with their own interpretations. Both visitors and locals found each other to be professional and accommodating. When Gobbi walked onto the stage for his first rehearsal the company greeted him with respectful applause; ready for the divo's demands the director Stefan Haag asked, 'Tito, what would you like to do?' Gobbi simply replied, 'What do you want me to do?' He adjusted his customary stage business to suit the direction that Haag had already developed. He knew from experience that if the supporting performers looked good, he looked good, so he worked closely with them, suggesting stage business that would complement his interpretation and improve their own performances.<sup>94</sup>

Not a natural teacher like Gobbi, Collier did not directly help her colleagues in the same way, but influenced them with her serious approach. While performing Collier worked at a very high level of intensity not maintained by her co-stars. At the orchestra rehearsals she did not 'mark', or sing at a lower volume or pitch to preserve her voice, but sang at full volume. During performances Gobbi broke the tension by pulling faces at his colleagues when the audience couldn't see. Collier never played jokes on stage. However she could relax when not the focus of the performance, and did not keep a prima donna's distance from the other company members; she was among many of the same people she had worked with four years earlier, such as Germain and Oxenbould, people who she could trust as professionals. The set design made it necessary for Marie to be on stage before Act III began, waiting for her cue in a turret, accompanied by the firing squad, among them the baritone John Pringle (singing Sciarrone). While

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<sup>92</sup> John Pringle, interview, Chatswood, NSW, 11 August 2006.

<sup>93</sup> 'First visit for 14 years', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 10 March 1968, p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> John Pringle, interview.

they waited they talked quietly and joked; later Pringle recalled, 'She was really sweet, she was such a nice woman, to us. Really very down-to-earth and we'd tell jokes, dirty jokes usually.'<sup>95</sup>

From the Festival's beginning in 1960 as an Edinburgh-on-the-Torrens the organisers had encouraged an atmosphere of glamour and excitement. It was as much a social event as a cultural one, the enthusiasm echoing the atmosphere surrounding the Sutherland-Williamson tour. The social column of the *Advertiser* recorded the ferment, the names and the gowns of the attendees at the first nights of *Tannhäuser* and *Don Carlo*.<sup>96</sup> The opening of *Tosca* on 15 March was the most anticipated night of the Festival. The *Australian* critic called it 'the night of the long tiaras, the festival's operatic night of nights'.<sup>97</sup> The audience applauded at every opportunity and gave the cast seventeen curtain calls.<sup>98</sup> The *Australian* cynically commented, 'Enthusiasm is automatic at a performance like this. People who have paid a great deal have the right to applaud a great deal: this is simple justice.'<sup>99</sup> But the performers deserved it; they had lived up to the audience's expectations of a world standard performance. The reviewers gave high praise to the three principals. John Cargher, a writer not given to hyperbole, declared it was 'a cast which can be equalled only in a major international opera house.'<sup>100</sup> The Melbourne *Sun* reported that Collier was 'in sure control in the high drama of each of the three acts. Her voice seemed more powerful than on her last visit, not losing resonance in the soft passages which she sang with clarity and fine musicianship.'<sup>101</sup> Kenneth Hince described Collier's portrayal as 'a wayward Tosca, properly conscious of herself as a famous singer, sensitive, quick to suspect and to feel a wound'.<sup>102</sup> He agreed that she sang well, but thought that 'Vissi d'arte' was 'vocally if not dramatically overdrawn'.<sup>103</sup>

The company celebrated its success with a party in the foyer of the Theatre. Collier changed from her costume and made an entrance in a full-length sequined silver gown,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> 'Stars On And Off Stage At Opera', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 9 March 1968, p. 23; 'Saw Opera', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 8 March 1968, p. 32.

<sup>97</sup> Kenneth Hince, 'Night of the long tiaras', *Australian*, 16 March 1968, p. 10.

<sup>98</sup> Howard Palmer, 'A night of triumph – 17 curtain calls', *Sun* (Melbourne), 15 March 1968, p. 30.

<sup>99</sup> Hince, op. cit.

<sup>100</sup> John Cargher, 'Triumph, tragedy', *Bulletin*, 30 March 1968, p. 60.

<sup>101</sup> Palmer, op. cit.

<sup>102</sup> Hince, op. cit.

<sup>103</sup> Hince, op. cit.

'shimmering like the star she was.'<sup>104</sup> It was a warm night, and the foyer was small. All the people she knew, the people with whom she had just been on stage, were out on the footpath in front of the theatre. Collier took a bottle of champagne from a waiter and went outside onto the Grote Street footpath, where she hitched up her gown, sat down on the edge of the gutter, and shared her champagne with her colleagues, a triumphant if tired diva, drained from the physical and emotional demands of the performance, but surrounded by adoring friends.<sup>105</sup>

The season had sold out, and Channel 9 expressed interest in filming the production, an event unknown for commercial television in Australia.<sup>106</sup> To accommodate the recording the company announced a free performance to be held on the following Monday for a reduced audience of 800; tickets were only available to season subscribers, and students began queueing on the Sunday night.<sup>107</sup> Broadcast after the Melbourne season, the video was apparently erased after it went to air. But a recording of the audio exists. In Act I Collier is strong and thrilling, supporting the breath and using vibrato to sustain the note tastefully. She sings with skill, but at the same time the combination of tone and vibrato suggests the fragility of the character. She sustains the energy throughout the dramatic second act, and shows no sign of fatigue in the Act III duet with Cavaradossi. Her co-stars also give their best, Smith's tenor relishing the melodies and pushing to the limits of his voice, and Gobbi especially menacing and sadistic. The orchestra is not world class but competent, and the conductor Carlo Felice Cillario keeps the pace and energy through the whole work. The audience applauds every entrance and exit of the stars, every aria and duet; they are clearly swept up in the experience, not just because of the atmosphere of expectation but also because it is an exciting performance.<sup>108</sup>

The Adelaide season was a happy one, relatively unmarred by problems. One rehearsal saw a heated argument between Collier and Gobbi that calmed down as quickly as it had flared up.<sup>109</sup> The performances passed without incident except one evening when Collier could not find the knife to stab Scarpia. She had the presence of

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<sup>104</sup> Oxenbould, *Timing Is Everything*, p. 156.

<sup>105</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, interview; 'Champagne on the steps for Marie Collier', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 17 March 1968, p. 52.

<sup>106</sup> The ABC had regularly broadcast studio performances of opera since 1956. See Alison Gyger's survey in *Australia's Operatic Phoenix* (Sydney: Pellinor, 2005), pp. 297-304.

<sup>107</sup> 'All-night queue for free festival opera tickets', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 18 March 1968, p. 12.

<sup>108</sup> Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca*, television broadcast, Carlo Felice Cillario (conductor), Australian Elizabethan Trust Opera, Adelaide, 18 March 1968. Broadcast Channel 9. (Private recording)

<sup>109</sup> John Pringle, interview.

mind to grab something else to do the deed; that the substitute was a banana probably went unnoticed by the audience but caused mirth after the curtain fell.<sup>110</sup> With an artistic triumph and an almost trouble-free season in Adelaide, Melbourne promised to be a pleasant experience.

But Collier was not in a positive state of mind. While in Adelaide she met the journalist Pat Rappolt for an interview for the Adelaide *Advertiser*. Collier's comments were marked by the directness and candidness that she had described to Binny Lum the previous year, revealing the things that preoccupied her and the way in which she was responding to them. In her BBC interview with John Amis recorded a few months before she had performed the prima donna role, for the most part making it an audience with a diva except for occasional moments of candour. Rappolt's article reveals the contradiction between being a diva and a private individual—the constructed public persona versus the real person with needs and wants that were not being met.

The interview took place in her hotel suite. Collier was dressed stylishly but informally in a flowing, caftan-like dress of 'brilliant purples, blues and greens' and in sandals; but Rappolt noticed that she was tired and that her eyes were slightly bloodshot. The conversation shifted between positive and negative. When Rappolt noted the chestnut colour of her eyes, Collier commented that her eyes changed colour according to the state of her health. 'If when I look in the mirror in the morning I see that they are very pale, I know I am not well.'

Collier's lack of energy shaped her replies, giving the impression of passivity and resignation. She explained that her career was not the outcome of drive and foresight: 'I am not really ambitious. I do things the best way I can, as the need and opportunities arise, but I never planned my career.' She did not act with calculation: 'I go on blindly. I take each day, each event, each opportunity as it comes.' She described the things she disliked about the lifestyle of the jet age singer. Packing and unpacking was difficult not because it was a chore but because 'it seems to underline the psychological wrench of partings and beginnings.' She did not like jet travel, where sleep was only possible with the aid of a pill. And then there was the loneliness. 'It increases towards the top of a career. You go to rehearsal and to the performance and back to the hotel. I am unable

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<sup>110</sup> Recalled by Ronald Maconaghie in Bernadette Cruise, 'Reminiscences of a rewarding singing career', *Canberra Times*, 20 June 1997.

to deliberately cultivate friendships. I can make them spontaneously, but not by calculation.'<sup>111</sup>

Marie talked about her lack of politics, her love of clothes and her personal interests, the chief of which were her home and children. Separation from them was painful. 'In ten months, I suppose I've spent eight with my family, and (broodingly) this is steadily getting worse, with more tours, more demands on my time.' She was beginning to miss out on significant events in her children's lives; her daughter Barbara had appeared in pantomimes and school concerts, but 'I never saw her in any of them.'<sup>112</sup>

Rappolt attempted to balance the good and bad, and the account closed positively, looking forward to engagements in the near future when Collier would 'enchant thousands with that soaring voice' all over the world. However the overall impression is not of the conquering diva but of a tired woman, resigned to the difficulties of her path and passive in the face of them.

### *Tosca in Melbourne*

Melbourne offered the possibility of some respite. There were family celebrations to enjoy, as her sister-in-law Margaret had recently given birth; and friends awaited her, such as the gregarious and sociable Mina Shelley Baily from National Theatre days, who always came to assist Marie whenever she returned to Australia. On her visit the previous year Marie had formed a friendship with a young singer, Lesley Skilney, whom she mentored to an extent and with whom Marie felt she could share her concerns about her family.<sup>113</sup> Marie would also see other friends from her life before singing, when she returned to her old church, St John's Camberwell, to sing with the church choir as she used to.<sup>114</sup>

But Collier also knew that Melbourne would be a challenge. It was the first time she had performed opera in her hometown since she had gone to Europe, and the locals wanted to see her triumphant at home as she had been in Adelaide. Six performances had sold out, and a Saturday matinee was added to meet the demand. Collier put on her professionalism and went to work.

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<sup>111</sup> Rappolt, op. cit.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Lesley Skilney, phone interview, 14 October 2016.

<sup>114</sup> 'Marie Collier To Sing With Her Old Church Choir', *Herald* (Melbourne), 28 March 1968.

Media attention was as high as it had been in Adelaide, and Collier gave the media more than their due. Her ability to provide varied copy is illustrated by the photos that the Melbourne newspapers ran the following day. The *Age* showed the diva on her arrival at Essendon airport, beaming and clutching her hat, purse and hatbox in the wind, 'the height of summer elegance'.<sup>115</sup> The *Sun* put another image on its front page: a photo of 'Aunt Marie' and her three-week-old niece Prue, taken after the baby's christening the day of Marie's arrival.<sup>116</sup> Almost obscured in the text that accompanied both pictures was the information that at the airport Collier had told the reporters that she was tired of singing Tosca and would like to give her 'a fairly long rest'.<sup>117</sup> This tantalising snippet from the candid diva could have made a dramatic story, but the press used it almost in passing, its significance unnoticed or irrelevant. The glamorous diva and the woman who loved family were the images the press wanted to show. As it turned out the season would provide more than enough drama.

Some of the drama was calculated. Two days later at the dress rehearsal, Collier invited the *Sun* photographer into her dressing room and posed, in costume, holding a cigar and blowing a generous cloud of smoke. The paper featured the photo on its front page the following day, the accompanying story beginning, 'It hardly seemed the best way of caring for the valuable vocal chords of a world-famous opera star...' (Figure 5). Collier explained that she had acquired the taste when she had had to smoke a cigar on stage a few years earlier, probably in *La fanciulla del West*. She told the reporter how she found the occasional cigar relaxing, and assured that it didn't damage her voice because she didn't inhale.<sup>118</sup> It was a deliberately provocative image: the scandalous prima donna potentially ruining her voice in the pursuit of pleasure, calculated to give those who saw it a pleasurable frisson at the thought of an attractive, feminine woman indulging in a male pleasure.

But other dramas were occurring that day. Collier was unhappy that Gobbi was not with her; he had been contracted to appear only in Adelaide. His replacement, Raymond Myers, was singing Scarpia for the first time and had not learned the role thoroughly. Haag had also changed aspects of the staging, and now Scarpia was a hunchback. During the dress rehearsal Myers kept looking to the conductor for help, and forgot his character, standing up 'with the padded hump looking like a spongy dorsal fin'. Act II

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<sup>115</sup> 'Wintry blast greets opera stars at Essendon', *Age* (Melbourne), 1 April 1968, p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> 'Aunt Marie's home', *Sun* (Melbourne), 1 April 1968, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> 'Just a little tired of Tosca', *Age* (Melbourne), 1 April 1968, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> 'Tosca? She's gone for a Havana', *Sun* (Melbourne), 3 April 1968, p. 1.



Figure 5. The diva exhales.  
*Sun* (Melbourne), 3 April 1968,  
 p. 1.

stopped and started as Myers made mistake after mistake, infuriating Collier more and more. Towards the end of the act Tosca implores 'Dio m'assistì!' (God help me!); when this line came, Oxenbould later remembered, 'Marie was close to me in the prompt corner... Her head was bent low, and as she sang the line, she raised it and looked me straight in the eye. I can still recall the ferocity in her gaze, mixed with a terrible disappointment about what was falling apart around her.' When Tosca finally stabbed the well-deserving Scarpia, Collier sang 'È morto! Or gli perdono!' ('He's dead! Now I forgive him!'). Cillario called out 'Io! No!' ('I don't!').<sup>119</sup> Neither did Collier; she could see the glory of Adelaide disappearing.

This misfortune did not make it into the press. But another did. The following day Collier was entering a lift at her hotel with Lesley Skilney when she tripped and fell, hitting and cutting her head on the wooden hand rail.<sup>120</sup> Diagnosed with concussion, Collier was ordered to rest. By the next night, the opening performance, she was

<sup>119</sup> Oxenbould, *Timing Is Everything*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>120</sup> Lesley Skilney, phone interview.



suffering from nausea and was given injections to help her keep her balance. Against doctors' advice she decided to go on.



Figure 6. The show must go on.  
*Sun* (Melbourne), 5 April 1968, p. 4.

The press were informed of the drama. It was another 'prima donna' story. Collier posed for photos as she put on her makeup, the cuts on her forehead covered by sticking plasters (Figure 6). An announcement was made from the stage: Miss Collier's physical condition was 'not as good as she would wish it to be.'<sup>121</sup> For Collier there was no question of relinquishing the night to her understudy; not in her hometown, and not with her brother and his family in the audience. Maurice and Margaret had left Prue with a babysitter, and took their excited sons Paul and Mark to the Princess Theatre to watch Aunty Marie.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>121</sup> 'Singer defies her doctors', *Age* (Melbourne), 5 April 1968, p. 3.

<sup>122</sup> Paul Collier, phone interview, 23 July 2007.

By falling in the lift on Wednesday Collier had upstaged her colleagues on Thursday. The newspapers ran news items with headlines along the lines of ‘the show must go on’, the *Age* announcing ‘Singer defies her doctors’, and the *Sun* accompanying its ‘Concussed—Marie sang on’ with a photo of Collier in costume and sticking plasters.<sup>123</sup> The trope of ‘diva avoids disaster’ was almost as beloved as the diva as disaster.

Given the drama of the event reviewers could have been forgiven for passing over any inadequacies in Collier’s performance, but it appears there were none. Collier’s early supporter Linda Phillips thought the drama of the circumstances made Collier’s performance even more impressive:

To sing Tosca at any time is an endurance test, but to sing with slight concussion and give a thrilling performance deserved the ovations she received at every curtain call. Never since the great Renata Tebaldi have I seen a more intense or beautiful Floria Tosca, or heard richer or more luscious singing allied with splendid acting.<sup>124</sup>

Felix Werder rhapsodised over her: ‘Her voice has a luxuriant quality, a floating tone of great beauty that eats into the nervous system of the listener never to be forgotten, and all this with the face and gracious carriage of a Botticelli.’<sup>125</sup> The other singers were not overlooked; both Smith and Myers were praised for their vocal performances, however Kenneth Hince noticed that Myers had depended on the prompter, and that for his acting ‘he ought to be put in heavy training by the producer.’<sup>126</sup> That sentiment was no doubt shared by at least one of his co-stars.

Marie had given her home town her very best, and celebrated after the performance with a champagne and sandwich supper at her suite in the Southern Cross Hotel, surrounded by her family, friends and favourite fans.<sup>127</sup> In the next few days she continued to carry out her commitments; media appearances combined elements of the personal and professional. Collier talked about her life and career on the Sunday night ‘Interview’ programme on GTV-9 television.<sup>128</sup> During the curtain calls on 16 April, her forty-first birthday, the company presented her with a cake, an event recorded by the *Sun* the next day with a photograph of Donald Smith giving her a birthday kiss and

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<sup>123</sup> ‘Singer defies her doctors’; ‘Concussed—Marie sang on’, *Sun* (Melbourne), 5 April 1968, p. 4.

<sup>124</sup> Linda Phillips, ‘Sick Marie Collier triumphs as Tosca’, *Sun* (Melbourne), 5 April 1968, p. 13.

<sup>125</sup> Felix Werder, ‘A Tosca inspired’, *Age* (Melbourne), 6 April 1968, p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> Kenneth Hince, ‘A foothold on the ramparts’, *Australian*, 9 April 1968, p. 6.

<sup>127</sup> Margaret Collier, letter to Kim Kemmis, 15 May 2007.

<sup>128</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 11 April 1968.

pouring champagne.<sup>129</sup> The following night Collier opened an exhibition of iron assemblages by the Australian-Italian artist Albert Ceen at a gallery in St Kilda.<sup>130</sup> She inspected the newly built Victorian Arts Centre in St Kilda Road, again accompanied by the press.<sup>131</sup>

On the surface she was the confident and elegant diva, but the press was not aware of other things that were happening. In the *Advertiser* interview she had joked, 'Most women who can enjoy children can enjoy the company of men', but men gave her considerable trouble on her Australian visits.<sup>132</sup> In 1964 after a performance of *Troilus and Cressida* Collier had given a party in her hotel. William Walton, Peter Sculthorpe and a colleague were the last people at the party. Sculthorpe and his colleague had to leave, but Marie made desperate gestures for them to stay, as she did not want to be left alone with Walton.<sup>133</sup> Four years later she had to put up with an executive of the AETT who had escorted her to functions but apparently wanted the relationship to go a little deeper. One night in the prompt corner Collier confided to Oxenbould that the rejected suitor had dumped her out of the car on a freeway late one night, forcing her to find her own way home.<sup>134</sup>

The diva temperament began to appear. The company started rehearsals for Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*, with Marcella Reale as Minnie, and when Oxenbould mentioned this in passing one day Collier erupted. She had sung it with Corelli, she raged, she should be singing it now. It did not seem to matter that she had to leave Melbourne directly after *Tosca* and was therefore unavailable to sing the role.<sup>135</sup>

Then the stress manifested in her voice during a youth performance. The attendees at these events were rowdier and more enthusiastic than the usual audiences, being mostly university students with high energy levels and little reverence for high art.<sup>136</sup> Tired and emotionally fragile, Collier was hyper-sensitive to the atmosphere. From her Act I entrance it was clear to Collier and Oxenbould that something was wrong with her voice. At first Collier assured Oxenbould that she would get through the performance,

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<sup>129</sup> 'A birthday for Tosca', *Sun* (Melbourne), 17 April 1968, p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> 'Meeting another art', *Age* (Melbourne), 18 April 1968, p. 3.

<sup>131</sup> John Bednall, 'Our Theatre "Better Than Opera House"', *Age* (Melbourne), 20 April 1968, p. 3.

<sup>132</sup> Rappolt, op. cit.

<sup>133</sup> Peter Sculthorpe, interview.

<sup>134</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, interview.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> John Pringle, interview.

but at the end of the act advised that she was not sure she could continue. A taxi was sent to fetch Maureen Howard, the understudy. The first interval was extended until Howard arrived and was put in costume and make-up. But Collier refused to be overcome by the challenge. She announced that she would continue with Act II.

To the audience's delight Collier threw everything into her performance. Oxenbould recalled, 'She absolutely used mind over matter, or *instinct* over matter. She'd started and she was going to finish.'<sup>137</sup> At the end of the act she was almost voiceless, but prepared to finish the show. There were no jokes in the turret that night; through Act III she clutched her throat, and whispered rather than sang. After the leap from the castle onto the mattresses she fled in tears to her dressing room, ashamed to take curtain calls because she had cheated the audience. Oxenbould sent the remaining cast in front of the curtain, but the audience stamped their feet and chanted 'Collier! Collier!' Oxenbould rushed back to the dressing room; Collier had changed out of her costume, but he took her arm and led her to the stage:

Protesting appropriately, she went through the curtain in her dressing gown to the loudest cheers of the evening. Clutching her throat she fell to her knees, revealing an awful lot of shapely leg and ample bosom as the applause became more frenzied. Her tear-filled eyes glittered in genuine amazement as she drank in the love of the public that she had bewitched.<sup>138</sup>

The last performance took place on 20 April, and Collier flew out of Essendon an exhausted woman. Her plans were to sing Chrysothemis in *Elektra* at Covent Garden in June, and more importantly to prepare for her Bayreuth debut as Kundry in *Parsifal* in July and August.<sup>139</sup> But at the end of May a statement from the Royal Opera appeared in the *Times*: 'Marie Collier is suffering from nervous strain and has been ordered to rest for a month...' In June came the announcement of her withdrawal from Bayreuth.<sup>140</sup> Collier did not perform again until October.

## Conclusion

Collier's relationship with her home country, and how it was negotiated in the context of her three visits to Australia in the 1960s, provides a different picture of Collier which complements and contrasts with the more familiar narrative of her international career.

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<sup>137</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, interview.

<sup>138</sup> Oxenbould, *Timing Is Everything*, pp. 160-61.

<sup>139</sup> Alan Blyth, 'Marie Collier', *Opera*, December 1968, pp. 956.

<sup>140</sup> 'Marie Collier To Rest', *Times* (London), 28 May 1968, p. 12; Stanley Sadie, 'Three British sopranos for Bayreuth', *Times* (London), 19 June 1968, p. 1.

Australian audiences were happy to see that Collier's years in Europe had resulted in the hoped-for transformation from a popular, talented beginner to an experienced and accomplished professional. They had seen her in the two strands that were to mark her career, as the expert in modern opera and as the star in standard repertoire. In Collier the best of the world had come to Australia, and the country used her to represent the best it could offer to the world.

Collier was proud to do this. She was Australian by character as much as by birth, tied to the country emotionally and psychologically; and her visits to the country affirmed her achievement, and confirmed that she had fulfilled her country's expectations.

