

Montserrat Caballé
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An Obituary and Appreciation by Ralph Moore

Celebrated Spanish operatic soprano Montserrat Caballé has died aged 85 in a Barcelona hospital, where she was admitted in September for an illness relating to her gall bladder.

The genuine opera-lover might be disheartened to read how virtually every obituary in the press and online begins its encomium for this beloved artist with the observation that she was “most famous for partnering Freddie Mercury in the duet *Barcelona*”. Originally released in 1987, following Mercury’s death in 1991 it became the signature song of the 1992 Summer Olympics in that city. Other serious opera singers like Pavarotti also courted wider popularity by singing crossover material, but this excursion into pop was rare for her; she was, of course, most renowned within the opera industry as an artist of immense gifts, with an extraordinary facility for learning roles quickly or even sight-reading without notice and a superb technique, especially with regard to floating high notes *pianissimo*.

That technique served her well throughout a long career spanning five decades, an achievement rendered all the more remarkable given the number of serious health problems she suffered and overcame. Her final years were somewhat clouded by a conviction for tax evasion carrying a fine and a suspended sentence, but her reputation as ‘La Superba’, one of the greatest lirico-spinto sopranos of the 20th century, will endure.

Her international breakthrough came in 1965 when she replaced Marilyn Horne in a semi-staged performance of Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* at New York’s Carnegie Hall, for which she earned a 25-minute standing ovation, but she had by that time already been singing in Swiss and German opera houses for almost a decade. That experience, singing mostly in German, formed the basis of her ability to undertake roles from Richard Strauss’ operas such as Arabella, the Marschallin and Salome – the latter in recording only, as she did not have the physical attributes to enact a teenager who performs an erotic dance – as well as the great bel canto roles by Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini. She also sang Mozart, Verdi, Ponchielli, Puccini, verismo, some French opera, zarzuela and Spanish songs, and even a little Wagner (for example, the First Flower Maiden in André Cluytens’ live *Parsifal* in 1960). That versatility and endurance resulted in her performing 90 roles, making at least fifty studio recordings and giving nearly 4000 stage performances.

These include some established classics, such as her Aida for Muti, her Liù for Mehta in a famous *Turandot*, an unusual and exquisite soprano Adalgisa alongside Sutherland’s Norma for Bonyngé, and her Violetta with Carlo Bergonzi. I vividly remember the first time I heard the ethereal, unearthly beauty of her high *pianissimo* notes in those Aida arias. She had power, too: a live recording of *Don Carlo* at the Met in 1972 finds her holding on to her final top B for twenty bars in true diva fashion – and thrilling it is, too. Despite the beauty of her sound and the solidity of her technique, she had flaws: the voice could sometimes turn matronly in tone, with too many glottal intrusions, and she never mastered a perfect trill; she was occasionally tempted by her versatility and facility to undertake roles unsuited to her vocal layout and temperament but the best of her work stands as a monument to a supremely gifted singer.

She married tenor Bernabé Martí in 1964; they had two children, and her daughter Montserrat, is also a professional soprano.

Ralph Moore