She had been able to use the media to present her image to a greater extent than overseas. Journalists had been willing to portray both the glamorous elements—the gowns, the ovations and the accidents—and the domestic—the family events and visits to her old haunts—but this compliance had been occasionally complemented by an aggression that she took personally.

Collier gained less from the visits than her fellow Australians. The tours added nothing to her professional profile, created no new opportunities for performance and marked no new path to follow in her repertoire. Her performances were popular triumphs but not artistic breakthroughs. *Troilus and Cressida* did not display her to the same advantage as the Russian or Czech works for which she had become famous. The attempt to create an Eliza Fraser opera foundered on artistic differences. Although she had been pleased to represent her country, the Expo concerts had not been what they could have been because of the choice of inappropriate repertoire. And by the time Australia saw her most celebrated role, Collier was tired of it and ready to move on; she left the country exhausted and feeling that she had been far from her best. The business of performing had become harder; her career was moving into a new stage where she had to make decisions about her abilities and her direction, in order to stop natural change turning into decline.

## Chapter 5      The middle-career diva: 1968-1971

When Marie Collier performed Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* in Adelaide in 1964 she had had problems with a Covent Garden wig.<sup>1</sup> When Georg Solti brought together the three female principals from his *Elektra* recording—Collier, Birgit Nilsson and Regina Resnik—for four performances at Covent Garden in May 1969, Collier brought her wig experience to bear. Birgit Nilsson, singing *Elektra*, had had some terse discussion with the wigmaster during rehearsals. The wigmaster declared that the wig did not need to be pinned to the stocking singers wear to hold their own hair in place. Nilsson convinced him to partially glue the wig to the stocking. But onstage Nilsson found the wig uncomfortable and tried to pull it into place. In error she pulled the stocking, and the wig started to slide. When Marie next came on stage she startled the already stressed Nilsson with what seemed to be new stage action, but Marie was in fact trying to give her some hairpins. At the next performance Nilsson's wig made it almost all the way through the opera, until the final minutes when *Elektra* died. As Nilsson slumped to the floor the wig slid over her face, and might have suffocated her had Marie not bent over her and moved it. A few days later Nilsson wrote, 'That's what I call being a good colleague, and I'll never forget her kindness.'<sup>2</sup>

Collier was the professional at the top of her career, who had the affection of her audiences and the respect of her colleagues. But her career had begun to lose momentum. Collier's progress had started to slow, not because of any special factors but because this was a natural stage in a singer's career. She was entering her middle career; she had established and consolidated her reputation, but the initial impetus had stopped, and she had to confront problems in her vocal state, her popularity and the demands of the profession.

At this stage of her career, in the years 1968 to 1971, Collier had to confront a number of problems with her voice: changes in the way she sang; the consequences of wear and tear; the manner in which she produced her sound; physical changes that naturally occur over the life cycle of a voice; and the fact that critics were commenting on these problems.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Four.

<sup>2</sup> P.H.S., 'The Times Diary', *Times* (London), 15 May 1969, p. 8. See also Raymond Ericson, 'A Pin In Time...', *New York Times*, 6 July 1969, pp. D13, 16.

The cancellation of the Bayreuth engagement had been a blow.<sup>3</sup> She was looking to new roles and new opera houses to move her career forward. Among audiences familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then indifference; and Collier had to contend with a change in demand and popularity with critics and opera management. She was being overlooked for her roles in the regular repertoire, replaced in the United States by long established singers with significant local followings, and in England by younger singers beginning to demonstrate their potential. The audiences for her specialty repertoire, modern and contemporary operas such as *The Makropulos Case*, were too limited for regular work; and in the late 1960s the interest in those works was beginning to fall away as their novelty decreased.

The costs of the profession were beginning to be harder to pay. The demands of touring and performing on a greater number of stages across four continents called for greater physical and emotional resources than she had available.

The middle-career singer faces a paradox succinctly described by Ethan Mordden: 'If one thinks of opera as the only sport in which the athlete is expected to *improve* as he or she gets older, and last into his fifties at top form, one realizes how easy it is to get drained and how fast it can happen.'<sup>4</sup> But by the end of 1971 Collier appeared to have successfully addressed the challenges, and was beginning to regain momentum instead of descending into respected obscurity like many singers who could not negotiate the changes.

Some of the stories that emerged after her death portrayed Collier as a powerless, aging singer desperate about a catastrophic decline in her abilities and her career.<sup>5</sup> The truth was less dramatic and more subtle. This chapter presents a picture of Collier as the singer facing a natural stage in her career, rather than the falling star of the legend. It examines the challenges she faced in the late 1960s, and the options she had: to consider alternative careers, to explore new ways of working with her voice, to re-evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of her repertoire, and to try to interest companies in the changes that she saw necessary. It investigates the steps she took to develop a positive direction for her career, and how success began to return in response to these changes.

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Blyth, 'Marie Collier', *Opera*, December 1968, p. 956.

<sup>4</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Demented: the world of the opera diva*, (New York: F. Watts, 1984), pp. 224-25.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Six.

## Paying the costs of the profession

Some idea of how Collier was dealing with the demands of the profession may be seen from a short documentary film aired on the BBC in May 1968. Late the previous year the broadcaster John Amis had gone to Cookham with a film crew to interview Collier for a series called *Voices for the World*, each episode of which focused on a British or Commonwealth singer who was having an impact on the international scene.<sup>6</sup> Much of the episode featured Collier singing studio performances of works for which she was known, or would like to have been known. But the interview segments between the musical items revealed a Collier who was deeply unhappy with her profession.

We see an elegant and smart woman, dressed in a chic pantsuit, comfortably curled up at the end of a lounge with her feet tucked under. The camera catches her charisma. But it is artificial; she is performing a role, the role of diva, masking her real character with the manufactured image. She is coy rather than confident, careful in making her answers; and her tone is mannered, her accent unnaturally formal and English, rather than the relaxed, cultured Australian cadences of her customary speaking voice.<sup>7</sup>

During the interview Amis did not shy away from the personal, asking her directly, 'Would you describe yourself as a chronically nervous person?' Collier admitted, 'I would say I suffer from chronic nervous tension.' She explained that she very much lived on her nerves, that 'with a certain temperament, you do have this tension, this feeling – I wouldn't say tension, but nerve ends are very sensitive, so to speak.'

Life as an international star was marked by isolation. 'It's very, very lonely, the pressure is tremendous, people expect an enormous amount of you. The world as such is very cut throat, it's not like the family life, of Covent Garden, which was always so wonderful.' As a freelancer in another town it was harder to get to know her colleagues. 'Even then, when the rehearsals have finished, you leave the theatre, nothing.' In a strange town she would go out only when necessary. 'I always have a feeling of wanting to stay inside wherever I am. Maybe this is a psychological thing—to at least make myself feel I belong in one place.' Contact with fans, or even old acquaintances, was alienating; while she had not changed, everyone else treated her as if she had, sometimes as if she had become super-human. When Amis asked, 'But a little of that's probably rather nice, isn't it?' Collier replied slowly, 'Very little. Very little indeed.'

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<sup>6</sup> *Voices for the World*, Ian Engelman (producer/director), BBC 1 TV, 13 May 1968. (BBC Programme Number LMA7132Y).

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Collier, interview, Balwyn, Vic, 2 May 2007.



Collier did not explicitly say so, but much of the pressure would have come from the conditions under which she had to perform. She condemned the resulting product:

When somebody comes into a repertory role they virtually do their own performance, they're steered around the stage... I did two Musettas at the Metropolitan; the first one, I met the baritone just before we went onstage. I had never been onstage, I had been through the score only once with the maestro. Now that is an international house... This is a thing I loathe and hate, because I think one should have more respect for opera than to do this instant opera business.<sup>8</sup>

That Collier was willing to answer with such candour indicates that she wanted the world to know about the pressure. It was a problem felt by the whole family. Amis sat Collier's children on the front fence and quizzed them. He asked Barbara, 'What are you going to do? Are you going to sing, or are you going to play the piano? What do you want to be?' Barbara answered 'Well, I hope to sing, I think.' But this was not what she wanted to do; at the age of nine she already recognized that there were costs to her mother's career, and only answered that way because she felt it was expected of her.<sup>9</sup>

After the breakdown in May 1968<sup>10</sup> the physical and psychological damage took a long time to mend. Collier's schedule for the rest of 1968 was much lighter than previous years, but in early 1969 she again had to spend time in hospital, for the third year in succession. After a month of performances in London, Hamburg and Amsterdam, Collier entered a clinic. The doctors prescribed 40mg of Valium per day, a relatively high dosage, and suggested she spend two weeks away from England, resting in a place without humidity. She considered Israel, Cyprus and Malta, but they were 'full of Americans'; so she bought a plane ticket to Kano in northern Nigeria, and set off thinking she might change it in Rome for one to Bari in southern Italy. However on the plane she met a friend who was continuing to Nigeria and suggested she stay in the hill station at Jos in the centre of the country, where she would have 'four boys to do for me' for £5 a day.<sup>11</sup> So Marie continued to Africa to stay in the nostalgic air of a relic of English colonialism, taking refuge from her vocal and professional problems.

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<sup>8</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Kosinski, phone interview, 25 March 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Four.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Collier, letter to Margaret Collier, 29 March 1969.

## Vocal and professional challenges

Through 1968 Collier had become aware that her voice was changing. This was natural; all voices are subject to 'a cycle of growth, change, and decay', changing in range, tone colour and control.<sup>12</sup> Collier had been studying and singing professionally for two decades; her voice had altered under the influence of coaching, the wear of use and overuse, and the physical changes of passing time. Singers live with the paradox that having achieved a measure of success, their capacities are under threat simply because that success took time to achieve. She not only had to deal with the problem of an aging, ailing voice, but also had to face up to a change in demand and popularity. Being overlooked was a symptom of the middle career; in her core repertoire she was one singer in a large group of fine performers, and her additional specialty in modern operas did not give her as many opportunities as she would have liked.

To deal with her vocal problems she sought help from Eduardo Asquez. Asquez had sung as a tenor with the Carl Rosa Company in the 1950s but became a vocal teacher with a reputation for assisting singers in difficulty. It is hard to determine exactly when she worked with Asquez, but it appears to have been for about six months, too brief a period in which to repair her technique.<sup>13</sup>

Assessments of her performances when she returned from her enforced rest in 1968 suggest Collier's voice was unable to handle the demands of the works, and that her acting was inconsistent and unsubtle. Collier returned to the stage for San Francisco Opera in October in a new role, that of the Woman in Arnold Schoenberg's half-hour opera *Erwartung*. It was a fitting work for a singer of Collier's temperament, preferences and reputation, a rarely performed piece in a difficult musical idiom calling for dramatic emotional expression. Schoenberg's score was a landmark in twentieth-century music; it was the first work in which he broke away from tonality, the key system on which Western music had traditionally been based. Describing the thoughts and emotions of a woman as she searches for her lover in the night, it calls for its one singer to perform a demanding vocal line ranging two and a half octaves,<sup>14</sup> with abrupt changes of rhythm, dynamics and mood, working without the benefit of a key to which

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<sup>12</sup> Rupert Christiansen, *Prima Donna: A History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Asquez, email to Kim Kemmis, 9 February 2016. For a detailed account of Eduardo Asquez's career see Elizabeth Forbes, 'Obituary: Eduardo Asquez', *Independent*, 1 October 1998.

<sup>14</sup> From G natural below the stave to B natural above it.

she can mentally refer in order to pitch her next note, and accompanied by and sometimes competing with a large orchestra.

The reviews lack detail, as *Erwartung* was only one piece in a triple bill,<sup>15</sup> but they assert that Collier's voice and acting were below her usual standards. Martin Bernheimer observed that she negotiated the vocal lines with a 'low degree of accuracy', and considered that she 'confused hysteria with histrionic intensity'.<sup>16</sup> The cruellest review described Collier's performance as 'zombie-fashion';<sup>17</sup> the kindest saw it as 'a brave, confident attempt'.<sup>18</sup>

However the critics' assessments may have been influenced by the poor production. An audience recording of the opening performance indicates that Collier sang the notes as fully as the angular melodic line allowed, ringing out dramatically at the fortissimo climaxes, with occasional thinness of tone in the middle voice. A hearing of the recording while reading the score shows that Collier pitches her notes accurately, with occasional lack of clarity towards the bottom of her range, and occasionally negotiating large gaps between pitches with a careful glissando. Some subtlety may have been submerged by the orchestra's outbursts, but the audience's wild response at the end indicates the dramatic impact of the performance.<sup>19</sup>

Vocal changes were obvious in her next appearances. In November and December she sang the title role in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* for the Royal Opera.<sup>20</sup> The production was ostensibly 'new', but the only new component was the direction; the scenery and costumes had been sourced from the remnants of older, superseded productions. William Mann of the *Times* recognised Brünnhilde's Rock from *Siegfried* in the Louisiana desert in Act IV, and suggested that 'seasoned patrons of Covent Garden can certainly enjoy spotting which production has yielded which bit of scenery

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<sup>15</sup> The performance commenced with Kurt Weill's one act opera *Royal Palace* presented as a ballet, and ended with the second part of Darius Milhaud's opera *Christophe Colomb*.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Bernheimer, 'S.F. Strikes Out Modern Operas', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 1968, p. D20.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Bloomfield, 'San Francisco', *Opera*, December 1968, p. 971.

<sup>18</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, 'Opera: Weill, Schoenberg and Milhaud Triple Play', *New York Times*, 7 October 1968, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Erwartung*, in-house recording, Gunther Schuller (conductor), San Francisco Opera Association, 5 October 1968. (Private recording).

<sup>20</sup> In October 1968 Queen Elizabeth II approved the renaming of the Covent Garden Opera as the Royal Opera. See 'The Royal Opera', *Times* (London), 24 October 1968, p. 3.

(Act 3 is the happiest hunting ground.)<sup>21</sup> The usually moderate Andrew Porter played the production:

In a word, *Manon Lescaut* as performed last night by Covent Garden was a bore. In a few hundred words we can try to find some reasons why. A summary description might be: poorly sung, dully acted, heavily conducted, clumsily produced... shovelled onto the stage rather than intelligently produced.<sup>22</sup>

Collier's acting of the title role did not appear to be at fault; it went almost without mention, the critics unanimously focusing on the weaknesses of her vocal performance. Mann thought she 'sang nervously with much forcing of her voice.'<sup>23</sup> Porter described the problem as 'using metallic brightness in phrases that call for ample, solid tone.'<sup>24</sup> The final performance was broadcast by the BBC,<sup>25</sup> and the recording of it supports these criticisms. While the voice is not forced as it appears to have been on the opening night, it does not have the beauty and voluptuousness of earlier years, her tone hard and bright rather than full and sensuous. Only when Collier sings in full voice, or in passages requiring intensity of expression, is her tone not uneven. Her interpretation is nuanced; she put as much thought into the expression of the text as in any other role. But her voice was not adequate for it.

The problem was not confined to new roles. When she appeared as Tosca at Covent Garden in February 1969 she sang more strongly than in *Manon Lescaut*, but while she 'found some bright, gleaming tone here and there... there were shrill, unsteady patches, too.'<sup>26</sup> Ronald Crichton noted that her high notes lacked their customary ring, and the line in her Act II aria was uneven.<sup>27</sup> Reviewers had written unfavourably of her voice before, but now there were suggestions that she was past her best. Crichton commented that 'Collier's Tosca invites the hoary phrase "accomplished portrayal",<sup>28</sup> but Philip Hope-Wallace's summary was politely devastating: 'This was a good workaday performance which honoured the strength of the indestructible music...'<sup>29</sup> The message between the lines was that, even though her acting was acceptable, her vocal problems meant that a once fine prima donna was beginning to decline. Quite

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<sup>21</sup> William Mann, 'A half-hearted revival', *Times (London)*, 28 November 1968, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Manon Lescaut', *Financial Times*, 28 November 1968, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Mann, 'A half-hearted revival'.

<sup>24</sup> Porter, 'Manon Lescaut'.

<sup>25</sup> Giacomo Puccini, *Manon Lescaut*, radio broadcast, Istvan Kertesz (conductor), Royal Opera, 19 December 1968. Broadcast BBC Radio 3. (Private recording).

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Sadie, 'Sonorous Puccini', *Times (London)*, 4 February 1969, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Crichton, 'Tosca', *Financial Times*, 4 February 1969, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, 'Tosca', *Guardian*, 4 February 1969, p. 8.

possibly the tone of these reviews exacerbated her anxiety and led to her hospital stay and journey to Nigeria. But in spite of her problems the Royal Opera thought it was worth bringing her back for six more performances over April.

Collier returned to the role of Santuzza in Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, singing it for the Met and for Covent Garden. Apart from a short season in Vancouver in 1966 Collier had not sung the part for nearly ten years when she took it to the Met. To the *New York Times* reviewer her portrayal was 'hardly a very finished piece of work'. While her choice of vocal colouring was good, she ran out of breath and sang with a bad wobble, a sure sign of vocal cords under stress; and her acting was of 'a melodramatic stagger-and-lurch brand... that misfired more than it succeeded'.<sup>30</sup> A comparison of recordings from both Vancouver in 1966 and the Met in 1970 shows the changes. In Vancouver her tone is rich and thrilling, with the high notes strong and held without any sign of strain.<sup>31</sup> In New York four years later the singing is not quite as confident. The opulent tone is still there, but she is unable to sustain the notes if they are not high and sung at full volume, and occasionally the tone thins out abruptly. Collier sings on pitch, but her voice lacks bloom, and without the richer tone her voice sounds thin, making it harder to be expressive. Her voice is not able to do all that she asks of it; we hear the musician carefully matching her voice to the demands of the music.<sup>32</sup>

In October and November 1970 Collier returned to Covent Garden for eight more performances of *Cavalleria rusticana*. The revival of Franco Zeffirelli's 1959 production lacked in many areas and was not well-received. In the *Times* Stanley Sadie's comments on Collier's performance succinctly described the approach she had been talking to cope with her inadequacies: 'Marie Collier, as Santuzza, did enough to indicate that she knew how it ought to be done, but that is not the same as doing it; the voice seemed to be in less than good trim, and she over-compensated with some exaggerated acting.'<sup>33</sup>

As noted with regard to *Erwartung*, one of the problems of assessing Collier's capacities in these years is the relative scarcity of high quality reviews, that is, critiques which examine the details, not just the overall picture. Collier was no longer the singer

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<sup>30</sup> Peter G. Davis, 'Marie Collier Sings In Met "Cavalleria"', *New York Times*, 18 April 1970, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, in-house recording, Otto-Werner Mueller (conductor), Vancouver Opera, October 1966. (Private recording).

<sup>32</sup> Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, in-house recording, Kurt Adler (conductor), Metropolitan Opera, 17 April 1970. (Private recording).

<sup>33</sup> Stanley Sadie, 'Cav and Pag', *Times* (London), 17 October 1970, p. 19.

in the critic's eye. She was singing fewer performances, was being given fewer first nights; she was seen in old or renovated productions, or with competent but unexciting casts. No longer was she the first choice, the exciting creator of new roles, or the star.

Collier was being eclipsed by other performers, but not because of her vocal challenges. She sang in a repertoire that was popular, and was of a voice type of which high-quality practitioners were plentiful. Her awareness of this was a cause of personal stress; it may have been the cause of her vehement opposition to Marcella Reale singing the role of Minnie in the Australian Opera's production of *La fanciulla del West* in Melbourne in 1968, even though she had commitments that prevented her performing the role herself.<sup>34</sup> At the Met Collier's usual repertoire was taken by house favourites. The majority of *Tosca* performances in 1968-1970 were taken by singers who had appeared at the Met since at least the late 1950s: Birgit Nilsson, Dorothy Kirsten, Lucine Amara, Renata Tebaldi and Leonie Rysanek. Many of these favourites had a number of Collier's roles in their repertoire: Gabriella Tucci sang *Tosca*, *Lù*, *Elisabetta di Valois* and *Aida*, and Martina Arroyo sang *Cio-Cio-San*, *Lù*, *Aida* and *Santuzza*. Newer singers were also being seen on the Met stage just as Collier had been. A short season of *Wozzeck* in 1969 saw the role of Marie sung by Evelyn Lear, Collier's colleague in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and probably her greatest competitor in new and modern repertoire.<sup>35</sup> The contingencies of planning and availability meant that Collier of course would not have been able to avail herself of all these opportunities had she been available; however the list above demonstrates the strength of the Met roster and the range of alternatives available to opera house planners. Collier may have had a longer career at the Met but for these circumstances.

At Covent Garden Collier shared *Tosca* with established singers such as Gabriella Tucci and Sena Jurinac. Attention was focusing on younger singers. The Welsh dramatic soprano Gwyneth Jones had become prominent at Covent Garden, singing Verdi heroines and some of Collier's roles such as *Chrysothemis*, *Elisabetta* and *Tosca*. Another Welsh soprano, Elizabeth Vaughan, sang *Cio-Cio-San*. While the Royal Opera offered more opportunities to Collier than the Met, much of her repertoire did not appear there at all during the late 1960s.

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<sup>34</sup> Moffatt Oxenbould, interview, Ultimo, NSW, 27 July 2006. See Chapter Five.

<sup>35</sup> See the singers' individual career records in the Metropolitan Opera Performance Archives at <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/> (accessed June 2015).

It was right for Collier to specialise in a niche repertoire to overcome the restrictions of being a singer in a repertoire where elite singers were plentiful, but this placed another set of limits on her. Opera houses liked staging these operas, but they were problematic. Only companies in larger cities could afford to present them; they could not do it often because the works did not attract audiences for enough performances to recoup costs; and once the small pool of connoisseurs in a city had experienced a particular opera, how eager would they be to see it again? Collier's performances of modern works in 1963-64 illustrate the problems. The run of eight performances of *Katerina Ismailova* in December 1963-January 1964 was an anomaly, the result of success. The following month *The Makropulos Case* received a healthy six performances. In July *The Fiery Angel* received only three performances. The staging of these works depended on the box-office receipts of the popular repertoire by Puccini and Verdi. Of the successes just mentioned, all highly acclaimed by the critics, only *Katerina Ismailova* received a repeat run within a couple of seasons, with four performances at the end of 1964. It was not until after *The Makropulos Case* had been successfully revived with Collier in a run of only four performances in 1971 that the work received a return season within twelve months. Collier helped to build the audience for this kind of opera, but she did not reap the benefit of it becoming an accepted part of the repertoire.

Engagements became fewer. After the last *Cavalleria* at Covent Garden on 18 November 1970 her popularity, as far as company management was concerned, appeared to be at its lowest; she had no more engagements booked for Covent Garden, for the Met, for San Francisco, or for Hamburg. Collier's challenge was to reassess the possibilities for her career and to create a new demand for her services.

### Reinvigorating her repertoire

In interviews Collier did not say much about the course her career was taking; in spite of the problems she mentioned, it all appeared to be full steam ahead for her career as an opera performer. But she was thinking about changing her repertoire to make herself more marketable. This section examines this and other options outside the opera house, such as teaching and adjudicating, and performing in concerts and cabaret, before looking at the path she settled for.

There were offstage alternatives to be considered. For many mid-career singers teaching was one way of extending their professional lives. It was probably not

something that Collier considered seriously. She had worked with several excellent teachers and coaches, such as Joan Cross, Dawson Freer, Ugo Benvenuti Giusti and Luigi Ricci, and no doubt had absorbed their methods. But at its core her art was based on inspiration rather than intellect. Her approach to a new part was to act on instinct, then refine the role as she rehearsed and performed. Although after twenty years of professional performance she knew the approaches and methods that worked for her, she was not conscious of why or how she did all the things she did, and could not have communicated them to others with assurance. This is not uncommon among singers; when the American bass Jerome Hines interviewed several dozen singers about their technique he found that most of them had difficulty in verbalising the way they produced their voice, because it was something they experienced through sensation.<sup>36</sup> Had she been confident in her technique she may have found a way; but the fact that she could not solve her own vocal problems was an obstacle.

An alternative to teaching was mentoring, a less formal relationship than teaching and coaching, based on the sharing of advice and wisdom rather than the development of skills. Collier established at least one relationship of this kind, and it worked well. In Melbourne in 1967 Collier met Lesley Skilney, the publicity officer for the Young ABC Youth Concert committee. When Marie found out that Lesley was studying singing she took an interest in her, and the two developed a close friendship, sharing meals and spending time together on Collier's Melbourne visits in 1967 and 1968. Marie encouraged Lesley to be positive, not to be discouraged by setbacks, but to be persistent in following her dream. The friendship continued in letters after Marie returned to England.<sup>37</sup> Mentoring seemed a better fit for Marie; her strength was in her experience rather than her technical understanding of her craft, and the relationship was based on friendship and generosity rather than on a formal hierarchical dynamic. Collier could nurture, but she didn't have the need to control others that Melba seemed to have, who supported and launched many protégées, few of whom had long-lasting or successful careers.<sup>38</sup>

Adjudicating in singing competitions was an option that included elements of both teaching and mentoring. The singing world in which she had grown up was full of

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<sup>36</sup> Jerome Hines, *Great Singers on Great Singing* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1982), p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Lesley Skilney, phone interview, 14 October 2016.

<sup>38</sup> For example the sopranos Stella Power (1896-1977) and Evelyn Scotney (1887-1967), and the contraltos Irene Ainsley (1883-1968), Ella Caspers (1888-1971) and Clara Serena (1890-1972). One exception was the baritone John Brownlee (1900-1969) who had a long international career as a singer and educator.



eisteddfodau and various competitions; most of her Australian contemporaries on the international scene were alumni of the Mobil Quest and the *Sun* and *Shell* Arias.<sup>39</sup> Collier's experience in these events had been limited—she made it to the finals in one Melbourne competition in 1950<sup>40</sup>—but her stage experience equipped her to sit on the judges' panel. This was a path that Joan Sutherland was later to take. After she retired from performance in 1990 Sutherland did not teach, as she had neither the temperament nor the understanding of her instrument, but adjudicated in international competitions, most notably in the Cardiff Singer of the World.<sup>41</sup> There is no evidence that Collier was offered the opportunity or even considered adjudicating; however it was a viable option had she chosen to pursue it.

In public statements Collier expressed her belief that her future was in singing and that she had no plans to stop.<sup>42</sup> Retirement may have been a possibility if she had been 'rich enough to satisfy my own demands, and the demands of my family, to the best of my ability. But I'm afraid I'm in the wrong profession.'<sup>43</sup> Instead she looked to what she was performing.

In her appearance in *Voices for the World* Collier demonstrated her abilities in music that might provide an alternative path. One piece she performed was the Annunciation scene from Licinio Refice's opera *Cecilia*, which she had loved since performing it in concert in 1963. She also recorded the aria 'To this we've come' from *The Consul*; she sang that aria at a London concert in January 1968 with the 'Air de Lia' from Debussy's *L'enfant prodigue*, which she last presented in Melbourne in 1954. Collier explained these choices to Amis, saying 'There is so much music in certain operas that are never done, that people hardly ever hear.'<sup>44</sup> In performing these pieces she may have been exploring the possibilities for concert performance. The concert career she had built up in the early 1960s had been put aside following her success in *Tosca*, but the advantages of a return to the concert stage were clear: freedom to take more engagements, fewer long absences from home, less work in preparing new repertoire, and none of the stresses of performing in a full production.

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<sup>39</sup> Of her colleagues in her Melbourne years Elizabeth Fretwell, Margreta Elkins, Lauris Elms, Geoffrey Chard, John Shaw and Robert Allman all placed well in various contests.

<sup>40</sup> 'A Voice In Good Shape', *People* (Sydney), Vol. 4 No. 10, 15 July 1953, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Joan Sutherland, *A Prima Donna's Progress* (Milson's Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1997), pp. 423-24.

<sup>42</sup> Pat Rappolt, 'Opera singer would like to fly a plane', *Advertiser*, 23 March 1968, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>44</sup> *Voices for the World*.

Her Proms concerts and other appearances indicate other repertoire she could perform. Her early concerts in Australia were a mix of operatic arias and art songs, the latter of which were not always successful because of her poor diction in foreign languages.<sup>45</sup> In Europe she had chosen works with orchestral accompaniment, with success in Berg's *Three Fragments from Wozzeck*<sup>46</sup> as well as arias. But Marie did not limit herself to art music. In *Voices for the World* she performed *Dio come ti amo*, an emotional ballad performed by Domenico Modugno as the Italian entry in the 1966 Eurovision Song Contest.<sup>47</sup> In the interview she laughed at the possibility of a cabaret career, but the fact that she wanted to perform a middle-of-the-road pop song for the television show indicates a leaning towards the genre. It was a natural progression from the popular songs such as Ivor Novello's 'We'll gather lilacs' that she had sung on radio in the early days of her career. Her performance of the Modugno song shows great potential in that style, and she would have been more marketable for television and radio appearances.

Cabaret and popular songs had been proven to be a valid second-career option for other singers. The dramatic soprano Helen Traubel supplemented her career at the Met with seasons in night clubs, cabaret and later on Broadway.<sup>48</sup> The mezzo-soprano Risë Stevens sang popular songs in Hollywood movies such as *Going My Way* with Bing Crosby,<sup>49</sup> and later on television, while maintaining her career at the Met. Claramae Turner sang popular songs in her recitals—the ballad *I Left My Heart In San Francisco* was written for her—and became famous not for her long career as a contralto at the San Francisco, Metropolitan, and New York City Operas but for playing Nettie Flower in the film of Rodger's and Hammerstein's musical *Carousel* in 1956.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of the potential Collier did not develop this part of her career. Apart from a recital at an arts festival near Cookham in late 1970,<sup>51</sup> she made no other concert performances after early 1968. Her only recorded concert broadcast was for the BBC's

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<sup>45</sup> See for example 'Marie Collier's Farewell', *Age* (Melbourne), 12 November 1954, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> 'L.S.O.'s Wozzeck of Sensuous Beauty', *Times* (London), 14 September 1961, p. 17. David Cairns, 'London Philharmonic Orchestra', *Financial Times*, 1 February 1964, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> 'Dio come ti amo' came seventeenth (equal last) in the 1966 Eurovision contest (<http://songcontest.free.fr/bdd/cec1966.htm>, accessed 7 July 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Christiansen, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>49</sup> *Going My Way*, Paramount Pictures, Leo McCarey (director), 1944.

<sup>50</sup> Margalit Fox, 'Claramae Turner, 92, Singer and Heart of a Song', *New York Times*, 7 June 2013, p. A24.

<sup>51</sup> 'Marie Collier in Fatal Flat Fall', *Maidenhead Advertiser*, 10 December 1971.

light music listener request programme *As You Like It* in February 1970.<sup>52</sup> We can only speculate on the reasons for this failure. Entrepreneurs would have been willing to present the famous diva in recital for considerably less expense than an opera production, and her reputation would have guaranteed audiences not only for concerts but also broadcasting and television. But there were both commercial and artistic reasons for not following this path. A calendar full of concert engagements would have restricted her ability to commit to opera seasons, where her heart lay. Her agent and manager may have thought that she was best presented as an operatic artist rather than a concert performer. The reviews of her Melbourne and Montreal concerts in 1967 had not been encouraging, even though the fault had lain with the choice of repertoire,<sup>53</sup> and Collier freely admitted that she did not like not being able to move while she sang.<sup>54</sup>

To stay on the opera stage she could accommodate her repertoire to the changes in her voice by refocusing her repertoire on less difficult roles, or even by changing her *fach* or vocal category, singing new roles in a different range or style from her customary ones. This was a route for the older singer who no longer had the high notes or the ability to sustain legato singing; Astrid Varnay, Marie's colleague in *Jenůfa* in 1968, had begun to make the transition in the mid-1960s. Varnay changed roles in the same operas as those she had sung before: from Salome to Herodias (*Salome*), and from Elektra to Klytämnestra (*Elektra*), and also ventured into newer repertoire, singing not only the Kostelnička in Janáček's *Jenůfa* but also Kabanicha in his *Katya Kabanova*.<sup>55</sup> This kind of change was not swapping the limelight for 'secondary' roles; these parts are as dramatically important, and vocally as challenging and fruitful as the title roles. In the right roles the singer could still have a great impact on the audience and extend her career considerably; Varnay received critical and popular acclaim for her Klytämnestra and the Kostelnička, and performed Herodias more times than any other role in her repertoire.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *As You Like It*, BBC Radio 2, 3 February 1970, 21:15-22:00, with the BBC Concert Orchestra conducted by Marcus Dods. Recorded in the Camden Theatre, London. Produced by Barry S. Knight for the BBC World Service.

<sup>53</sup> See Chapter Six.

<sup>54</sup> Blyth, 'Marie Collier', p. 957.

<sup>55</sup> The Austrian soprano Leonie Rysanek made the transition to the same roles in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>56</sup> Astrid Varnay with Donald Arthur, *Fifty-five Years in Five Acts: My Life in Opera* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), pp. 247-51. She sang Herodias 213 times; the four roles listed above comprised a quarter of her total number of performances over her entire career, 421 out of 1738 (op. cit., pp. 347-49).

A similar change would have been possible for Collier. But the inconsistent state of her voice did not make such a choice easy. Her tone had become hard, and long notes were difficult to sustain evenly; but her high notes were still strong and usually on pitch. To sacrifice the most thrilling part of her voice would be to take away Collier's greatest attraction before it was necessary.

The key then was to re-examine her current repertoire, finding ways that presented her at her best. By mid-1967 she decided that she no longer wanted to sing Musetta. Audiences loved her in it, but 'there's something about it that to me is not satisfying. You start at an enormously high peak, you must be *zoom!* really there when it happens, when you enter. And then it just goes...' <sup>57</sup> To the disappointment of the Met she was adamant that she would not perform it, and sang it at Expo in Montreal only to honour her contract with La Scala. <sup>58</sup>

Another Puccini role came under question. In Melbourne in March 1968 she commented that she would like to give Tosca 'a fairly long rest'. <sup>59</sup> But if she was in earnest, it was impossible and unwise to drop it. It was the role for which she was known, and she was still outstanding in it. Tosca remained her 'bread and butter' role, getting her regular work; in February 1969 she was called to Hamburg to replace an indisposed singer and so impressed the company that they invited her to return as a regular guest artist from the middle of the year.

Collier brought back into her repertoire roles she had not performed for a long time. In Hamburg she regularly sang Venus in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, in which she had not appeared since the beginning of the decade. She had to re-learn it in German, but it was a useful role to have in reserve—it was not long, and the vocal range was lower than most of her roles. Santuzza also came back into her repertoire, although as we have seen it was not well-received because of her vocal problems. A more successful assumption reappeared in the Covent Garden *Elektras* with Solti in 1969. The sets and costumes dated from 1953, but John Copley had revised and relit the production, necessitating extra rehearsals. This was what Marie needed; the extra work allowed her to refresh the role of Chrysothemis histrionically and vocally, allowing her to perform with confidence in a part that she had sung well and still suited her voice. The

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<sup>57</sup> *Voices for the World*.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Jaretzki (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Sandor Gorlinsky, 7 July 1967; Sandor Gorlinsky, letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 5 September 1967; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>59</sup> 'Just a little tired of Tosca', *Age* (Melbourne), 1 April 1968, p. 3.

reviews focused on Nilsson and Resnik as the dominant players, but the few lines devoted to Collier suggested that she had improved over her first performances in the role in 1966. The *Times* thought her interpretation was ‘admirably judged, admirably sung too’;<sup>60</sup> Andrew Porter found her ‘passionate yet controlled.’<sup>61</sup> The voice and acting had worked together to create an effective portrayal; if the role suited her vocally and temperamentally, and a director was willing to devote some care to her, Collier could deliver excellent work.

Collier found different results when in March the following year she returned to the role of Marie in Berg’s *Wozzeck*. She had last sung it for Covent Garden in 1960, and had performed the *Three Fragments from Wozzeck* several times in concerts; but the last of these was in 1964, so there was no recent performance experience for her to draw on. The 1970 performances were a revival of the old production; rehearsals would have been devoted only to technical matters and stage movement rather than the development of characterisation and interpretation. Collier’s portrayal in 1960 had received mixed reviews. Where one critic thought her portrayal ‘a most striking study’, another thought her characterisation was unfocused; where one heard ‘beauty of tone’, the other heard too much opulence.<sup>62</sup> A decade later the reviewers found that although she was of an acceptable standard, she did not sing confidently, and the characterisation was still not clearly defined.<sup>63</sup> It may not have all been Collier’s fault. The opera was sung in English rather than the original German, and like most of the cast Collier’s enunciation was poor.<sup>64</sup> Neither did the costuming help; the *Financial Times* found that Collier’s ‘raven hair, scarlet mouth and lissome figure’ gave the reviewer ‘an odd sensation of having one foot in Britten’s East Anglia and the other in Mascagni’s Italy...’<sup>65</sup> Given a better production, and the help of a sympathetic director such as John Copley had been in *Elektra*, Collier could have made a better impression, and the role was worth keeping in her repertoire.

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<sup>60</sup> Stanley Sadie, ‘A thrilling evening’, *Times* (London), 10 May 1969, p. 19.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Porter, ‘Royal Opera revivals’, *Musical Times*, July 1969, p. 754.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Heyworth, ‘Berg’s Vision of Büchner’, *Observer*, 4 December 1960, p. 27, and Andrew Porter, ‘Wozzeck at Covent Garden’, *Financial Times*, 5 December 1960, p. 7; see also Chapter Three for a full discussion.

<sup>63</sup> See for example Alan Blyth, ‘Eloquent’, *Times* (London), 24 March 1970, p. 10; also Alan Blyth, ‘Wozzeck’, *Musical Times*, May 1970, p. 516. Blyth reviewed the second evening rather than the customary opening.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, ‘Berg’s “Wozzeck” at Covent Garden’, *Guardian*, 24 March 1970, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ronald Crichton, ‘Wozzeck’, *Financial Times*, 24 March 1970, p. 3.

Another option Collier followed was that of adding new roles. In the busy years after substituting for Callas, from 1965-67, Collier had concentrated on performing the operas she had been singing for several years, and with the exception of Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra* she had added no new works to her repertoire list. From 1968 this changed; in that year alone she performed three new roles, Jenůfa, the Woman in *Erwartung*, and Manon Lescaut. She let it be known she would like to do more. In an interview in mid-1968 she offered four roles she would be interested in assuming: two Strauss roles, the Dyer's Wife in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, which had recently become popular at the Met, and the title role in *Salome*; and two Italian roles, Maddalena in Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, and Mimì in *La bohème*. Of these four she was especially interested in *Salome*.<sup>66</sup> The Italian roles were certainly within her vocal and dramatic capabilities. The Strauss roles presented more challenges. Both parts were complex characters that would be interesting to work on, and she had the dramatic skill. Vocally she had the beauty of tone needed for *Salome*, and the power needed for both that young woman and the Dyer's Wife. If she could overcome the intermittent failure of her voice in sustained notes, both were possible.

It was one thing to decide which roles to drop, add or revive; it was another to make the changes happen. That was a matter of multiple, simultaneous exchanges between companies, management and the singer, involving suggestions, proposals, rejections and counterproposals, all while Collier performed, studied and rested. Her negotiations with the Metropolitan Opera from 1967 to 1970 demonstrate the complexity of the process of reinvigorating her repertoire.

During the first run of Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra* in New York in 1967 Collier's management and the Met began to discuss future possibilities for her with the company. The Met proposed that Collier sing the title role in Puccini's *Turandot* in September 1968, initially covering<sup>67</sup> Birgit Nilsson and then taking over the role. The role would be part of a package with performances as Musetta, Tosca and Elisabetta in *Don Carlo*. Collier wanted to perform roles she was about to add to her repertoire; her manager Henry Matthieu advised the Met that she would like to perform *Jenůfa* and *Manon*

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<sup>66</sup> Patrick J. Smith, 'and we quote', *High Fidelity/Musical America*, August 1968, p. MA-17.

<sup>67</sup> A 'cover' or 'understudy' is a singer who is kept on stand-by in order to replace a performer at short notice in case of illness or misadventure.

*Lescaut*, both of which she was committed to at Covent Garden in 1968.<sup>68</sup> Both sides considered the other's proposals.

The Met's priority appears to have been to secure her for *Musetta*. Her interpretation was broad and unsubtle but the audiences loved it; the Met openly admitted, 'no one else has, for a long time, made the success with the part that she had this season.' They offered Collier nine performances over seven weeks, more than their usual guarantee.<sup>69</sup> But Collier was adamant that she wanted to drop *Musetta*. In a talk with her agent Sandor Gorlinsky she stressed that she did not want to perform the role under any circumstances.<sup>70</sup> *Turandot* also presented problems on two counts. A spinto role calling for loud, lyrical singing, *Turandot* would set challenges for her voice in its current problematic state. She also knew that her interpretation of a role developed over a run of performances, rather than appearing fully-formed on the first night. To follow Nilsson under these conditions would have been disastrous. She advised the Met that although she would like to sing the role in the future, she felt her return to the Met should be in a role that 'suits her voice and artistry best and in which she can make a success for herself and the Met.'<sup>71</sup> Collier agreed that *Don Carlo* and *Tosca* would be suitable works in which to return to the Met, and added two more that she wished to revive, Minnie in Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* and Marie in *Wozzeck*.<sup>72</sup>

The Met acceded to Collier's reservations, advising Gorlinsky, 'Miss Collier obviously feels strongly about her reasons for not doing these roles, and we will not try to persuade her to reconsider.' Of her preferred roles they were only able to offer her a contract for *Don Carlo* in 1968.<sup>73</sup> But the suggestion of *Fanciulla* tied in with their plans for the 1969-70 season. In October 1968 Collier signed a contract for ten performances as Minnie in September-October 1969 and February-April 1970.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Jaretzki (Assistant Artistic Administrator, Met), memorandum to Rudolf Bing (General Manager), John Gutman (Assistant Manager), Robert Herman, George Schick (conductor and musical consultant) (all Metropolitan Opera), 14 April 1967; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Sandor Gorlinsky, 18 May 1967; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>70</sup> Sandor Gorlinsky, letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 28 June 1967; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Paul Jaretzki (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Sandor Gorlinsky, 7 July 1967; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>74</sup> 'Standard Principal's Contract' between the Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc and Marie Collier, 9 October 1967; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

As was often necessary these arrangements were adjusted. The Met wanted Renata Tebaldi to sing the role after Collier started the season, and Rudolf Bing wrote to Collier to ask her to sing only the first four performances and to cover Tebaldi's first two performances.<sup>75</sup> Collier replied in the negative; their negotiations had been difficult and that she believed she deserved better.<sup>76</sup> But after six months Gorlinsky persuaded her to accept the changes, and the contract was amended.<sup>77</sup> *La fanciulla del West* was scheduled to open on 19 September, with Collier singing with Plácido Domingo and Cornell MacNeil. But after all these exchanges it was not to happen. A breakdown in negotiations of pay and conditions between the Met and unions representing the orchestra, soloists, chorus and dancers led to a management lockout, and the first three months of the season were cancelled, including the production of *Fanciulla*.<sup>78</sup>

The Met acknowledged that Minnie was a role in which Collier would have had a great success, and to make up for the lost exposure they offered Collier performances of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Tosca* in 1970.<sup>79</sup> They also proposed a new role: that of Lady Macbeth in Verdi's *Macbeth*. This role sits mostly in the lower range of the soprano voice, and calls for a singer who can produce a huge sound and handle difficult high notes, without the need for a consistently beautiful tone; Verdi explicitly stated that he did not want the role to sound beautiful.<sup>80</sup> Although Collier did not think highly of Verdi's heroines,<sup>81</sup> she may well have enjoyed working on this part; however the proposed engagement covered January-February 1971, when she was already committed to a revival of *The Makropulos Case* at Sadler's Wells.<sup>82</sup> She turned down the new, untried part in favour of a guaranteed success in one of her strongest roles.

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<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Bing (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Marie Collier, 27 August 1968; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>76</sup> Rudolf Bing (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Marie Collier, 23 September 1968; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Sandor Gorlinsky, 21 March 1969; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>78</sup> 'Singing Is Believing', *Time*, 12 December 1969.

<sup>79</sup> 'Standard Principal's Contract' between the Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc and Marie Collier, 23 January 1970; see also Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Gorlinsky Promotions, 5 March 1970; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives

<sup>80</sup> Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Vol. I From Oberto to Rigoletto* (London: Cassell, 1983), p. 275.

<sup>81</sup> Collier thought most of Verdi's female roles were 'too cardboard'. Patrick J. Smith, 'and we quote', *High Fidelity/Musical America*, August 1968, p. MA-17.

<sup>82</sup> Rudolf Bing (Metropolitan Opera), cable to Sandor Gorlinsky, 11 March 1970; Sandor Gorlinsky, letter to Robert Herman (Metropolitan Opera), 12 June 1970; Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.



When Collier went to Cleveland to sing *Tosca* for the Met with Domingo, Rudolf Bing had to inform her that the company could find no place for her in the 1970-71 season.<sup>83</sup>

The process of reinvigorating her repertoire was not one of quick decisions leading to instant success. It was a slow process of carefully working to identify strengths and weaknesses and to find opportunities. The repertoire that emerged was not totally transformed but refined, reshaped to focus on what she was good at and what was marketable, and giving her some new directions.

### The return of success

In 1971 Collier's efforts to revitalise her career began to bear fruit. She made an impact by reviving an old role, rejuvenating one of her core roles, and adding a new one; and she showed that the vocal problems of the last few years were diminishing. But the insecurities she showed indicate that confidence was slower in returning.

In February 1971 she sang an old role at a new house. The Sadler's Wells Opera had moved its performances from Islington to the larger Coliseum in the West End. When Collier returned to the company as Emilia Marty in *The Makropulos Case* she elicited the best reviews she had had since the mid-1960s. Normally sedate critics penned sentences such as 'a whale of a part in which Marie Collier gives a whale of a performance.'<sup>84</sup> Andrew Porter's enthusiasm burst through his controlled writing in a string of adjectives lauding her 'enthraling, iridescent, powerful and detailed performance.'<sup>85</sup> Harold Rosenthal declared Collier's interpretation to be 'one of the finest individual operatic interpretations to be seen and heard on the London operatic stage.'<sup>86</sup>

The response contrasted sharply with that to her Santuzza a few months earlier. What had happened? Edward Greenfield identified the reason for her success, declaring 'It is only rarely that a singer is as perfectly matched to an opera part as Marie Collier in Janacek's strange opera.'<sup>87</sup> She knew how to play a diva because it was her profession,

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Jaretski (Metropolitan Opera), letter to Sandor Gorlinsky, 16 June 1970, Marie Collier file, Metropolitan Opera Archives.

<sup>84</sup> Desmond Shawe-Taylor, 'Touching Performance', *Sunday Times* (London), 21 February 1971.

<sup>85</sup> Andrew Porter, 'The Makropulos Case', *Financial Times*, 22 February 1971, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Harold Rosenthal, 'The Makropulos Case. Sadler's Wells Opera at the Coliseum. February 23', *Opera*, April 1971, pp. 352-3.

<sup>87</sup> Edward Greenfield, 'Janacek opera', *Guardian*, 20 February 1971, p. 8.

what she had learned to do for twenty years; but more importantly the role was a fit for her dramatic talents. It gave Collier the opportunity to express a wide range of moods and emotions: intensity, coldness, cruelty, passion and compassion, which combined with her personal charisma to move the audience, and the critics.<sup>88</sup> Her portrayal was not perfect; Collier adopted the same characterisation that had brought her acclaim in previous productions, including the appearance of drunkenness in the last act which the critics still thought unconvincing.<sup>89</sup> But that was a minor issue in the face of her overall impact.

Another key was the fact that Collier's singing had improved. Harold Rosenthal commented that her 'warm, vibrant voice' was 'sounding much better than for many a month';<sup>90</sup> William Mann considered that it was 'the affecting quality of her voice makes this character live, perhaps more than any other character in her repertory to date.'<sup>91</sup> The BBC broadcast of the performance of 28 February supports these claims. Collier's characteristic tremulous quality is present, but it is never weak and feeble; the tone is full, and her pitch is accurate. There are flaws: sometimes her diction is indistinct, she does not hold the full value of the notes, and compared to her 1964 performance it takes longer for the note to 'bloom', that is, for the tone to broaden.<sup>92</sup> But the vocal line played to her strengths and allowed her to cover her weaknesses more than the traditional roles she had been singing. In modern repertoire her deficiencies were less exposed, with vocal lines calling more for expression than tone, and less sustained legato singing.

The reputation of her 1964 performances made the critics eager to hear her again; the reviews for *The Makropulos Case* outnumbered those for all her London performances since 1968. Her reputation in the role had helped the reputation of the opera; 5,026 people saw the production over four performances, a fifty per cent increase in attendance over the six-performance 1964 season.<sup>93</sup> Sadler's Wells signed her for another season of the opera the following January.

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<sup>88</sup> Porter, 'The Makropulos Case'; William Mann, 'Immortal bird', *Times* (London), 22 February 1971, p. 9; Greenfield, 'Janacek opera'.

<sup>89</sup> Shawe-Taylor, *op. cit.*; Porter, 'The Makropulos Case'.

<sup>90</sup> Rosenthal, *op. cit.*

<sup>91</sup> Mann, 'Immortal bird'.

<sup>92</sup> Leoš Janáček, *The Makropulos Case*, radio broadcast, Charles Mackerras (conductor), Sadler's Wells Opera, February 1971. Broadcast BBC Radio 3, 28 February 1971. (Private recording).

<sup>93</sup> 'Sadler's Wells Opera at the London Coliseum', *Opera*, May 1971, p. 461.

This enthusiasm may have given her confidence, but three months later when the production went on tour to northern England Marie was showing signs of insecurity. The promised January performances were the only English engagements she had secured for the foreseeable future; and her only international engagement was a series of *Toscas* in Pretoria and Johannesburg in August. The baritone Geoffrey Chard, who had first got to see and know Marie in Sydney in the early 1950s, sang the role of Marty's nemesis Jaroslav Prus when the company went to Manchester. He recalled a 'hair-raising' performance, when she arrived at the theatre at the last minute, possibly under the influence of alcohol. Collier 'didn't sing a lot of the notes' and her performance lacked sharpness, but she still thrilled the audience.<sup>94</sup> Michael Kennedy described the view from the audience in *Opera*:

Miss Collier's larger than life performance was rapturously received, but though admittedly a remarkable piece of operatic character-portrayal and of dramatic singing, I was not convinced that it was the kind of performance Janacek visualised—insufficiently moving, for one thing, and tending towards Lady Billows and Lady Bracknell.<sup>95</sup>

When Marie flew to South Africa in July to sing *Tosca* with PACT Opera<sup>96</sup> she found a more congenial environment. Collier was to alternate in the role with the American soprano Marcella Reale, and their Scarpia would be her old colleague Tito Gobbi.

The PACT company included a number of semi-professional chorus members, one of whom was Michael Halliwell, a student of music and literature at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. As a young baritone Halliwell was more interested in observing and working with Gobbi, but Collier made a strong impression upon him and his colleagues. The production had a relaxed atmosphere; Collier and Gobbi were approachable and friendly, and enjoyed the numerous barbecues and parties that the hospitable company members invited them to. Halliwell was impressed by the concern that the stars showed their Cavaradossi, Giovanni Gibin, when he collapsed one night on stage from the effects of the altitude. To Halliwell's mind Collier had everything that the ideal *Tosca* should have: beauty, presence, theatricality, and a voice not only capable of carrying the role but in good shape, singing everything with ease.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Geoffrey Chard, interview, Forest Lodge, NSW, 6 February 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Kennedy, 'Sadler's Wells in Manchester', *Opera*, July 1971, p. 656.

<sup>96</sup> A professional company formed by the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal in 1963.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Halliwell, interview, Camperdown, NSW, 27 September 2006.

Gobbi, on the other hand, saw a lonely and unsettled Collier when he arrived. He helped her find some stability, and soon she was herself again, 'singing with a beautiful and rich voice and acting her best. She received a wonderful reception. All the shadows had vanished. She was happy again, surrounded by her friends and admirers.'<sup>98</sup> In a traditional staging, with a director willing to let the stars do it their way, Collier gave her customary characterisation. If there were any of the vocal problems that had marred her recent performances they were not obtrusive; the critics noted the warmth and richness of her tone, the ease of her high notes, precise enunciation and good projection.<sup>99</sup> The stars were treated as stars; when the time for the final performance came on 27 August, the theatre management asked Collier and Gobbi to print their hands and feet, with their signatures, in a box of cement, in the Hollywood star tradition. Gobbi later said, 'I printed my right hand and foot and Marie her left; she wanted it that way, stating that our hands and feet would look nice symmetrically!'<sup>100</sup>

On her return to England Collier started preparing for a new role, one earned because of her reputation as the Janáček specialist. In October 1971 the BBC presented a studio performance of a Janáček rarity, *Osud*, or 'Fate', rehearsed and recorded at the Camden Theatre in north London. Collier sang the role of Míla, with Gregory Dempsey performing Živný. Dempsey had sung the role of Albert Gregor in most of Collier's performances of *The Makropulos Case* since 1964, and had performed with her on the Sadler's Wells tour earlier in the year. He had noticed that Collier's voice was beginning to deteriorate.<sup>101</sup> After the performance went to air in January 1972 reviews seemed to avoid direct comments on Collier's voice. The *Guardian* recorded that Collier 'took the rôle of Míla with characteristic passion';<sup>102</sup> there were 'floods of eloquent sound' from both Collier and Dempsey.<sup>103</sup> Some minor criticisms were made of her interpretative choices, the *Times* asserting 'she seemed to hector when she meant to suggest urgency',<sup>104</sup> and the *Musical Times* suggesting she was imperious when she should have been browbeaten.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Tito Gobbi, 'Marie Collier 1927-1971', *Opera*, February 1972, pp. 118-119.

<sup>99</sup> Joe Sack, 'Tosca, with Collier', *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 19 August 1971; John Davies, 'Collier A Vital, Brilliant Tosca', *Star* (Johannesburg), 19 August 1971.

<sup>100</sup> Gobbi, op. cit. A letter to *Opera* after Collier's death confirmed that 'Her voice rang out beautifully and she seemed to be in complete command of the role'; see Aldo J. Baggia, 'Marie Collier', *Opera*, June 1972, p. 100.

<sup>101</sup> Gregory Dempsey, phone interview, 28 January 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Edward Greenfield, 'Janacek on Radio 3', *Guardian*, 24 January 1972, p. 8.

<sup>103</sup> William Mann, "Osud", *Times* (London), 24 January 1972, p. 15.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> John Tyrrell, 'Radio', *Musical Times*, March 1972, p. 288.

Such comments do not tell us much about the state of Collier's voice in late 1971; for that we have to turn to the broadcast recording. Allowance must be made for the conditions under which it was recorded. The BBC had used the Camden Theatre for broadcasting since 1945 (the *Goon Show* was recorded there in the late 1950s), and the theatre's acoustics had been adjusted to favour recording rather than the audience experience. As a result we have one of the better recorded performances of Collier's singing on record, albeit not in an opera house. She has no problems singing the role; her tone is rich in the top and middle of her voice, and she sings sustained phrases without the sudden disappearance of tone that had occurred in *Cavalleria rusticana* the previous year. The Collier we hear is a voice more under control than at any time in the previous three years. There is no longer the freshness of her early recordings; it is a voice growing older, but one a competent singer could work with to find new colours and new roles to go with them.<sup>106</sup> It was unlikely that this would be a role that she would repeat; *Osud* remains a rarity and is not performed as often as Janáček's other operas. But she made a good impression in the repertoire for which she was known; it was business as usual.

## Conclusion

In considering the options for her later career Marie Collier was shaping her legacy, forming the way that she wanted to be remembered. She chose to pursue her current path of performing, adapting her roles as time and circumstances demanded. She had removed Musetta from her repertoire, a role she no longer enjoyed. She had revived some old roles with some success, especially Chrysothemis and Emilia Marty. She had found new blood in the character of Tosca, the core role of her repertoire and the foundation of her fame. She was adding new roles, with mixed success: *Erwartung* had not succeeded, and *Osud* was never going to be part of the regular repertoire because of its structural problems. Most importantly, she was overcoming the vocal problems that had affected her for several years. Collier seemed to be successfully negotiating the challenges of the soprano's middle-career.

Given the absence of clear statements from Collier, it is impossible to find exactly what she thought during the process of refocusing her career. Would she have seen the adoption of less prominent roles, or adjudicating and teaching, as a step backward, an abdication of the limelight? Did she see the choice as between being remembered as

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<sup>106</sup> Leoš Janáček, *Osud*, studio performance, Vilém Tauský (conductor), BBC Studios Camden, 16 October 1971. Broadcast BBC Radio 3, 22 January 1972. (Private recording).

the star going from strength to strength or as the old trouper adored by fans because of her past glories?

By the end of 1971 it was clear that it was to be the former. The conductor Sarah Caldwell invited Collier to perform the role of Cassandra in the American premiere of Berlioz's *Les Troyens* for the Opera Company of Boston. Vocally the role lay in the more secure part of Collier's range, with enough loud climaxes to show off her power. Dramatically the role was a Collier specialty, histrionic, noble and tragic. After talking with her husband and manager, she accepted the offer. Marie, Victor and Henry decided to celebrate her good fortune. What eventuated from a night on the town was not only fateful for her but would define the way Marie Collier would be seen by posterity.

## Chapter 6      The myth of the Tragic Diva: 1971–present

The essential facts about Marie Collier's death were covered in two sentences:

Marie Collier, 44-year-old Covent Garden opera star, plunged to her death today from the second floor of her Leicester Square flat. The fall happened about midnight and early this morning a Scotland Yard spokesman said that foul play had been ruled out.<sup>1</sup>

Radio listeners in Britain heard the news on the morning of Wednesday 8 December 1971. The event had occurred too late for the morning papers; by the time the evening newspapers hit the stands the story had made its way to New York, with newspapers in Chicago and Los Angeles carrying it in Thursday's editions. Australian papers ran the news in their Thursday morning editions across the country, at about the same time as the *New York Times*.

For most people it was just a news item. The greatest impact was upon those who knew Collier personally, as Marie the mother, the wife, the sister, the friend. They were trying to comprehend it, to deal with the immediate practical consequences and to work out what it meant for their future.

For the family the first response was to break the news to the children in a place where they could deal with it in safety. The boys were brought home from boarding school, where their upset father told them the news.<sup>2</sup> Barbara dealt with journalists, telling one, 'We are all very upset and my father can't talk to anyone at the moment.'<sup>3</sup> In Melbourne Marie's sister-in-law Margaret arrived home from doing Christmas shopping to find her mother, who had heard the news on the radio. Her younger son Mark was already at home, but Paul was playing at a friend's house. She rang the friend's house and asked them to send Paul home because she didn't want him to find out about his aunt from the radio. Then she rang her husband Maurice at his pharmacy to break the news about his sister. His first words when he returned home expressed his shock: 'This is terrible. She's only forty-three.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney Edwards, 'Opera star Marie falls to her death', *Evening Standard*, 8 December 1971, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Vorwerg, letter to Kim Kemmis, 18 June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> 'Opera star plunges to death', *Evening Mail* (Slough), 8 December 1971

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Collier, phone interview, 15 March 2007.

Marie's colleagues gathered to discuss the news and share their shock, at Sadler's Wells and in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> At Covent Garden the company tried to comprehend her death as they prepared for the night's performance, which by a sad coincidence was *Tosca*, the role for which Collier had become renowned. They were dealing with the death of someone they had known and loved, or at least respected. Those who did not have that personal connection—the majority of people—responded differently.

For family and friends, Marie Collier's death was a profound, catastrophic event. For the majority of people who knew her only as a performer or a public identity there were no personal consequences; but many nevertheless connected with the event and participated in it. The diffusion of the story through media reports and conversation provided opportunities to interpret and assess both the death and the career. Her passing was marked in formal acts of commemoration, such as printed obituaries, broadcasts and memorial services. Each retelling, discussion and commemoration reshaped the story. The coronial inquiry held soon after Collier's death established a coherent and reasoned account of the incident, but over time another version emerged, portraying Collier as the Tragic Diva: the exalted, charismatic and talented artist who excites audiences, who bears flaws, who suffers and is ultimately ill-fated. This chapter examines how people responded to and interpreted Collier's death, how the memory of the event was shaped, and how it has come to dominate the historical account of Collier's life and career.

## The first responses

Most people who heard the news did not have to deal with personal consequences. The majority remained observers, but a number became participants. Some had a professional interest, as journalists or as people involved in the musical or entertainment industries; while others simply made their own connection to the event. These people invested in Collier's death, drawing significance and value from the event, shaping their own versions of it and interpreting it for their own requirements, and expressing these understandings of her in media coverage and in acts of public remembrance.

Most information was second hand, deriving from sources of varying reliability. The police released a limited amount of information; journalists added to this by taking

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<sup>5</sup> 'Essential Collier', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 9 December 1971; Michael Halliwell, interview, Camperdown, NSW, 27 September 2006.



information from reports on wire services and in other newspapers, and interviewing bystanders, neighbours and colleagues for original elements. As each new detail became known the journalists analysed it, speculating on its meaning and proposing their own conclusions.

An article produced after much consideration was more likely to contain precision and clarity, where a piece written to catch the early edition might reach for a cliché. The subediting process shaped the message; the need for concision in formulating the headline reduced the story to its barest elements without nuance and explanation. Only two elements were needed to convey the essence of the story, the person and the means of death. Beyond those the article was shaped by the tone of the publication. Journals of record such as the London *Times* or the *New York Times* focused on facts, recording the death of a noted artist. Tabloids such as the *Evening Standard* focused on effect, the important factor being the drama of the death. Not only did these resort to cliché but they created a picture by adding extensive detail, teasing out for the reader how events unfolded, increasing the fascination and the apparent veracity of the account.

The progressive disclosure of information added a feeling of drama to the news. The first, plain version of the story told that around midnight she had fallen to her death from a window in her flat. Leaning over a radiator to open the window, she had overbalanced, and almost hit a man passing on the street below. She was pronounced dead on arrival at Charing Cross Hospital.<sup>6</sup> From the beginning the police ruled out foul play.<sup>7</sup>

By the time the story had been printed in Australia and America more details were available. As journalists spoke to neighbours in Leicester Square, police spokespersons, Collier's husband and other witnesses, the story became more dramatic. Collier had been at the apartment with her manager Henry Mathieu discussing a tour of America.<sup>8</sup> Matthieu had grabbed at her ankle as she fell, but he was unable to keep his grip.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Edwards, op. cit.; 'Opera star plunges to death', *Evening Mail* (Slough), 8 December 1971.

<sup>7</sup> 'Covent Garden singer falls to her death', *Times* (London), 9 December 1971, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> 'Soprano Marie Collier, Covent Garden Singer', *Washington Post*, 10 December 1971, p. B24.

<sup>9</sup> 'Opera Star Miss Collier Dies in Fall', *Chicago Tribune*, 9 December 1971, p. B24; 'Manager tried to prevent death fall,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 1971, p. 4.

The incident occurred too late to make the morning editions on 8 December, so the earliest local accounts appeared in the evening papers, with their own particular emphases. The height changed between reports: from the second floor, thirty feet; the fourth floor, sixty feet.<sup>10</sup> The differences can be explained as an exaggeration of detail to heighten the drama but were more likely to be the result of the newspapers' dependence on the details provided by the wire services.<sup>11</sup> Writers used whatever sources they could, drawing on agency reports<sup>12</sup> and updating the story between editions with details from accounts in English newspapers.<sup>13</sup>

The manner of death was described to indicate its dramatic nature, although newspapers varied as to how dramatically it was expressed. 'Dies in fall' was a common phrase, expressed slightly more sensationally as 'death fall'.<sup>14</sup> Most dramatic were the headlines that described it as a 'plunge', with its sense of movement and doom.<sup>15</sup> This drama provided the central interest for most reports: the slip, the grab for the ankle, the long fall, and the almost-catastrophe of barely missing a passer-by: that story was more engaging than had she merely passed away in her sleep or died after a long illness. Most dramatic of all was the photo of the location, with an arrow indicating the fatal window (Figure 7).

The drama was further enhanced through the inclusion, usually in a sidebar, of responses for responses from shocked colleagues. The *Daily Telegraph* reported the shocked declaration of Edward Renton, the administrative director of Sadler's Wells: 'I don't know what we shall do without her'.<sup>16</sup> The Melbourne *Sun* offered appraisals from local colleagues and mentors; Gertrude Johnson of the National Theatre recalled Collier's stage persona as a 'femme fatale', and Linda Phillips gave a precise and

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<sup>10</sup> Edwards, op. cit.; 'Marie Collier, 44, Dies in Fall; Covent Garden Opera Soprano', *New York Times*, 8 December 1971, p. 40; 'Soprano Marie Collier, Covent Garden Singer', *Washington Post*, 10 December 1971, p. B24; Lynne Bell, 'Singer dies in fall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 1971, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> 'Opera star plunges to death', *Evening Mail* (Slough), 8 December 1971; 'Marie Collier, 44, Dies in Fall; Covent Garden Opera Soprano', *New York Times*, 8 December 1971, p. 40; Bell, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> 'Soprano Marie Collier, Covent Garden Singer', *Washington Post*, 10 December 1971, p. B24; 'Soprano Marie Collier Dies After London Fall', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1971, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Bingham, 'Opera star death riddle', *Sun* (Melbourne), 9 December 1971, p. 2; Mike Bingham, 'Opera star death fall a mishap', *Sun* (Melbourne), 9 December 1971, p. 2

<sup>14</sup> Bingham, 'Opera star death fall a mishap'; 'Manager tried to prevent death fall,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 1971, p. 4; 'Aust. Opera star in London death fall', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 9 December 1971, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> 'Opera star plunges to death', *Evening Mail* (Slough), 8 December 1971; Edwards, op. cit.; 'Opera Star Miss Collier Dies in Fall', *Chicago Tribune*, 9 December 1971, p. B24; Bell, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> 'Essential Collier', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 9 December 1971.

measured summation of her protégée: 'She was a true find in voices and she also had an active, brilliant mind. She was highly strung and temperamental, but primarily of a bright disposition.'<sup>17</sup>

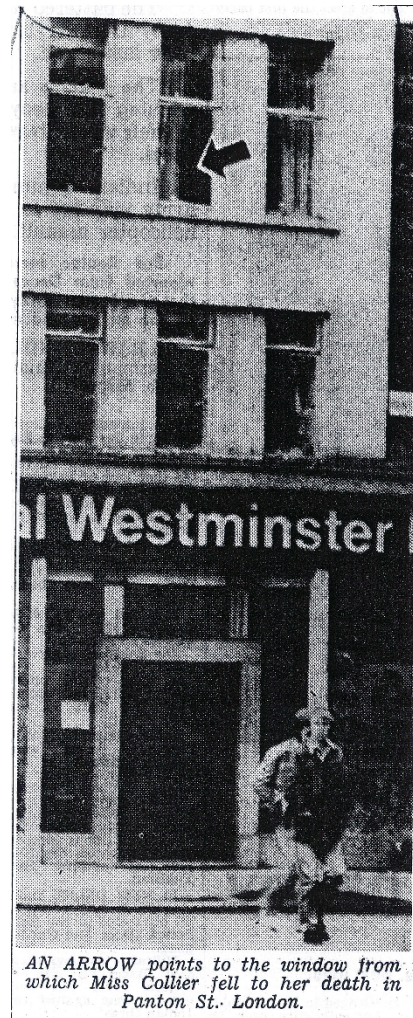


Figure 7. The fatal window. *Herald* (Melbourne), 9 December 1971, p. 6.

The accounts of Collier's death had a second element, of deeper consequence. To provide context for the death writers described Collier's personal life and professional achievements, and in their descriptions of the person they established the initial manner in which her life and career were to be remembered.

Broadsheets in places where she had a high reputation, such as New York, Los Angeles and Australia, simply identified her with her name.<sup>18</sup> Her profession was

<sup>17</sup> 'Collier, brilliant "femme fatale"', *Sun* (Melbourne), 9 December 1971, p. 17.

described as ‘opera star’ or singer,<sup>19</sup> the London *Times* specified her as a ‘Covent Garden singer’.<sup>20</sup> Collier’s age and familial status were identified, as was the custom; but instead of providing insight into the story the details were irrelevancies jammed in at convenient points. ‘As the 44-year-old star tried to push the window...’ read one report,<sup>21</sup> while one wire service offered, ‘Police sources said the death of Miss Collier, wife of civil engineer Victor Vorwerg and the mother of three sons and a daughter, was accidental.’<sup>22</sup>

These were incidental details; more relevant material was found in the précis of Collier’s career, explaining to readers exactly why they thought she and the story were significant. Most prominently featured were her performances of Tosca and her replacement for Callas. The *Guardian* said merely that she ‘won fame for her interpretation of Tosca’;<sup>23</sup> but in most reports Collier’s relationship with Tosca was described through Callas, with the emphasis not on the performance she gave but the fame it gained her.<sup>24</sup>

It was only in the formal obituaries that readers learned of Collier’s achievements in modern repertoire, and even then only in the broadsheets with a tradition of opera coverage such as the *Times* and the *Guardian*.<sup>25</sup> Australian obituaries focused on her Melbourne years and the Callas substitution, omitting any mention of the breadth of her repertoire or her success in modern operas.<sup>26</sup> W.L. Hoffmann’s obituary for the

<sup>18</sup> ‘Marie Collier, 44, Dies in Fall; Covent Garden Opera Soprano’, *New York Times*, 8 December 1971, p. 40; ‘Soprano Marie Collier, Covent Garden Singer’, *Washington Post*, 10 December 1971, p. B24; ‘Soprano Marie Collier Dies After London Fall’, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1971, p. 10; ‘Marie Collier dies in fall’, *Australian*, 9 December 1971, p. 1; ‘Marie Collier death fall “an accident”’, *Age* (Melbourne), 9 December 1971, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Edwards, op. cit.; Bingham, ‘Opera star death riddle’; Bell, op. cit.; ‘Opera singer dies in fall’, *Canberra Times*, 9 December 1971, p. 1; ‘Manager tries to stop opera star’s fall’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 9 December 1971, p. 3; ‘Aust. Opera star in London death fall’, *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 9 December 1971, p. 1; ‘“Singer’s fall an accident”’, *Guardian*, 9 December 1971, p. 22; ‘Opera Star Miss Collier Dies in Fall’, *Chicago Tribune*, 9 December 1971, p. B24.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Covent Garden singer falls to her death’, *Times* (London), 9 December 1971, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Opera star plunges to death’, *Evening Mail* (Slough), 8 December 1971.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Soprano Marie Collier, Covent Garden Singer’, *Washington Post*, 10 December 1971, p. B24; also

‘Soprano Marie Collier Dies After London Fall’, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1971, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> ‘“Singer’s fall an accident”’, *Guardian*, 9 December 1971, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards, op. cit.; ‘Marie Collier, 44, Dies in Fall; Covent Garden Opera Soprano’, *New York Times*, 8 December 1971, p. 40; Bingham, ‘Opera star death riddle’.

<sup>25</sup> For example, ‘Marie Collier – Gifted Australian Opera Singer’, *Times* (London), 9 December 1971, p. 16; ‘Unorthodox opera voice’, *Guardian*, 9 December 1971, p. 5; Andrew Porter, ‘Marie Collier’, *Financial Times*, 9 December 1971, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> For example, ‘Her voice matched by beauty’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 1971, p. 4; ‘Council grant led her to Covent Garden’, *Age* (Melbourne), 9 December 1971, p. 2.

*Canberra Times* noted a reason for this: ‘Oddly enough, most Australians who knew of Marie Collier have been unaware of the extent and lustre of her international reputation.’ Hoffmann then described her achievements in contemporary opera.<sup>27</sup>

Several newspapers noted the sad coincidence of *Tosca* being performed at Covent Garden the night after her death, not merely because it was her greatest success, but because ‘*Tosca*, of course, falls to her death in the last act.’<sup>28</sup> *Tosca*’s death was voluntary, but no accounts of Collier’s death went so far as to describe or suggest it as suicide; many stressed the belief that it was an accident. However some accounts sought to find meaning in the event by exploring Collier’s personal history, making an implicit link between her emotional struggles and her death.

Some newspapers mentioned her breakdown in 1968 as an unadorned fact.<sup>29</sup> In the *Evening Standard* Sydney Edwards made it a dramatic element: ‘There came a period when all the travelling and coping with the new status of star, where people now expected so much from every performance, brought about a nervous collapse.’<sup>30</sup> He embellished the story with a factoid that became part of the legend: ‘She once talked after a world trip of the loneliness of it all, of going back to her hotel room by herself after a performance, in South America or in Europe.’<sup>31</sup> In some newspapers this became a direct quotation: ‘When the rehearsals are over and you leave the theatre, there’s nothing.’<sup>32</sup>

Newspaper accounts of Collier’s life and death represented one method of memorialisation. Another kind took place in the public expression of grief by people associated with Collier. These acts of mourning took many forms, ranging from the traditional obsequies to remembrances in print, broadcast and public performance. Their primary expression was of grief and respect, especially in public events of commemoration.

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<sup>27</sup> W.L. Hoffmann, ‘World of opera loses a great singer’, *Canberra Times*, 10 December 1971, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, op. cit.; see also “‘Singer’s fall an accident’”, *Guardian*, 9 December 1971, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Among them ‘Opera star plunges to death’, *Evening Mail* (Slough), 8 December 1971, and ‘Soprano Marie Collier, Covent Garden Singer’, *Washington Post*, 10 December 1971, p. B24.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> ‘Her voice matched by beauty’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 1971, p. 4; Bingham, ‘Opera star death riddle’.

Of those, the foremost was Marie's funeral, which was held at Holy Trinity Church of England, her parish church in Cookham, on the afternoon of 15 December. Edgar Evans, with whom she had sung in *Katerina Ismailova*, attended the funeral, as did her compatriots Sylvia Fisher and Gregory Dempsey, and Sir John Tooley. Evans found some dark humour in the circumstances, recalling that 'the organ was so loud that Marie must have been vibrating in her coffin—because I was vibrating in front of it!'<sup>33</sup> After the ceremony her remains were cremated at Slough before being laid to rest in the churchyard by the Thames at Cookham.<sup>34</sup>

At Covent Garden the night after Collier's death the company's General Manager, John Tooley, addressed the audience with a 'tactful' speech in front of the curtain and dedicated the performance to Collier.<sup>35</sup> Plácido Domingo had sung with Collier in Hamburg and Cleveland; he was making his Covent Garden debut in this performance, opposite Gwyneth Jones as Tosca. Domingo later recalled, 'The show must indeed go on, but there are times when one wonders why. Somehow we pulled ourselves together and even gave a good performance.'<sup>36</sup>

Memorial services presented the opportunity for a public response by those who were not part of her family or close circle. On the Sunday before Christmas a memorial service was held at St John's Church of England Camberwell in the church where she sang as a girl.<sup>37</sup> A more formal ceremony was held on the afternoon of 8 February 1972, when her colleagues gathered after rehearsals and before performances at the 'Actors' Church', St Paul's Covent Garden. They paid tribute with music: the Royal Opera Chorus sang *How Lovely are thy Dwellings Fair* from Brahms's *A German Requiem*, and the Sadler's Wells Opera sang the angelic chorus from the finale of Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*. After a tribute by Tito Gobbi the choruses and orchestras united under Charles Mackerras to perform the Easter Hymn from *Cavalleria rusticana* with Rita Hunter singing Santuzza, the part in which Marie first became a star.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Edgar Evans, interview with Robert Little, October 2006. (Unpublished.)

<sup>34</sup> 'Deaths', *Times* (London), 11 December 1971, p. 26; 'Funeral for Aust Opera Singer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1971, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, 'Tosca', *Guardian*, 9 December 1971, p. 10; Felix Aprahamian, 'High tragedy', *Sunday Times* (London), 12 December 1971, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> Plácido Domingo, *My First Forty Years* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983), p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> 'Memorial to singer', *Sun* (Melbourne), 17 December 1971, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> 'Marie Collier' [Program for memorial service] 8 February 1972, National Library of Australia, 'Marie Collier' clippings file, call no. BIOG.

Tributes were broadcast in Australia, the ABC commemorating Collier in December with two special programmes featuring music and recollections.<sup>39</sup> On 22 January the BBC broadcast her final performance, the studio recording of Janáček's *Osud* (Fate) that she had made the previous October. Press reports on the broadcast took an elegiac tone, some noting the terrible coincidence of the fates of the singer and the final character she had sung.<sup>40</sup>

Formal obituaries began to appear soon after Collier's death, in newspapers in the immediate aftermath and in specialist magazines up to several months later. While they expressed regret at Collier's passing these pieces did not display the immanent grief of the public events. The purpose of the formal obituary was to assess the career, not to reflect on the tragedy. After tackling the challenge of summarising the high points of a twenty-year career in a few sentences writers tried to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the performer's artistry; strengths were highlighted, while the weaknesses that could not be overlooked were assessed in descriptive terms rather than in the critical way they had been raised during her career. The *Guardian* described her career as 'remarkable, if uneasy':

There was something uneasy about its development because the very unusualness of her lyric-dramatic voice was the product of an unorthodox technique, many experts anticipating rapid vocal decline. Remarkably, however, the voice thrived on its admittedly perilous foundations.<sup>41</sup>

Andrew Porter's piece for the *Financial Times* was comprehensive and precise:

Marie Collier had a bright, gleaming theatrical personality, striking looks, and a vividness of presence and manner which were matched by a bright, gleaming, powerful voice. This voice had not been schooled to classical smoothness and security; though Miss Collier's Tosca, Butterfly, and Elisabeth in *Don Carlos* were strongly projected, and passionately played, her most complete successes were achieved in modern roles such as Prokofiev's Renata in *The Fiery Angel*, Shostakovich's Katerina Ismailova, Marie in *Wozzeck*, and above all, Emilia Marty, the centuries-old ever-beautiful heroine of Janacek's *The Makropulos Case*, which she was to have sung again at the Coliseum next month. The timbre at its best had a dark, burnished beauty, a voluptuous gleam. Words were delivered with intensity. She was a colourful, exciting performer...<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> David Gyger, 'A feast of fine Menotti', *Australian*, 13 December 1971, p. 8; 'Radio tributes', *Age* (Melbourne), 16 December 1971, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> William Mann, "Osud", *Times* (London), 24 January 1972, p. 15; Edward Greenfield, 'Janacek on Radio 3', *Guardian*, 24 January 1972, p. 8; Andrew Porter, 'Osud', *Financial Times*, 24 January 1972, p. 3; John Tyrrell, 'Radio', *Musical Times*, March 1972, p. 288; 'The Times Diary', *Times* (London), 22 January 1972, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> 'Unorthodox opera voice', *Guardian*, 9 December 1971, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Porter, 'Marie Collier'.

While appearing descriptive, all these tributes were interpretations, attempts to create a picture of Collier for posterity. Each writer reduced their personal impressions of scores of unique performances into a single, definitive description. Like the myth of the Tragic Diva that was beginning to emerge, these were constructed images; but they were based on close association with Collier's career and written after long periods of consideration, acknowledging her strengths and her weaknesses, memorialising her perhaps not on her own terms, but with respect and integrity.

## What actually happened

A third kind of memorialisation was the forensic process of establishing what had happened. Just over a week after Collier's death a thorough investigation had taken place and a comprehensive account of the events was available to the public. The broadsheets carried only basic information about the finding,<sup>43</sup> but the tabloids reported on the inquiry in detail.<sup>44</sup>

On the morning of 15 December, the day of Collier's funeral, the coronial inquest was held by the Westminster Coroner, Gavin Thurston. He called witnesses to hear of the events of that evening, questioning Victor Vorweg, Henry Mathieu, a passer-by, and the pathologist who had examined Marie's body.

Around the beginning of 1971 Collier had moved her London base from a mews in Belgravia<sup>45</sup> to a flat on the second floor of Leicester Square Chambers, a building on Panton Street in the south-western corner of Leicester Square.<sup>46</sup> This was not only the business address of Marie Collier Ltd but also convenient to Covent Garden and the Coliseum where Sadler's Wells Opera was now based. Marie stayed at the flat during the week, with Victor occasionally joining her.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For example 'Singer had whisky and wine before fatal fall', *Times* (London), 16 December 1971, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> The following reconstruction of events is based primarily on reports of the coronial inquest, especially 'Singer's last moments', *Evening Argus* (Brighton, UK), 15 December 1971, and 'Marie Collier: drink quiz by coroner', *Evening Standard*, 15 December 1971. We must depend on newspaper accounts for a description of the inquest as the records are sealed for seventy-five years and will not become available until 2046. However the existing accounts share enough detail to enable a reconstruction of the witness testimony and the coroner's line of inquiry.

<sup>45</sup> 6 Cadogan Lane SW1.

<sup>46</sup> *Who's who: an annual biographical dictionary* (London: Adam and Charles Black Ltd, 1972).

<sup>47</sup> 'Marie Collier: drink quiz by coroner'.



The night of Tuesday 7 December 1971 was cold; the day's temperatures had ranged between 7–9°C, and although it had not rained it was very humid at 92 per cent.<sup>48</sup> Victor arrived at the flat at about 6pm. Marie was excited at a new offer she had received: to sing the role of Cassandra in Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens* in Boston for the conductor and impresario Sarah Caldwell. After talking about this for a while Victor rang a producer at Sadler's Wells.

Marie was having a whisky and soda when her manager, Henry Mathieu, arrived at the flat soon after. He shared Marie's excitement about the possibilities the job might open up for her in the United States, and talked with Marie and Victor about the arrangements that would have to be made for her to be able to take up the contract, including the question of whether she would have to give up another opera to which she was committed. A friend, Dennis Kestrel, arrived at around that time; they decided to continue discussing the arrangements later, and the four went to dinner at a restaurant close to the flat.

When they arrived at the restaurant Marie had another whisky and soda, and the four shared two bottles of wine during the meal. Marie left the restaurant early, as she never drank coffee, and went back to the flat. When the three men returned to the flat just before 10.30pm Marie was listening to a recording. Victor had to drive Kestrel home to Virginia Water near Ascot, then home to Cookham. He and the others left after about ten minutes. Marie came to the door to say goodbye.

The car headed south to Pall Mall, but Mathieu asked Victor to stop. What was then said was unclear; Victor later said he thought Mathieu had said he 'had an appointment'. Mathieu explained at the inquest that he had more business matters to discuss with Marie. Mathieu walked back to the flat, and as he neared the flat he saw Marie walking on the other side of the street. He asked, 'What are you doing?' She answered, 'I have a lot to think about, so I've come out for a breath of fresh air.' She was still excited about *Les Troyens*.

They talked as they went back up to the flat. It was now around midnight. Marie threw off her hat and coat and went quickly down the corridor to the living room. The windows of that room overlooked Leicester Square; Marie looked through one when visitors rang

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<sup>48</sup> 'Weather forecast and recordings', *Times* (London), 8 December 1971, p. 2

the doorbell. To open the window one had to lean over a radiator; the catch on the left-hand side was stiff, but the window swung out very easily once open.

Mathieu followed Marie into the living room to see her legs disappearing through the window. Marie screamed. Mathieu grabbed her foot and bent over the sill, but the foot was slipping. He could not get any purchase on the window sill; he tried to get up on the radiator, but she slipped from his hands and fell.

Paul Fenton, a barman, was on his way home with his wife when he heard a cry. He looked up and saw what looked like a dummy fall from a window, spin around and hit the pavement. He ran over and put his jacket under her head. Matthieu ran down the stairs and asked 'Is she all right?' Fenton said, 'No, I think she is dead.' Mathieu said, 'No, she can't be...' several times.

The police and ambulance were called. Marie was declared dead on arrival at Charing Cross Hospital just after midnight. When Victor arrived home at Cookham at about 1.30am the police were waiting.

After ascertaining Victor's account of the evening the coroner asked about Marie's emotional health. Victor described the 1968 breakdown and attributed it to overwork. The more important question was the amount of alcohol the deceased had consumed; he asked Victor and Mathieu how much she had drunk and when. The pathologist, Dr David Bowen, described the injuries that Marie had received: a depressed and fractured skull, a fractured and dislocated right elbow, and haemorrhaging around the brain. Bowen testified that the alcohol level in the deceased's blood was 281 millimetres, the equivalent to half a bottle of spirits drunk over a number of hours, and three-and-a-half times the permitted level for driving. This was enough to make most people inebriated; the effects might not be immediately evident in someone used to drinking, but their coordination would be affected, and they would be likely to become dizzy on making any sudden movements.

The coroner handed down his verdict quickly: accidental death. The first reports of the inquest were published that evening. Within hours of Collier's funeral a considered assessment, professional, reasoned and uncontroversial, was in public hands. Marie Collier's death had been found not to be an act of suicide stemming from overwhelming pressure or mental health issues, but an accident of alcohol and an awkward window sill.

## The growth of the myth

A plausible, evidence-based explanation of Collier's death existed, but that did not stop speculation. Contemporary discussions focused less on facts and more on perceptions. Over time the discussion of Collier in personal conversation, newspaper articles, reference works, popular and fan culture, and the internet shaped Marie Collier's memory as the Tragic Diva.

Immediately on hearing of the death people began to speculate about its nature. Collier had last performed on stage in August in Johannesburg. Her South Africa colleagues were shocked; they were unaware of any issues Collier may have had in her time working with them, and asked themselves whether or not her death was suicide.<sup>49</sup> At Sadler's Wells stories began circulating about what had happened in the flat; the tenor Gregory Dempsey later remembered, 'It was the talk of the town, and you don't know what was true and what was made up.'<sup>50</sup> Some colleagues simply assumed that Collier had taken her own life. In a tribute printed in *Opera* Tito Gobbi framed his reminiscences of her within her nervous and uneasy temperament. 'The great success she very well deserved maybe became too heavy for her to bear... Perhaps she was unable to detach her own personality from the operatic role and sometimes was overcome by it.'<sup>51</sup> In January Max Oldaker, her old colleague from Melbourne days, commented to the writer Charles Osborne, 'It was most tragic about Marie Collier. I wonder what was behind it?'<sup>52</sup>

Some of the newspaper coverage reflected this tone. As noted, the journalist Sydney Edwards had written in the *Evening Standard* of 'the loneliness of it all';<sup>53</sup> other newspapers copied this, with the additional quotation, 'When rehearsals are over and you leave the theatre, there's nothing.'<sup>54</sup> None of those early reports identified when the statement was first made; this is important, given the significance that this quotation was to have for the way Collier was to be remembered.

As time passed and the immediate events of Collier's death were forgotten, the view of Collier became less the singer who may or may not have committed suicide and more

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Halliwell, interview, Camperdown, NSW, 27 September 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory Dempsey, phone interview, 28 January 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Tito Gobbi, 'Marie Collier 1927–1971', *Opera*, February 1972, pp. 118-119.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Osborne, *Max Oldaker: Last of the Matinée Idols* (London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1988), p. 215.

<sup>53</sup> Edwards, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> 'Her voice matched by beauty'; Bingham, 'Opera star death riddle'.

the Tragic Diva. Her death was integrated into the story of her career as if it was a part of her accomplishments, and competed with her achievements for the major focus.

In the 1980s reference works noting her career presented a more nuanced consideration than the presentations of Collier that appeared in popular culture, in print, performance and fan discussions. Perhaps because of the need for concision, several authoritative encyclopaedia do not mention her death at all beyond the birth and death dates in parentheses.<sup>55</sup> Some authors of reference and scholarly works may have seen it as a responsibility to acknowledge her early death. Whether it is believed to be deliberate or accidental, her death is appended to her story of her career, even when not presented as part of the picture of the Tragic Diva.

One approach has been to treat the death as a plain fact without implication or commentary. In her account of opera in post-war Australia, Alison Gyger notes almost parenthetically that after the 1968 *Toscas* Collier did not return to Australia, singing with Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells 'until her accidental death, in London in December 1971, when she fell from a window.'<sup>56</sup> John Cargher's *Bravo! Two Hundred Years of Opera in Australia* examines Collier's Australian career, describing her triumphs in the 1950s and referring to her death only in a photo caption: 'She achieved star status internationally over the next nineteen years before tragically falling to her death from a window in London.'<sup>57</sup> He uses the word 'tragically' probably as conventional cliché rather than an explanation.

In comparison, the critic John Steane was certain that she had killed herself. In the late 1990s he wrote, 'She committed suicide. The shock of it—even if, as at first said, the death had been accidental—profoundly affronted the notion that people with so much animation belong to life.'<sup>58</sup> He concludes his discussion of Collier by casting her as the

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<sup>55</sup> 'Collier, Marie', in David Hamilton, *The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 88–89; 'Collier, Marie', in Michael Kennedy (ed.) *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev., <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/oprt237/e2283> (accessed 31 August 2015); and Alan Blyth, 'Collier, Marie', *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/06120> (accessed 31 August 2015).

<sup>56</sup> Alison Gyger, *Australia's Operatic Phoenix* (Sydney: Pellinor, 2005), p. 222.

<sup>57</sup> John Cargher, *Bravo! Two Hundred Years of Opera in Australia* (South Melbourne: Macmillan and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> J.B. Steane, *Singers of the Century* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, Vol. 2, 1998), p. 178.

Tragic Diva with a quotation from a 1964 review of *Katerina Ismailova*: 'It was as if she were prematurely enacting the tragedy which has eventually to happen.'<sup>59</sup>

Thérèse Radic's 1993 entry on Collier in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* succinctly presents 'tragic' aspects of Collier's life while letting readers draw their own conclusions. She mentions the demands Collier placed on herself; she cites Collier's statement concerning the loneliness of life outside the theatre, and notes that the question of suicide was raised: 'It was this public statement that led to rumours of suicide when her sudden death was announced on 8 December 1971.' She then lists the medical causes of Collier's death, and the coroner's finding of accidental death.<sup>60</sup>

The 'loneliness' quote had thus become part of the official story. Radic sources the quote to an obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald*,<sup>61</sup> but neither that obituary nor any contemporaneous reports identify when the statement was first made.

Popular culture and opera fandom have taken a different direction to the scholarly accounts of Collier's life, emphasising the death and the tragedy over her achievements. In the early 1990s the Melbourne singer Bernadette Robinson and theatre director Rodney Fisher created *You Might As Well Live*, a tribute in song and monologue to ten stars who lived 'tragic lives'<sup>62</sup> including Marilyn Monroe, Billie Holliday, Edith Piaf, Judy Garland and Marie Collier. In publicity for the show Robinson went to pains to highlight Collier's story as one lesser known; journalists briefly sketched Collier's achievements, but framed them within the context of her death, and rehearsed some of the clichés:

The only Australian, and the least known of the ten, is the dramatic soprano Marie Collier, who died in 1971 after falling from a window in her London flat... [Robinson said] 'There were even some suggestions that Collier had suicided; that's the one thing the family insisted we not allude to—she fell, she did not throw herself.' Collier, married with four children, made no secret of the loneliness of stardom. She once said: "When rehearsals are over and you leave the theatre, there's nothing."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 180; the review quoted is by Arthur Jacobs (*Opera* 1964).

<sup>60</sup> Thérèse Radic, 'Collier, Marie Elizabeth (1927–1971)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/collier-marie-elizabeth-9791/text17305> (accessed 31 August 2015; first published in hardcopy: Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

<sup>61</sup> 'Her voice matched by beauty'.

<sup>62</sup> Nicole Taylor, 'You know the face, now she's a star', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 February 1991, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Cochrane, 'Ten greats celebrate as star is born', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January 1991, p. 5.

The show toured across Australia for several years, and introduced many people to Collier's story, albeit through a particular filter.

Over the decades since Collier's death the myth of the Tragic Diva has been primarily spread by word of mouth, in verbal exchanges and on the internet. The myth can be seen even behind straightforward explanations of Collier's death. For example, the editors' 'Talk' page for Collier's entry in *Wikipedia*, the publicly-editable collaborative online encyclopaedia, saw the following exchange in 2013-14:

'She didn't die in an accident. It was a suicide.' [unsigned comment, 5 September 2013]

'You know this, how?' [Jack of Oz, 13 October 2013]

'*Australian Dictionary of Biography* tells us the coroner's verdict was "accidental death". That ref is now in the article.' [shaidar cuebiyar, 13 August 2014]<sup>64</sup>

Much of this informal discussion is as much about community interaction and personal identity as the subject. It says more about the speakers than the subject. An exchange of posts on the internet news group *rec.music.opera* in 1999 illustrates the way in which rumour, fact and personal identity intersect in the discussion of Collier's death. To the simple question 'Does anyone know the cause of her premature death?' came a stream of responses asserting suicide or accident. Only one person claimed personal knowledge of Collier; the others based their statements on what they had heard over nearly thirty years, from gossip, published statements by J.B. Steane and Tito Gobbi, and 'reliable sources':<sup>65</sup>

I have heard from a very reliable friend, that during a party, Collier had trouble opening a large window which was stuck. When she applied enough force, the window suddenly opened causing her to lose her balance resulting in the fatal fall. (Ed Burke, 19 December 1999)

My reliable source says she was drunk, running around, was out of control—not that it was a direct intentional suicide—but she was on a self-destructive trajectory, and the implication was that something like this was not a total surprise. (Wotan99, 20 December 1999)

Rather than an attempt to establish a reliable account of events, the discussion became a defence of contradictory positions. Detail was supplied in increasing

<sup>64</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AMarie\\_Collier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AMarie_Collier) (accessed 6 September 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Quotations below are from the topic 'Marie Collier', *rec.music.opera*, 17–22 December 1999, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.music.opera/jFPW0xS8coM> (accessed 27 August 2015). Names cited are user names. Spelling and punctuation has been corrected for clarity.

amounts to increase the apparent veracity. The reason for the suicide, declared one correspondent, was her recent sacking from the Covent Garden revival of *Tosca* and the downward trajectory of her career:

You will find that the night of her death coincides with Domingo's Covent Garden Debut as Cavaradossi in 1971. She was due to sing opposite him when she was sacked shortly before the premiere and replaced by Gwyneth Jones. She had become increasingly unreliable and had missed a few rehearsals as her technique was very dodgy at that stage and was drinking quite a bit. During the evening of the premiere she was drinking in the Lemon Tree, just off St Martins Lane where most of the Sadler's Wells singers frequented. She had allegedly drank the equivalent of two bottles of gin and staggered to her hotel around the corner. At around 11.00pm, when *Tosca* (the ring-in Jones) was due to take her final plummet, Miss Collier reenacted the scene in her room in a drunken stupor. She swan dived out of the window, and landed chin-first on the pavement, breaking her neck. She was alive when the ambulance arrived, but was dead within minutes. The paramedics commented that most accidents of this type, the victim was always found curled up in a ball, protecting their heads, but Miss Collier was found arms outstretched in a defiant Toscaesque position. While her international career was taking off, her personal life was becoming more and more complicated due to the enormous pressure she was under at the time. People who knew her at the time that she was due for a colossal burn-out, which prophetically occurred. (David, 21 December 1999)

The writer tried to establish the authority of his source:

This story was told to me by a singer from Sadler' Wells who was the first person called to the hospital that evening, and sung with her in the opening night of *Makropoulos Case* a few nights previously, when she missed most of her cues and wept throughout the whole performance. (David, 22 December 1999)

The more detail in an account, the more it can be verified or, as in this case, falsified. Here circumstances have been altered and manufactured in order to create the picture of the woman heading for a tragic destiny. The details of where and how much she drank and where she died may have appeared convincing to the readers but were demonstrably false. Most readers would not have known that her neck was not broken in the fall, although some may have guessed the alleged impact position was a theatrical fabrication. At the distance of nearly thirty years it may have been difficult for readers to recall that Collier had actually performed *The Makropulos Case* nearly twelve months before and that she had died nearly twenty-four hours before *Tosca* opened; nor is it likely they knew that Collier not only had not been sacked from the *Tosca* production but in fact had never been involved in it.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jones's casting had been announced as early as July 1971; see 'Covent Garden '71-'72', *Times* (London), 29 July 1971, p. 9.

The idea of Collier's sacking by the Royal Opera has been asserted by Norman Lebrecht,<sup>67</sup> but there is no evidence that the severance of the relationship was abrupt. Her file at Covent Garden does not contain any evidence to that effect, and none of Collier's colleagues interviewed for this research can recall such an incident. The 'sacking' seems to be an interpretation based on the fact that Covent Garden simply did not offer her any more work. Neither is there any substantial evidence to support the charge of unreliability. Her colleague Geoffrey Chard recalled a precarious performance of *The Makropulos Case* in Manchester in early 1971, but other colleagues such as John Pringle and Michael Halliwell recalled a singer who was professional and considerate during performances.<sup>68</sup>

The discussion explains Collier's death as a consequence of being the Tragic Diva, the celebrated artist who fails and falls. The facts are changed to fit in with the trope. The natural change of her career is interpreted as a decline; a rare departure from professional behaviour becomes a habit of unreliability, and a normal parting of the ways becomes an abrupt sacking. The timing of the *Tosca* performance is moved forward by twenty-four hours to provide a more suitable context, and a drunken accident becomes a theatrical demise. The reason for these assertions is not to provide information and edification of readers, but to defend and assert personal identity. Personal pride is at stake: pride at knowing information to which other fans would not have access, having sources of information beyond the reach of others, of being the highest, most exalted kind of opera fan. Collier's identity is deliberately obscured; while claiming to reveal truth about Collier, the fan falsifies her image so as to protect their own.

Much of the power of Collier's tragedy is derived from her own words. They are quoted or referred to in many of the examples above, and still hold an appeal for writers. In an essay from a CD released in 2009 we read:

Mystery still clouds Marie Collier's death in 1971, aged just 44, when she was at the absolute peak of her European career... The drama of Floria Tosca's dive to her death prefigured Marie Collier's own fate, when she fell—or jumped—from her hotel window, with her autopsy revealing high alcohol levels. The verdict was accidental death—but the continuing suicide theories were boosted

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<sup>67</sup> Norman Lebrecht, 'Tosca scores again', 14 June 2006, *La Scena Musicale* <http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/060614-NL-tosca.html> (accessed 16 August 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Geoffrey Chard, interview, Forest Lodge, NSW, 6 February 2007; John Pringle, interview, Chatswood, NSW, 11 August 2006; Michael Halliwell, interview.



by her own quoted remark that 'When rehearsals are over and you leave the theatre, there's nothing.'<sup>69</sup>

One characteristic of all these uses is that, although the words are used as a quotation, no reference actually identifies the source of the quote. In its original context Collier's words were more specific and nuanced.

In 1968 Collier recorded an interview for a BBC series on opera singers called *Voices for the World*. When the broadcaster John Amis commented on the transition she had made from a London star to a world star, Collier replied:

And that's terrible. I find it's the worst transition of all. It's very, very lonely, the pressure is tremendous, people expect an enormous amount of you. The world as such is very cut throat, it's not like the family life of Covent Garden, which was always so wonderful. But you arrive, you may not have met the singers before, it takes a while, your fellow singers, it takes a while for you to get to know them, as artists. Even then, when the rehearsals have finished, you leave the theatre, nothing.<sup>70</sup>

Collier's point was that the touring life was lonely once you left the theatre. At the time of her death, and in its many reiterations afterwards, the statement was taken out of this context. Presented by themselves, the words came to mean that life did not exist outside the theatre. Compare the quotation from the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'She made no secret of the loneliness of the star, and once said: "When rehearsals are over and you leave the theatre, there's nothing."<sup>71</sup> While a good paraphrase of the original words, the lack of context altered the meaning. In his *Evening Standard* tribute Sydney Edwards correctly placed the idea in the context of touring, but added 'the loneliness of it all';<sup>72</sup> and the lure of the phrase obscured the context and Collier's intended meaning. The loneliness of touring became 'the loneliness of the star' or 'the loneliness of it all', and this loneliness became an explanation for her death. With the inclusion of this version in a reference work such as the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* this explanation becomes part of the 'official' story.

A week after Collier's death the Westminster Coroner had delivered a considered and uncontroversial assessment of the circumstances. Nevertheless from the time of her

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<sup>69</sup> Anthony Clarke, [booklet essay], *Royal Opera Gala*, studio recordings, 1968. CD: Eloquence/Decca 480 0952 (2009).

<sup>70</sup> *Voices for the World*, Ian Engelman (producer/director), BBC 1 TV, 13 May 1968. (BBC Programme Number LMA7132Y).

<sup>71</sup> 'Her voice matched by beauty'. See also Bingham, 'Opera star death riddle'.

<sup>72</sup> Edwards, op. cit.

death a mix of rumour, third- and fourth-hand anecdote, gossip, inadequate research, and a statement isolated from its context and given undeserved significance formed a sensationalist, entertaining version of the story contradicting the coroner's finding. An incident that was tragic even in the most straightforward interpretation, as the coroner took, has come to define a person's whole life and career, even to caricature it. How can we explain why this version of Collier as the Tragic Diva has predominated?

### The attraction of the Tragic Diva

Cowgill and Poriss describe the diva as the ultimate form of the prima donna, the singer of supreme gifts, 'high repute and immense popularity' who has something beyond the norm that enables her to become 'a magnificent creature able to transcend the mundane and in the process move those who listen to her through flights of rapture.'<sup>73</sup> Most divas are not tragic; among Collier's contemporaries were Joan Sutherland and Birgit Nilsson, performers whose artistry enraptured fans but whose lives were not marked by great suffering or turmoil. It is suffering which transforms the prima donna into the Tragic Diva; the woman who must produce her art with an unusual sensitivity to the pressures of life, contending with professional crises, family conflicts, romantic turmoil, and even the shadow of death, becomes in the eyes of the fan something more than human, and helps them transcend the quotidian.

Opera fans revere the singer of great or even epoch-making talent who died early and had an element of tragedy in their lives. Both women and men, these performers achieved much; they were highly gifted singers who enthralled audiences and still have wide followings through their audio and video recordings. They can be assessed for their achievements; but one way in which fans perceive them, is through the prism of their death and tragedy, redefining their legacy in a way which supports personal need.<sup>74</sup>

The epitome was Maria Callas whose artistry achieved a high level though talent and intelligence but whose image was dominated by professional and personal controversies. The early decline of her voice became a tragedy in itself; her death from heart failure in Paris at the age of fifty-three sealed the legend. Although there has

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<sup>73</sup> Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds), *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. xxxiii.

<sup>74</sup> Opera is not the only musical field where the tragic artist is appreciated. In instrumental music the early deaths of the cellist Jacqueline du Pré (1945–1987) and the pianists Glenn Gould (1932–1982) and Julius Katchen (1926–1969) have contributed to their mystique and sales figures.

been much serious examination of Callas's performance career and recorded legacy,<sup>75</sup> popular commentary on the singer tends towards the flavour of this statement from one best-selling biography: 'But Maria had been dead for some time and, on 16 September 1977, the part of her that had gone on existing gave up.'<sup>76</sup>

The English contralto Kathleen Ferrier was much-loved during her career because of the beauty of her singing and her down-to-earth personality. But her later recordings have taken on a deeper emotional significance because they were made while she was ill with the breast cancer that would kill her at the age of forty-one. In the notes of a 2000 re-release of Ferrier's 1952 performance of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* the critic Michael Kennedy wrote, 'It is scarcely possible to listen to this recorded performance without taking into account the personal circumstances of the artists concerned—Walter, the composer's friend, and Ferrier, who knew while she was making the recording that it was her own *Abschied* [farewell], that she would see the lovely earth grow green again only once more.'<sup>77</sup> The American mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt-Lieberson was similarly beloved, a performer of Baroque and twentieth-century opera who died of breast cancer in her early fifties.<sup>78</sup>

Male singers too can be attractive because of the tragedy surrounding them. The Swedish tenor Jussi Björling had two tropes that were grist to the mill of the opera gossip. It was an open secret that the Swedish tenor struggled with an alcohol addiction. But he also suffered from an illness that would bring about his early death. In March 1960 Collier had sung with Björling in *La bohème* at Covent Garden. Before one performance Björling suffered an attack of atrial fibrillation and was unable to go onstage for the opening of the opera. When the curtain rose thirty-six minutes late, Björling sang in full voice but with care, and with support from his colleagues and the enthusiasm of the audience he made it to the end.<sup>79</sup> Contemporary newspaper reports

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<sup>75</sup> See for example Michael Scott, *Maria Meneghini Callas*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 1991); and John Ardoin, *The Callas Legacy: The Complete Guide to Her Recordings on Compact Disc* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, fourth ed., 1995).

<sup>76</sup> Arianna Stassinopoulos, *Maria Callas: the woman behind the legend* (London: Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1981), p. 396.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Kennedy, 'Kathleen Ferrier sings Mahler', *Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde—3 Rückert-Lieder*, studio recordings, 1952. CD Decca Legends 466 576-2 (2000). See also Rupert Christiansen, 'The glory of "Klever Kaff"', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 8 September 2003, for a discussion of Ferrier's appeal.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Tommasini, 'Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Luminous Mezzo, Dies at 52', *New York Times*, 5 July 2006, p. A15.

<sup>79</sup> Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas, *Jussi*, (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996), pp. 328-333.

told a straightforward tale, as did the individuals who participated in the performance.<sup>80</sup> However stories began circulating that the incident was the result of intoxication.<sup>81</sup> Björling died of an enlarged heart in his sleep less than six months later, aged forty-nine.<sup>82</sup> The drinking problem, the disastrous performance, and the early tragic death: all qualifications for the Tragic Diva.

The German lyric tenor Fritz Wunderlich was only thirty-five years old when he fell down the cellar stairs of a friend's hunting ledge near Heidelberg. The nature of the accident became the subject of fervid discussion in later years, with implications of drunkenness, practical jokes, philandering and murder (see below). Although his career was short, his performances of Mozart and lieder on stage and on record have kept his reputation alive fifty years later, with his early death the tragic twist with poignant appeal.<sup>83</sup>

All these singers had a 'special' quality and an early death. All can be seen as other identities than the tragic artist: the gifted tenor, the lieder singer, the explorer of rare and contemporary works. For these singers the discussion centres on their music, not on their early passing; but the manner of their deaths still shadows that discussion.

### How the fan uses celebrity to create identity

To understand how the singer might be cast as the Tragic Diva we must move beyond the facts of Collier as a person and an artist, to the ways that people perceived her, assigned meanings to her and incorporated them into their lives; that is, to how the fan uses the celebrity to create identity. This identity focuses on the suffering of the celebrity, with distinctions in the way in which the pain of male and female artists is interpreted; and the process allows an individual not only to define himself but to participate in community.

Theorists have understood this transaction between fans and celebrities in economic terms: the celebrity becomes a commodity because the consumer (the fan) wishes to

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<sup>80</sup> 'Mr. Björling Taken Ill On Stage', *Times* (London), 16 March 1960, p. 12; 'Björling Sings Though Unwell', *Guardian*, 16 March 1960, p. 1; 'Björling Stricken', *New York Times*, 16 March 1960, p. 44;

'Tenor Sings "Boheme" After "Heart Attack"', *Washington Post*, 17 March 1960, p. B19.

<sup>81</sup> John Culshaw, *Putting The Record Straight* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1981), p. 238.

<sup>82</sup> 'Mr Jussi Björling', *Times* (London), 10 September 1960, p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> For a brief examination of the legends around Fritz Wunderlich's life and death see Jan Neckers, 'Fritz Wunderlich: Life and Legend', *Opera Nostalgia*, <http://www.operanostalgia.be/html/wunderlich.htm> (accessed 11 December 2016).

possess her.<sup>84</sup> The fan sees a benefit in ‘having’ the celebrity and incorporating her into their existence. The fan experiences the celebrity’s work and responds positively. This experience can be a direct contact or at a distance, for example the live performance, supplemented or nourished by the meeting at the stage door; or only through mediated representations, such as the recording or broadcast, or in photos, newspapers and magazines. The fan assigns value and importance to this experience, creating an image of the celebrity, which they use to construct meanings, to assert values, and to formulate and express their personal identity.

Identification with the celebrity consolidates not only personal identity but also that of the group in which the individual seeks to exist. This community can be moral as well as social. A key element in the formation of the communal identity is gossip about the celebrity; by talking about the star, the individual’s interactions with her and the stories about her become integrated into daily life and bind the community.<sup>85</sup> The discussion of Collier’s death on *rec.music.opera* demonstrates this function: the community talks about their interactions with Collier or her colleagues and reiterates their positions. The result is not illumination on Collier’s demise, but the expression of the community’s values, and thus the continuation of the community. Graeme Turner proposes that the use of celebrity to form community is a compensatory mechanism for the radical changes in the social construction of communities in the late twentieth century;<sup>86</sup> but in earlier decades it also helped marginalised individuals make contact and become less isolated.

The point where a fan connects with a celebrity may be one of many things: it could be glamour, artistic achievement, or physical attractiveness. With the Tragic Diva the point of identity is the celebrity’s suffering. Perhaps the most visible example of this in the opera world is the fanatical following of Maria Callas. Callas’s appeal stretches across the whole spectrum of sexualities, but she remains the singer most closely associated with gay opera fans.<sup>87</sup> In his book *The Queen’s Throat*, Wayne Koestenbaum acknowledges that his passion for Callas is worship—his chapter on her is called ‘The Callas Cult’—and proclaims the validation that gay men find in her: ‘To demand that I

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<sup>84</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 15.

<sup>85</sup> Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage Publication, 2nd ed. 2014), pp. 119, 128.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>87</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: opera, homosexuality, and the mystery of desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 135.

renounce my veneration is to suggest the desirability of erasing what makes me gay.<sup>88</sup> Callas transcended her limits, transforming herself from a dumpy young woman to a glamorous star, yet her art was both sublime and imperfect at the same time, musicality and intellect expressed in a flawed instrument. In Koestenbaum's reading she surmounted suffering, musically and personally, and in doing so she gave voice to the hopes of gay men and enacted the expression and change that they were prevented from enacting in their own circumstances.<sup>89</sup>

Writing in the early 1990s, Koestenbaum commented that Callas's association with gay fans was a tacit one,<sup>90</sup> but this is untrue. In 1985 Terrence McNally's play *The Lisbon Traviata* highlighted Callas as a significant factor in the lives of a group of gay men; McNally returned to Callas in *Master Class*, presenting her as the Tragic Diva contemplating her life and career.<sup>91</sup> Pop culture examined the relationship in Jonathan Demme's 1993 film *Philadelphia*, in which Callas's recording of 'La mamma morta' from Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* allows Tom Hanks's character, dying from complications of AIDS, to enact his connection to the singer's pain and to express his own victory over suffering.<sup>92</sup>

This relationship is not static, as the dynamic of the connection between the Hollywood entertainer Judy Garland and her gay fans shows. Examining a corpus of gay men's responses to Garland written up to a decade after her death, the cultural critic Richard Dyer argues that the initial responses of gay men to Garland were to an intense experience of the emotion she expressed and shared with her audience, an expression of 'suffering and survival, vulnerability and strength, theatricality and authenticity, passion and irony'.<sup>93</sup> By the 1970s however the understanding of Garland changed from the sufferer to the survivor; Dyer associates this change with a greater political awareness associated with the rise of gay liberation, from victimhood to resistance in the face of oppression.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>91</sup> Terrence McNally, *The Lisbon Traviata*, first performed at Theatre Off Park, New York City, 1985; McNally, *Master Class*, first performed by the Philadelphia Theatre Company 1995.

<sup>92</sup> *Philadelphia*, Jonathan Demme (director), Tri-Star Pictures, 1993.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2004), p. 151.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 141-42.

The appeal of the suffering celebrity stretches beyond the limited circle of the community of fans. For most of the western world Marilyn Monroe's professional achievements are obscured by the tragic circumstances of her life and death. Bernie Taupin's lyrics for Elton John's song *Candle in the Wind* portray the tortured and misunderstood Marilyn.<sup>95</sup> In the 1990s the song came to represent Diana, Princess of Wales, when Taupin and John wrote a new version following Diana's death in 1997; the connection of Diana with Marilyn resonated with the public, and the new version became the biggest selling single since the beginning of sales charts in the US and UK in the 1950s.<sup>96</sup>

The huge scale of the public mourning after Diana's death exposed the extent to which the British public had created a sense of communal identity through empathy for Diana following the public revelation of her personal problems.<sup>97</sup> This phenomenon itself marks an increasing appropriation of the suffering of others for personal purposes since the 1970s, the emergence of 'trauma culture'. Anne Rothe describes this as the process whereby popular culture seizes on the suffering of people, strips it of all historical and political context, and turns it into commodities which are then sold for entertainment. Trauma culture is exemplified in the rise of exploitative talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s such as those of Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey, and the popularity of Holocaust memoirs (real and fake) and 'misery lit'.<sup>98</sup> Another form of trauma appropriation is the reinterpretation of Anzac as an experience of trauma: since the 1980s the original Anzacs have been reimagined as people who suffered, in the light of the trauma experienced by World War II prisoners of war and returned servicemen from Vietnam.<sup>99</sup>

The celebrity's suffering, however, is interpreted along gender lines. The suffering of the female artist is treated differently to that of the male artist; Molly Beauchemin calls

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<sup>95</sup> *Candle In The Wind*, music by Elton John, lyrics by Bernie Taupin, © Dick James Music 1973; original version released on Elton John, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, DJM Records, CD Polydor 821 747-2, first released 1973.

<sup>96</sup> *Candle In The Wind 1997*, The Rocket Record Company/Mercury 568 109-2, 1997. The Guinness Book of Records claims this version has sold 33 million copies to 2015, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/59721-best-selling-single> (accessed 26 September 2015).

<sup>97</sup> See Graeme Turner, op. cit., pp. 107-109, for a discussion of the ways the public responded to and used Princess Diana's personal trials and death to form personal and communal identity.

<sup>98</sup> Anne Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 4-5, 50.

<sup>99</sup> Christina Twomey, 'Trauma and the Reinvigoration of Anzac: An Argument', *History Australia*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2013, p. 88.

this 'the gendering of martyrdom'.<sup>100</sup> In a 2012 interview the American singer-songwriter Rickie Lee Jones decried the inability of people to understand female artists except 'through the prism of suffering... Men also have points of breaking. But for some reason, we love that point in women.'<sup>101</sup> In response to the release of Asif Kapadia's documentary film *Amy*,<sup>102</sup> about the English soul and r'n'b singer Amy Winehouse, the journalist Hadley Freeman expressed her disgust: 'This movie reinforces the point that one should never underestimate the public's appetite for watching a woman destroy herself... This film adheres perfectly to the general rule of real lives on film, which is that women are tragic and men are heroic.'<sup>103</sup>

A different set of values is assigned to women than to men, such as weakness and failure, and emotional and psychological issues are deprecated. Men are seen as thwarted geniuses rather than tormented souls. Beauchemin explores this notion in an article responding to Kapadia's film and another documentary, Brett Morgen's *Cobain: Montage of Heck*,<sup>104</sup> examining the life and death of the singer and guitarist Kurt Cobain. Beauchemin criticises the different ways in which the public treated Winehouse's and Cobain's behaviour and addiction problems during their lives: 'Men who grapple with issues that coincide with art and fame are canonised in death; women who do the same are made lesser, somehow, by their own unequivocal loss.'<sup>105</sup> She highlights the historical nature of this dichotomy by pointing to the different standards used by the *New York Times* to eulogise Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin in 1970. Hendrix was portrayed as the guitar genius who seduced audiences and broke musical boundaries; when Joplin died three weeks after Hendrix, she was the fast-living, doomed performer.<sup>106</sup> The *New York Times* took a similar approach when reporting the death of singer Jim Morrison the following year, declaring that he 'personified rock

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<sup>100</sup> Molly Beauchemin, 'Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain and the Gendering of Martyrdom' *Pitchfork*, 22 June 2015, <http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/808-amy-winehouse-kurt-cobain-and-the-gendering-of-martyrdom/> (accessed 24 July 2015).

<sup>101</sup> John Lewis, 'An Audience with Rickie Lee Jones', *Uncut* (London), November 2012, p. 12.

<sup>102</sup> *Amy*, On The Corner Films, Asif Kapadia (director), 2015.

<sup>103</sup> Hadley Freeman. 'Never underestimate the appetite for seeing women like Amy Winehouse self-destruct', *Guardian*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/24/publicappetiteamywinehouseselfdestru> [ctkapadiafilmvoyeurism](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/24/publicappetiteamywinehouseselfdestru) (accessed 25 June 2015).

<sup>104</sup> *Cobain: Montage of Heck*, HBO Documentary Films, Brett Morgen (director), 2015.

<sup>105</sup> Beauchemin, op. cit.

<sup>106</sup> 'Jimi Hendrix, Rock Star, Is Dead in London at 27', *New York Times*, 19 Sep 1970, p. 29; 'Janis Joplin Dies; Rock Star Was 27', *New York Times*, 5 Oct 1970, p. 1.



music's image of the superstar as sullen, mystical sexual poet'.<sup>107</sup> The obituarists focus on their achievements—Morrison the charismatic shaman; Hendrix's reinvention of blues guitar playing, exemplified in his performance of the American national anthem at Woodstock—rather than picturing them as suffering victims. Their deaths are explained as the result of excess (tacitly applauded) rather than the culmination of personal agony (not so tacitly pitied); Jussi Björling's drinking contributed to his death, but does not make him an object of pity.

However Beauchemin's focus on 1970s celebrity deaths does not take into account a recent change in the way male suffering has been treated. The response to the deaths of several male performers in the 1990s and 2000s marks a shift in acknowledging tragedy alongside excess and genius in the myth-making about male performers: the Tortured Genius has become a male corollary of the Tragic Diva. While Cobain's substance abuse was viewed in a particular way in his lifetime, Morgen's *Cobain: Montage of Heck* examines the tensions between Cobain's talent and personality. The American singer-songwriter Elliott Smith had a history of substance abuse, mental health issues and suicide attempts, and both his music and the manner of his death ensured his 'canonisation'.<sup>108</sup> The 'suffering artist' has in fact achieved such popularity that it has become associated with men who were not particularly troubled. The American singer Jeff Buckley became the object of myth following his accidental drowning in 1997; he quickly became the thwarted genius, but subsequently the myth has taken on an element of suffering; one magazine profile from 2013 described him as 'the Haunted Rock Star'.<sup>109</sup>

The growing use of the trope of the Tortured Genius, the de-gendering of martyrdom, is probably due to the rise of trauma culture. But using the pain of the male artist as a key

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<sup>107</sup> 'Jim Morrison, 25, Lead Singer With Doors Rock Group, Dies', *New York Times*, 9 July 1971, p. 34.

<sup>108</sup> See for example Liam Gowling, 'Elliott Smith: "Mr. Misery" Revisited, 10 Years After the Singer-Songwriter's Controversial Death', *Spin*, 21 October 2013, <http://www.spin.com/2013/10/elliott-smith-mr-misery-10-year-anniversary-death/> (accessed 4 October 2015); also Alexis Petridis, 'The mysterious death of Mr Misery', *Guardian*, 19 March 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2004/mar/19/popandrock.elliottsmith> (accessed 4 October 2015).

<sup>109</sup> 'Life Story: Jeff Buckley – the Haunted Rock Star', *marie claire*, 4 May 2013, <https://au.lifestyle.yahoo.com/marie-claire/news-and-views/celebrity/a/5885343/jeff-buckley-the-haunted-rock-star/> (accessed 30 September 2015). For a critique of the 'canonisation' of Buckley, see Jude Rogers, 'Jeff Buckley? No thank you', *Guardian*, 2 June 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2007/jun/02/jeffbuckleynothankyou> (accessed 30 September 2015).

to interpreting their body of work has a precedent in critical and popular responses to Vincent van Gogh; and his case shows that challenges to the received interpretation can be perceived as threatening to the common values of a community. For many, suffering is the key to understanding van Gogh's vivid palette and the distortion of buildings and skies reflecting his inner turmoil. This painter 'suffering for his sanity' has been the theme of popular portrayals of van Gogh such as Irving Stone's novel *Lust for Life* and its movie version,<sup>110</sup> and Don McLean's 1971 song *Vincent*.<sup>111</sup> Central to the myth is Vincent's slow, painful death from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. In their 2011 biography of van Gogh, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith asserted that the suicide is a satisfying narrative because 'it provides a suitably tragic end to an undeniably tragic life.'<sup>112</sup> However they provide detailed evidence supporting the probability that instead of taking his own life Van Gogh had been shot accidentally by a group of boys,<sup>113</sup> and argued that the legend of his suicide is probably a myth created by scholars whose work had been 'deeply embedded in the old narrative', a claim that provoked strong resistance from the professional community of van Gogh scholars.<sup>114</sup>

Van Gogh's suffering has thus become a foundational myth for a community, consolidating its identity and values, a process also seen in the opera community. For example in 2001 a member of *rec.music.opera* asked about a rumour that a 'jealous husband' may have had something to do with the death of Fritz Wunderlich after a fall at a hunting lodge near Heidelberg in 1966. A series of posts followed citing alternative stories or objecting to the idea that it was anything but an accident. The only agreed details were that he had fallen down the stairs and suffered head injuries. But why had he fallen? The most conservative offered that the room was dark, and that Wunderlich had lost his balance and grabbed at a railing which broke. Some suggested that he had drunk too much alcohol with his dinner. The 'jealous husband' story had it that Wunderlich had made a pass at Helga Hotter, the wife of the bass Hans Hotter, and that the bass had punched Wunderlich, who fell and was fatally injured. Others asserted that the problem was his shoelaces: that they had been tied together as a

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<sup>110</sup> Irving Stone, *Lust for Life* (London: Bodley Head, 1935); *Lust for Life*, MGM, Vincente Minnelli (director), 1956.

<sup>111</sup> Don McLean, 'Vincent', *American Pie*, United Artists, LP UAS-5535, 1971.

<sup>112</sup> Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 869.

<sup>113</sup> See 'Appendix: A Note on Vincent's Fatal Wounding', in Naifeh and Smith, op. cit., pp. 869-880.

<sup>114</sup> Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, 'NCIS: Provence: The Van Gogh Mystery', *Vanity Fair*, December 2014, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2014/12/vincent-van-gogh-murder-mystery> (accessed 2 December 2014).

joke, or that he had not tied his shoelaces when he went upstairs to find some bedtime reading. Another suggestion dismissed the fall entirely and claimed that Wunderlich's head injuries were caused by a gunshot. Whatever the cause, apparently all present at the lodge conspired to keep the true events secret. One contributor expressed his antipathy towards the discussion: 'This all sounds like Oliver Stone conspiracy shit, will it never end?'<sup>115</sup>

## How Collier became the Tragic Diva

The examples of Maria Callas and Judy Garland allow us to draw some characteristics of the Tragic Diva. First, she presents the image of the diva, the charismatic, gifted performer transcending the mundane. Second, she offers the fan an intense expression of emotion, experienced in person in the diva's presence, or in a removed fashion through live broadcast or recordings. The emotion is conveyed often through the vehicle of a tragic persona; for Garland, through torch songs delivered with maximum emotion, for Callas, through the tragic heroines of Puccini, Bellini, Verdi, Gluck and Donizetti. Third, she has a history of suffering or struggle, and often a tragic demise; and this suffering may offer validation of the fan's own struggles.

The followings of Callas and Garland lie at the more passionate end of the range; for most people the point of identity is not as significant, with the trope of the Tragic Diva a tool for interpreting the artist rather than forming personal identity. Collier did not have an explicitly gay-identifying fanbase nor a fanatical following like those of Callas and Garland that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s. However the mechanisms operating in the cases of Callas and Garland function the same way for Collier. An examination of the characteristics of the attraction of those women for fans can help explain Collier's attraction and the change in focus from her achievements to her image as the Tragic Diva.

Collier consciously cultivated the image of the diva. In his book *Demented: the world of the opera diva* Ethan Mordden nominated the essential qualities of the opera diva as voice, musicianship, temperament, commitment and audacity, or life presence.<sup>116</sup> By the 1960s Collier had developed a public persona that displayed all of these qualities.

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<sup>115</sup> 'Fritz Wunderlich's death', *rec.music.opera*, 8-12 November 2001, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.music.opera/b7SBYhw1H11> (accessed 3 September 2015).

<sup>116</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Demented: the world of the opera diva*, (New York: F. Watts, 1984), pp. 8, 13.

They were on display every time she went on stage: the voice that thrilled, her musicianship in mastering and interpreting the difficult roles she performed, her temperament as a key component of her interpretation, her commitment as her belief in the character and situation she was performing, and her life presence in the charisma she projected. There were off-stage corollaries: a professionally-trained cultured-Australian accent, her championing of modern and rare repertoire, the dignity and sometimes the hauteur of the diva, with the occasional display of temper and the warmth she conveyed in personal encounters. The publicity around her thriving family life only enhanced her professional persona.

Collier also provided the fan with an intense experience of emotion, in the portrayal of tragic heroines. Mordden described the phenomenon of the opera diva principally from the point of view of the devoted fan. He proposed a simplistic but useful distinction between the *Stimmdiva* and the *Kunstdiva*. The first is characterised by beauty of voice (the German word *Stimme*); the second is characterised by acting and interpretation, epitomised in the German word for Art (*Kunst*).<sup>117</sup> Mordden classified Collier as *Kunstdiva*: 'So consumed by the romance of being Minnie of the golden west or the 342-year-old Elina Makropulos that one scarcely noticed the rough singing...'<sup>118</sup> He also described the concept of the 'demented' performance, developed by opera devotees at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1960s. A demented performance is one where everything falls into place: 'Demented is opera at its greatest, a night when the singers are in voice, in role, in glory. Everything fits. ... And note: not thrilling, admirable or inspiring, but demented: insane... it is the *Kunstdivas* who most frequently achieve the ecstasy of demented, because so much of it depends on fabulous interpretation.'<sup>119</sup>

At their best Callas and Garland were demented. The critic Harold Rosenthal wrote of Callas's 1964 Paris performance of Bellini's *Norma*, 'The audience went mad, and rightly so, for once again the Callas magic had worked.'<sup>120</sup> In 1961 the *New York Times* reported the standing ovations and screaming that had repeatedly occurred during Judy Garland's performance at Carnegie Hall, in an evening 'something not too remote

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>120</sup> Harold Rosenthal, 'The Callas Magic', *Opera*, August 1964, p. 535.

from a revival meeting.<sup>121</sup> Collier too elicited emotion in the audience; her performance in *The Consul* had sometimes brought forth extreme audience reactions from people reliving their own nightmares of death and dispossession,<sup>122</sup> but throughout her career audiences responded with fervour.<sup>123</sup> When she replaced Callas in *Tosca* the audience ‘cheered, stamped their feet, clapped, and shouted “Bravo!”’ for nearly twenty minutes.<sup>124</sup>

Collier’s repertoire of tragic heroines ensured that the emotionality of her performances was something the audience could expect at almost every performance. She performed suffering and tragedy, playing women who suffered from love or violence or both. Like Callas her main signature role was *Tosca*, the passionate, suffering diva, a role in which the singer could portray pain and torment in a manner calculated to arouse the audience. In Mordden’s eyes a good *Tosca* was ‘by the nature of the role, demented... Anything less than demented isn’t *Tosca*.’<sup>125</sup> Callas’s *bel canto* heroines expressed their suffering in set-piece ‘mad scenes’; Collier performed the twentieth-century equivalents, with Katerina Ismailova singing her loneliness and despair, Emilia Marty disintegrating psychologically and physically with the emptiness of unnaturally long life, Jenůfa struggling to cope with rejection, murder and betrayal, and Renata slipping into literal insanity in *The Fiery Angel*.

Of the forty-five roles that Collier sang during her professional career the majority involved tragedy or tragic endings. Seventeen died (twelve by their own hand or choice, three murdered or executed, one by accident and one from exhaustion and exposure); and six suffered the death of a husband or lover, one the death of a child. Of the roles that Collier sang at her peak, only Minnie (*La fanciulla del West*) had a happy ending, and even that involved exile (Table 1).

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<sup>121</sup> Lewis Funke, ‘Judy Garland in Concert: Attracts Cheering Fans to Carnegie Hall’, *New York Times*, 24 April 1961, p. 36.

<sup>122</sup> Frank van Straten, *National Treasure: The Story of Gertrude Johnson and the National Theatre* (Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1994), pp. 173, 176.

<sup>123</sup> For example see ‘Fidelio’, ‘“The Consul” fires Perth audiences’, *West Australian*, 4 July 1953, p. 4; Lindsey Browne, ‘Menotti’s “Consul” at Tivoli’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1953, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> ‘20-minute ovation for Miss Collier’, *Guardian*, 3 July 1965, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Demented: the world of the opera diva*, (New York: F. Watts, 1984), p. 11.

<i>Role</i>	<i>Opera</i>	<i>Type of death</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Year</i>
Magda Sorel	<i>The Consul</i> (Menotti)	suicide	gas oven	1953
Tosca	<i>Tosca</i> (Puccini)	suicide	fall from a building	1953
Aida	<i>Aida</i> (Verdi)	suicide	entombment	1954
Cio-Cio-San	<i>Madama Butterfly</i> (Puccini)	suicide	ritual suicide	1958
Liù	<i>Turandot</i> (Puccini)	suicide	stabbing	1958
Inés	<i>Don Juan de Mañara</i> (Goossens)	suicide	fall from a window	1959
Katya Kabanova	<i>Katya Kabanova</i> (Janáček)	suicide	drowning	1959
Marie	<i>Wozzeck</i> (Berg)	murder	stabbing	1960
Lisa	<i>The Queen of Spades</i>	suicide	drowning	1961
Cressida	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> (Walton)	suicide	stabbing	1963
Katerina Ismailova	<i>Katerina Ismailova</i> (Shostakovich)	suicide	drowning	1963
Emilia Marty	<i>The Makropulos Case</i> (Janáček)	extreme old age	refusal of elixir of life	1964
Nedda	<i>Pagliacci</i> (Leoncavallo)	murder	stabbing	1965
Renata	<i>The Fiery Angel</i> (Prokofiev)	execution	burning at the stake	1965
Christine Mannon	<i>Mourning Becomes Electra</i> (Levy)	suicide	shooting	1967
Manon Lescaut	<i>Manon Lescaut</i> (Puccini)	natural	exposure	1968
Míla Valkova	<i>Osud</i> (Janáček)	accident	fall from a balcony	1971

Table 1. Deaths in Collier's repertoire

The Tragic Diva requires a history of suffering and struggle; she must not only perform pain in her art but also in her life. Callas's private life was anything but private—her early weight problems, her marriage with the Italian businessman Giovanni Battista Meneghini, her affair with Aristotle Onassis, and her battles with opera managements, conductors and producers became as much a focus as her art. Garland was notorious for her public meltdowns, her unreliability and the tempestuous of her personal life. Collier's public experience of suffering was subtle, not attracting the attention drawn to Garland's catastrophe or Callas's soap opera; and her problems came to take on special significance only after her death.

In the construction of the Tragic Diva the tragedy of the life leads inexorably to the tragic demise—early, sudden (or lingering and painful) but not unexpected. After withdrawal from public life Callas died of heart failure at the age of fifty-three in Paris in 1977, completing a legend that was already cemented in history. Writers such as Arianna Stassinopoulos described it as if she had died of a 'broken heart.'<sup>126</sup> Garland

<sup>126</sup> Stassinopoulos, op. cit., p. 396.

died in a Chelsea mews of an accidental overdose of prescription medication in 1969; when her body was repatriated to the United States for burial thousands queued to view her at a funeral parlour in New York.<sup>127</sup>

In contrast, Collier succeeded in creating a stable domestic life, and all her personal difficulties did not provide a fraction of the column inches provided by Callas's offstage life. Media discussion of Collier's personal issues was limited to a handful of newspaper items, announcing her withdrawal from performances because of exhaustion. Some of her closest colleagues knew the struggles she faced; some saw the occasional fits of temperament; but once the performance began Collier was a professional, and that was the face that most of her colleagues saw. It was only when the exhaustion began, late in her career, that interviews became more confessional; but these only showed her as the candid diva, not the tragic one, and came to represent a persona of pain only after her death, seized on by journalists such as Sydney Edwards to 'explain' what had happened.<sup>128</sup> After her death the meaning changed from 'my job can be very difficult' to 'I suffer for my art.' Collier's death was unexpected, but as soon as the news broke her life was reinterpreted to make her death inevitable. Her appointment as the Tragic Diva was a posthumous one.

## Conclusion

People responded to the news of Collier's death differently according to their proximity to the singer. Family, friends and colleagues reacted with grief and shock. Colleagues and fans commemorated her passing in public acts such as performances, broadcasts and memorial services. The media presented the story as news and entertainment, shaping different versions of the incident and the person according to their own preferences and approaches, and influencing the way both Collier's death and her career were to be remembered. Writers specialising in opera presented more versions of Collier's life in formal obituaries which focused on the achievements of her career rather than the drama of her death.

As knowledge of the circumstances of Collier's death receded into the past so did the knowledge of her achievements. People formulated their own conceptions of the events of 7 December 1971, in spite of the coroner's verdict of accidental death. A discourse of music and celebrity and tragedy grew around Collier, casting her as the

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<sup>127</sup> Gerald Clarke, *Get Happy: the Life of Judy Garland* (London: Warner Books, 2001), pp. 421-23.

<sup>128</sup> Edwards, op. cit.

Tragic Diva, the talented, charismatic, flawed, suffering artist whose early demise was inevitable.

These formulations draw on the suffering of charismatic performers as part of a process of forming personal identity, and establishing membership of a community, a process seen most vividly in the cases of Maria Callas and Judy Garland. Collier became the Tragic Diva because she shared certain characteristics with Callas and Garland: she presented the image of the talented and larger-than-life diva; in her portrayals of tragic heroines she gave fans an experience of intense emotion with which they could connect; and her personality and life experiences were interpreted as tragedy and suffering.

After her death Marie Collier was presented as the victim of a tragic incident; her identity as a diva then became bound up with the tragedy, the life and the death used to interpret each other. When many remember Marie Collier they think not of the vital, dynamic Tosca or Emilia Marty, but the broken body lying in Leicester Square at midnight. In the conclusion I revisit what we have seen of Collier's career in earlier chapters and identify ways of remembering Collier that give more recognition to her accomplishments than the cliché of the Tragic Diva.



## Conclusion

In the second decade of the twenty-first century a visible resistance to the celebration of the suffering of famous people seems to be emerging. Christmas 2016 saw the passing of three beloved and iconic figures in popular culture: the singer George Michael, the actor Carrie Fisher and her mother the musical comedy star Debbie Reynolds. Reynolds's status as one of the last survivors of the Golden Age of Hollywood and the great era of movie musicals could never be obscured by her experience of loss and sadness. However Fisher and Michael lived out their personal demons in the public eye, and journalists and fans were quick to insist that memorials gave due weight to their accomplishments. Michael's achievements as a songwriter and his identity as a gay role model took as prominent a place in press reports as his very public history of drugs, cottaging and driving infringements.<sup>1</sup> Fisher subverted the trope of the 'suffering artist' by building positive achievements on her pain. After her death her experience of bipolar disorder and addiction received attention, but she was also lauded for her work as a writer and script consultant and for her high visibility as a feminist and mental health advocate who inspired many at the personal and political levels.<sup>2</sup> The habit of remembering people for their tragedy rather than their achievements will probably persist, but alongside it will be a disposition to look for a more positive legacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Owen Jones, 'George Michael was a defiant gay icon. His life must not be sanitised', *Guardian*, 27 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/26/george-michael-defiant-gay-icon-sex-life-lgbt-rights> (accessed 27 December 2016); Laura Barton, 'George Michael's songs were more than simple tales of lust and longing' *Guardian*, 26 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/dec/26/george-michael-songs-more-than-lust-and-longing> (accessed 27 December 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Hadley Freeman, 'Hilarious realist: Carrie Fisher was the person everyone would want to sit next to at a wedding', *Guardian*, 28 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/filmblog/2016/dec/27/carrie-fisher-appreciation-remembered> (accessed 28 December 2016); Hannah Jane Parkinson, 'Forget the gold bikini. For people with mental illness Carrie Fisher was a queen', *Guardian*, 28 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/commentisfree/2016/dec/28/carrie-fisher-bipolar-dies-mental-illness-princess-leia> (accessed 28 December 2016). For Fisher's political impact see Joanna Robinson, 'How Carrie Fisher Became the Surprising Face of the Rebellion Against Trump', *Vanity Fair*, 23 January 2017, <http://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/01/carrie-fisher-todd-fisher-womens-march-donald-trump> (accessed 25 January 2017); and Caitlin Gibson, 'How Princess Leia became an unofficial symbol for the Women's March', *Washington Post*, 23 January 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/01/23/how-princess-leia-became-an-unofficial-symbol-for-the-womens-march/?utm\\_term=.342170049810](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/01/23/how-princess-leia-became-an-unofficial-symbol-for-the-womens-march/?utm_term=.342170049810) (accessed 25 January 2017).

Of course this can only be the case when the person has not fallen out of public memory. To be remembered there must be an extraordinary level of interest in the personality, even a cult, during their life. In her lifetime Collier did not appear in the popular eye as much as Callas, Sutherland or Melba. She does not have a large body of fans and record companies enthusiastic to keep her memory alive.

As I have argued, the focus on Collier's death obscures her achievements. Her career emerged at a time of change and potential in Australia and its artistic culture. One of a small but important group of Australian performers that established careers in England, she went further than most, extending her success to North and South America, and becoming celebrated not only for her work in standard repertoire but also for her success in modern operas.

To explore this I examined how she was formed as an artist and how she developed a career as a professional performer. I identified elements of her identity important to understanding her, such as her Australian origins, her gender and her desire to make a family, and explored how she created an image reflecting her self-perception.

Collier's development as an artist was a career-long process. For someone who had accidentally fallen into singing, she took her art seriously and worked hard to develop her vocal and acting skills. Her teachers, most importantly Kathleen Wielaert, developed her mezzo-soprano voice into a dramatic soprano, initially promising a Wagnerian but eventually forming a spinto soprano suited for Puccini and Verdi. Her attractive looks and personal charisma gave her a compelling stage presence, but initially her acting was a matter of instinct rather than craft and required much work. Her voice too was flawed. The technique she had learned from Wielaert gave her a strong opulent sound, however it was not always reliable and placed serious strain on her voice. Collier became aware of the problems soon after her international career began, and learned to work within her strengths and weaknesses. As she moved into her forties she also dealt with the natural changes of the voice that come with age.

Collier's repertoire proved crucial to her success. From her earliest professional engagements and formal study in Italy she developed her repertoire to increase her appeal as an artist, adding and removing roles to suit her voice and personality and to be ready for performance opportunities when they arose. Her ability to perform works in their original languages added to her marketability at a time when the opera business was being 'internationalised'. Her repertoire came to consist of core traditional works

and a more specialist selection of works in contemporary idioms. The traditional repertoire began with her Santuzza in Melbourne in 1952, and eventually she specialised in Puccini, with Tosca her signature role, and also with success in Verdi, Wagner and Strauss. Her success in Menotti's *The Consul* in 1953, and seasons of *Katya Kabanova* and *Wozzeck* later in the decade, indicated that she had a gift for modern repertoire, and her portrayals in newer operas from eastern Europe and Russia—Shostakovich's *Katerina Ismailova*, Renata in Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel*, and most famously Emilia Marty in *The Makropulos Case*—became cornerstones of her reputation. She also created roles in new operas by contemporary composers. The middle-period of her career saw changes in her roles as well as her voice. Faced with changes in her own popularity and the demand for her specialty roles, she re-evaluated her repertoire and adjusted it to adapt to new circumstances.

Collier's career began at a time of expansion in Australian musical culture, but like her predecessors she had to leave the country to reach her potential. Her middle-class upbringing in post-World War II Melbourne exposed her to a musical milieu enjoying growth and opportunities at a level never before seen in the country. But the geographical and cultural isolation of Australia limited the opportunities for training and performance at the highest level. After study in Italy Collier secured a principal contract at Covent Garden. She sang a mixture of principal roles and supporting parts at the Royal Opera House and on tours throughout the United Kingdom. She worked as a guest artist at Sadler's Wells and with regional companies, and built a parallel career in concerts and broadcasting on radio and television. In the early 1960s she started appearing in North and South America, and established a continuing relationship with the San Francisco Opera and eventually the Metropolitan Opera.

By the mid-1960s Collier was acclaimed in the opera world, but she became famous to the wider public when she replaced Maria Callas in Tosca at Covent Garden in 1965. Presented by the media as the making of an 'overnight star', the event became an integral part of Collier's legend. Opportunities to perform increased in Europe as well as America. Now a freelance artist, Collier took as many engagements as possible, but the increasing travel and time away from home created physical and psychological pressures.

Two elements of Collier's identity are essential to understanding her career. Collier always declared her pride in her nationality, and her success overseas made her a cultural figurehead for many Australians. For them she represented the achievements

of Australian art to the world, formally in official concerts and informally as an opera star. To local performers she modelled international standards when she returned to Australia to perform through the 1960s. To artists such as Patrick White and Peter Sculthorpe she was the inspiration to create works expressing Australian identity.

Collier's experience as a woman was of course crucial to the way she negotiated her professional and personal lives. She worked as an opera singer at a time when concepts of female autonomy and gender roles were changing radically. She persisted in trying to secure her professional autonomy and her personal goals; and while the tensions were difficult to mitigate she achieved the remarkable accomplishment of establishing a family while maintaining a successful, demanding career.

Collier's success partially built on a unique image that, while built on accepted tropes, reflected the person she perceived herself to be. In her early Australian career her mentors and the media created the persona of an attractive, talented star-in-the-making. As her career developed Collier created a representation of herself using elements of her professional and domestic selves, combining her roles as the attractive, compelling artist and the mother making a home life in the image of the housewife-diva. When Collier returned to Australia in 1968 the media presented her as the glamorous and triumphant diva who combined an international career with a thriving family life of joys and responsibilities. It was an image she had been at some pains to control.

But she could not control the image that developed after her death. Motivated by the tragedy of her early, accidental death, media and gossip presented her as the Tragic Diva, looking to the negative aspects of her career—the pressures of stardom, the health issues, and the common challenges to a singer's voice and career—to create a mythology which 'explained' her death as suicide or the outcome of an inevitable doom.

But Marie Collier's legacy is not to be found in the trope of the Tragic Diva, the woman who suffered for her art now resting at peace in a quiet churchyard by the River Thames. Instead we should look to her achievements: the artist and musician, the Australian and the cosmopolitan, and the woman of her time, negotiating the professional and personal spheres to achieve her vision of a life that included art, work and family. Her experiences reveal much about post-World War II Australian identity and cultural values, about the ways in which the making of opera changed throughout the world in the 1950s and 1960s, and how women negotiated their changing status

and prospects through that period. Marie Collier's legacy is in how she lived and what she achieved; not in a death, but a life.

## Appendices

### 1. Marie Collier's operatic repertoire

Kate *The Pirates of Penzance* (Gilbert and Sullivan) (English)  
13 November 1943 Melbourne (first)

Pitti-Sing *The Mikado* (Gilbert and Sullivan) (English)  
18 July 1945 Melbourne (first)  
19 July 1945 Melbourne (final)

Iolanthe *Iolanthe* (Gilbert and Sullivan) (English)  
17 September 1947 Melbourne (first)  
18 September 1947 Melbourne (final)

Tessa *The Gondoliers* (Gilbert and Sullivan) (English)  
4 September 1948 Melbourne (first)  
5 September 1948 Melbourne (final)

Princess Ida *Princess Ida* (Gilbert and Sullivan) (English)  
12 September 1951 Melbourne (first)  
14 September 1951 Melbourne (final)

Santuzza *Cavalleria rusticana* (Mascagni)  
18 March 1952 Princess Theatre, Melbourne (first)  
24 September 1958 Glasgow (first international)  
13 October 1966 Vancouver (first in Italian)  
6 November 1970 Covent Garden (final)

Magda Sorel *The Consul* (Menotti) (English)  
7 March 1953 Princess Theatre, Melbourne (first)  
30 March 1954 Melbourne (final)

Tosca *Tosca* (Puccini) (English, Italian)  
16 June 1953 Theatre Royal, Adelaide (first)  
29 August 1958 Llandudno (first international)  
28 January 1963 Covent Garden (first in Italian)  
27 August 1971 Johannesburg (final)

Giulietta *The Tales of Hoffmann* (Offenbach) (English)  
13 February 1954 Princess Theatre, Melbourne (first)  
9 July 1957 Covent Garden (first international)  
11 January 1965 Covent Garden (final)

Helen *La belle Hélène* (Offenbach) (English)  
3 April 1954 Princess Theatre, Melbourne (first)  
15 April 1954 Melbourne (final)

Teresa *The Maid of the Mountains* (Fraser-Simpson & Tate) (English)  
17 April 1954 Princess Theatre, Melbourne (first)  
28 April 1954 Melbourne (final)

- Aida *Aida* (Verdi) (English, Italian)  
 28 August 1954 Brisbane (concert)  
 28 March 1958 Covent Garden Manchester (first stage, first international)  
 26 July 1966 Buenos Aires (first in Italian)  
 13 August 1966 Buenos Aires (final)
- Marenka *The Bartered Bride* (Smetana) (English)  
 20 October 1954 Hobart (first)  
 29 October 1964 San Francisco (final)
- Musetta *La bohème* (Puccini) (English, Italian)  
 6 November 1956 Covent Garden (first)  
 10 March 1960 Covent Garden (first in Italian)  
 11 October 1967 Montreal (final)
- First Lady *The Magic Flute* (Mozart) (English)  
 10 November 1956 Covent Garden (first)  
 13 April 1957 Covent Garden Southampton (final)
- Karolka *Jenůfa* (Janáček) (English)  
 10 December 1956 Covent Garden (first)  
 24 April 1958 Covent Garden (final)
- Clotilde *Norma* (Bellini) (Italian)  
 1 February 1957 Covent Garden (first)  
 6 February 1957 Covent Garden (final)
- Polyxena *The Trojans* (Berlioz) (English)  
 6 June 1957 Covent Garden (first)  
 19 July 1958 Covent Garden (final)
- High Priestess *Aida* (Verdi) (English)  
 3 March 1958 Covent Garden Oxford (first)  
 22 March 1958 Covent Garden Manchester (final)
- Fourth Maid *Elektra* (Strauss) (German)  
 14 May 1958 Covent Garden (first)  
 9 June 1960 Covent Garden (final)
- Flora Bervoix *La traviata* (Verdi) (Italian)  
 20 June 1958 Covent Garden (first)  
 27 May 1960 Covent Garden (final)
- Cio-Cio-San *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini)  
 2 October 1958 Aberdeen (first)  
 3 March 1961 Covent Garden (first in Italian)  
 7 July 1964 Coventry
- Liù *Turandot* (Puccini) (English)  
 18 December 1958 Covent Garden (first)  
 24 January 1966 Covent Garden (final)
- Ines *Don Juan de Mañara* (Goossens) (English)  
 11 April 1959 BBC (recording)

- Katya Kabanova *Katya Kabanova* (Janáček) (English)  
 18 November 1959 Sadler's Wells (first)  
 1 December 1959 Sadler's Wells (final)
- Venus *Tannhäuser* (Wagner) (English, German)  
 9 December 1959 Sadler's Wells (first)  
 7 December 1969 Hamburg (first in German)  
 7 June 1970 Hamburg (final)
- Marie *Wozzeck* (Berg) (English)  
 2 December 1960 Covent Garden (first)  
 6 April 1970 Covent Garden (final)
- Concepción *L'heure espagnole* (Ravel) (English)  
 25 April 1961 London (first)  
 June 1963 Edinburgh (final)
- Gerhilde *Die Walküre* (Wagner) (German)  
 29 September 1961 Covent Garden (first)  
 22 September 1964 Covent Garden (final)
- Lisa *The Queen of Spades* (Tchaikovsky) (English)  
 2 December 1961 Covent Garden (first)  
 19 December 1961 Covent Garden (final)
- Hecuba *King Priam* (Tippett) (English)  
 29 May 1962 Coventry (first)  
 18 June 1962 Covent Garden (final)
- Helena *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Britten) (English)  
 24 July 1962 Buenos Aires (first)  
 29 July 1962 Buenos Aires (final)
- Elisabetta de Valois *Don Carlo* (Verdi) (Italian)  
 6 April 1963 Covent Garden (first)  
 November 1965 Hartford, CN (final)
- Cressida *Troilus and Cressida* (Walton) (English)  
 23 April 1963 Covent Garden (first)  
 20 March 1964 Adelaide (final)
- Freihild *Guntram* (Strauss) (German)  
 22 May 1964 BBC Glasgow (recording)
- Mrs Fabien (Pilot's Wife) *Night Flight* (Volo di Notte) (Dallapiccola) (English)  
 29 May 1963 Glasgow (first)  
 5 June 1963 Edinburgh (final)
- Gutrune *Götterdämmerung* (Wagner) (German)  
 6 September 1963 Proms (Concert, Act III only)  
 11 September 1963 Covent Garden (first)  
 26 September 1964 Covent Garden (final)



- Katerina Ismailova *Katerina Ismailova* (Shostakovich) (English)  
 2 December 1963 Covent Garden (first)  
 16 December 1964 Covent Garden (final)
- Emilia Marty *The Makropulos Case* (Janáček) (English)  
 12 February 1964 Sadler's Wells (first)  
 4 June 1971 Sadler's Wells Manchester (final)
- Freia *Das Rheingold* (Wagner) (German)  
 3 September 1964 Covent Garden (first)  
 21 September 1964 Covent Garden (final)
- Giorgetta *Il Tabarro* (Puccini) (Italian)  
 12 April 1965 Covent Garden (first)  
 13 May 1965 Cardiff (final)
- Renata *The Fiery Angel* (Prokofiev) (English, Italian)  
 27 July 1965 London (first)  
 12 June 1966 Buenos Aires (first in Italian)  
 18 June 1966 Buenos Aires (final)
- Minnie *La fanciulla del West* (Puccini) (Italian)  
 21 September 1965 San Francisco (first)  
 March 1966 Palermo (final)
- Chrysothemis *Elektra* (Strauss) (German)  
 7 April 1966 Covent Garden (first)  
 19 May 1969 Covent Garden (final)
- Nedda *Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) (Italian)  
 26 March 1965 Covent Garden (first)  
 22 October 1966 Vancouver (final)
- Christine Mannon *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Levy) (English)  
 17 March 1967 Metropolitan Opera (first)  
 28 December 1967 Metropolitan Opera (final)
- Manon Lescaut *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) (Italian)  
 9 January 1968 Houston (first)  
 19 December 1968 Covent Garden (final)
- Jenůfa *Jenůfa* (Janáček) (English)  
 16 February 1968 Covent Garden (first)  
 1 March 1968 Covent Garden (final)
- A woman *Erwartung* (Schönberg) (English)  
 5 October 1968 San Francisco (first)  
 13 October 1968 San Francisco (final)
- Míla Valkova *Osud* (Janáček) (English)  
 16 October 1971 BBC Camden (recording)

## 2. Marie Collier's amateur, concert and broadcast repertoire

Kate *The Pirates of Penzance* (Gilbert and Sullivan)  
13 November 1943 Melbourne (first performance)

Pitti-Sing *The Mikado* (Gilbert and Sullivan)  
18 July 1945 Melbourne

Iolanthe *Iolanthe* (Gilbert and Sullivan)  
17 September 1947 Melbourne

Tessa *The Gondoliers* (Gilbert and Sullivan)  
4 September 1948 Melbourne

Chorister *White Horse Inn* (Benatzky)  
26 December 1948 Melbourne

Chorister *Oklahoma!* (Rodgers – Hammerstein)  
19 February 1949 Melbourne

'One Night of Love' (Schertzinger/Kahn)  
11 June 1950 3KZ Melbourne

'Kashmiri Song' (Woodforde-Finden/Hope)  
1 October 1950 3KZ Melbourne

'Through The Years' (Youmans)  
15 July 1951 3KZ Melbourne

'I Love Thee' (Grieg)  
19 August 1951 3KZ Melbourne

Princess Ida *Princess Ida* (Gilbert and Sullivan)  
12 September 1951 Melbourne

'Vissi d'arte' (Puccini, *Tosca*)  
18 November 1951 3KZ Melbourne

'O patria mia' (Verdi, *Aida*)  
'A te grave cagion m'adduce' (Verdi, *Aida*)  
1951 Radio broadcast Melbourne

'Ah! perfido', Op. 65 (Beethoven)  
Miserere (Verdi, *Il Trovatore*)  
8 August 1952 Hawthorn Town Hall

*Elijah* (Mendelssohn)  
20 December 1952 Melbourne

*The Holy City* (Adams-Weatherly)  
21 December 1952 Melbourne

'We'll Gather Lilacs' (Novello)  
Radio broadcast c.1952

'Count Your Blessings' (Excell/ Oatman)  
Red Cross public service announcement March 1953

Air de Lia (Debussy, *L'enfant prodigue*)  
'Le temps des lilas' (Chausson)  
'Plaisir d'amour' (Trad.)  
14 June 1953 Elder Hall, University of Adelaide

'Mother, You Know The Story' (Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*)  
'Habanera' (Bizet, *Carmen*)  
'Oh My Beloved Daddy' (Puccini, *Gianni Schicchi*)  
'The Tryst' (Sibelius)  
'Songs My Mother Taught Me' (Dvorak)  
'I Know Where I'm Going' (Trad.)  
'I Will Give You The Keys Of Heaven' (Trad.)  
31 October 1953 Broken Hill

'Ritorna vincitor' (Verdi, *Aida*)  
'Ah! suicidio' (Ponchielli, *La Gioconda*)  
22 November 1953 Melbourne

Carols by Quilter, Bax and Warlock  
'Lullay dear Jesus' (Bax)  
22 December 1953 Adelaide

Songs by Elgar, Landon Ronald, Eric Coates and Linda Phillips  
18 February 1954 Melbourne

*King David* (Honegger)  
27 May 1954 Adelaide

*Requiem* (Verdi)  
7 September 1954 Melbourne

'Ciel! mio padre' (Verdi, *Aida*)  
Letter Scene (Tchaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*)  
11 September 1954 Melbourne

*Wesendonck Lieder* (Wagner)  
Airs by Lowes, Arne and Haydn  
*Gypsy Songs* (Dvorak)  
'Pace, pace mio Dio' (Verdi, *La forza del destino*)  
11 November 1954 Melbourne

'Mimi's farewell' (Puccini, *La bohème*)  
25 June 1954 5AN Adelaide

*Four Songs from the Japanese*, Op. 9 (Alexander Goehr)  
3 October 1960 London

'She walks in beauty like the night' (Isaac Nathan, orch. Mackerras)  
26 January 1961 BBC

*Three Fragments from Wozzeck* (Berg)

13 September 1961 Proms

Two arias from *The Duenna* (Roberto Gerhard)

16 September 1961 Proms

*The Love Duet of Romeo and Juliet* (Tchaikovsky)

22 August 1962 Edinburgh

L'annunzio (Refice, *Cecelia*)

26 February 1963 Liverpool

*Five Elegies for High Voice and Chamber Orchestra* (1962) (John McCabe)

18 June 1963 Liverpool

*Grisettes' Song* (Zozo) (Lehár, *The Merry Widow*)

Arias from *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini)

26 July 1963 London

'Ach, istomilas ja gorem' (Lisa's aria) (Tchaikovsky, *The Queen of Spades*)

3 August 1963 Proms

*Guntram* (Strauss) (excerpts)

22 May 1964 BBC Glasgow (recording)

Songs by Charles Ives

20 May 1967 BBC Radio 3 broadcast

*Shéhérazade* (Ravel)

26 May 1967 Melbourne

'Sola, perduta, abbandonata' (*Manon Lescaut*, Puccini)

'In quelle trine morbide' (*Manon Lescaut*, Puccini)

'To this we've come' (Menotti, *The Consul*)

23 January 1968 London

'Dio come ti amo' (Domenico Modugno)

'Quando m'en vo' (Puccini, *La Boheme*)

13 May 1968 BBC-1 TV

### 3. Marie Collier's recordings

Berlioz, Hector, *The Trojans*, radio broadcast, Rafael Kubelik (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 20 June 1957. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. CD: Testament SBK41443 (2009)

Britten, Benjamin, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, radio broadcast, Meredith Davies (conductor), Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, July 1962. (Private recording)

Excell, Eswin O., and Oatman, Johnson, Jr., 'Count Your Blessings', Shirley Radford, organist, Red Cross public service announcement, March 1953 (transcription 78 rpm).

Goossens, Eugene, *Don Juan de Mañara*, studio performance, Eugene Goossens (conductor), BBC 1959. Broadcast BBC Third Programme, 11 April 1959. (Private recording)

*Great Characters in Opera, 1: Scarpia in Tosca*, television broadcast, BBC1, 26 November 1965. Recorded 8-9 February 1965. (BBC Programme Number LMA7001E) DVD: *Tito Gobbi: 100th Anniversary Edition*, ICA Classics DVD ICAD5118 (extracts) (2013).

*Great Characters in Opera, 5: Il Tabarro*, television broadcast, BBC1, 18 February 1966. Recorded 1965. (BBC Programme Number LMA7011W).

Janáček, Leoš, *Jenůfa*, radio broadcast, Rafael Kubelik (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 24 February 1968. Broadcast BBC Radio 3. (Private recording)

Janáček, Leoš, *Katya Kabanova*, radio broadcast, Charles Mackerras (conductor), Sadler's Wells Opera, November 1959. Broadcast BBC Third Programme, 24 November 1959. (Private recording)

Janáček, Leoš, *The Makropulos Case*, radio broadcast, Charles Mackerras (conductor), Sadler's Wells Opera Company, 21 February 1964. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording)

Janáček, Leoš, *The Makropulos Case*, radio broadcast, Charles Mackerras (conductor), Sadler's Wells Opera, February 1971. Broadcast BBC Radio 3, 28 February 1971. (Private recording)

Janáček, Leoš, *Osud*, studio performance, Vilém Tauský (conductor), BBC Studios Camden, 16 October 1971. Broadcast BBC Radio 3, 22 January 1972. (Private recording)

Levy, Marvin David, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, radio broadcast, Zubin Mehta (conductor), Metropolitan Opera, 1 April 1967. (Private recording)

Mascagni, Pietro, 'Voi lo sapete' (*Cavalleria rusticana*), studio recording, pianist unknown, Milan, 24 June 1955 (unpublished 78 rpm).

Mascagni, Pietro, *Cavalleria rusticana*, in-house recording, Otto-Werner Mueller (conductor), Vancouver Opera, October 1966. (Private recording).

Mascagni, Pietro, *Cavalleria rusticana*, in-house recording, Kurt Adler (conductor), Metropolitan Opera, 17 April 1970. (Private recording).

Novello, Ivor, 'We'll Gather Lilacs' (*Perchance to Dream*), radio broadcast c. 1952. CD: *Stage Musicals: Strike Up The Band!*, Larrikin D24103 (2000).

Prokofiev, Sergei, *The Fiery Angel*, radio broadcast, Leon Lovett (conductor), New Opera Company, 31 July 1965. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording).

Prokofiev, Sergei, *The Fiery Angel*, radio broadcast, Bruno Bartoletti (conductor), Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, June 1966. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, 'Donde liete usci' (*La bohème*), studio recording, pianist unknown, Milan, 24 June 1955 (unpublished 78 rpm).

Puccini, Giacomo, *La bohème*, radio broadcast, Rafael Kubelik (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company. Broadcast BBC Home Service, 6 December 1956. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, *La fanciulla del West*, in-house recording, Francesco Molinari-Pradelli (conductor), San Francisco Opera Association, 21 September 1965. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Madame Butterfly* (excerpts), studio recording, Bryan Balkwill (conductor), HMV. Recorded December 1959, February 1960. CD: EMI Classics for Pleasure 585 009-2 (2003).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Manon Lescaut*, radio broadcast, Istvan Kertesz (conductor), Royal Opera, 19 December 1968. Broadcast BBC Radio 3. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Il Tabarro* (excerpts), in *Great Characters in Opera, 5: Il Tabarro*, television broadcast, BBC1, 18 February 1966. Recorded 1965. (BBC Programme Number LMA7011W). DVD: Hardy HCD4054.

Puccini, Giacomo, *Il Tabarro*, radio broadcast, John Pritchard (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 23 April 1965. Broadcast BBC Third Programme. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Tosca*, (excerpts), in *Great Characters in Opera, 1: Scarpia in Tosca*, television broadcast, BBC1, 26 November 1965. Recorded 8-9 February 1965. (BBC Programme Number LMA7001E) DVD: *Tito Gobbi: 100th Anniversary Edition*, ICA Classics DVD ICAD5118 (extracts) (2013).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Tosca*, in-house recording, Piero Bellugi (conductor), San Francisco Opera Association, 21 October 1965. (Private recording)

Puccini, Giacomo, *Tosca*, Edward Downes (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 10 May 1966. Broadcast BBC Third Network, 25 December 1966. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Tosca*, television broadcast, Carlo Felice Cillario (conductor), Australian Elizabethan Trust Opera, Adelaide, 18 March 1968. Broadcast Channel 9. (Private recording).

Puccini, Giacomo, *Turandot*, John Pritchard (conductor), Covent Garden Opera Company, 2 February 1960. (Private recording).

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