

# Dueling Divas

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*Editor's Note: Ray Bishop passed away on December 5, 2008 (see memorial on page 43). Ray served as an editor for Structural Integration for a number of years. More than that, he was a frequent contributor to the journal, offering up elegantly written and densely footnoted articles that linked Rolfering® to other worlds—particularly music. This is a previously unpublished contribution from a few years back. To paraphrase one of its lines, "May we thank you, Ray, for sharing your voice with us."*

The CD arrived last week. I was intensely curious and oddly apprehensive as I opened it. No plastic wrapping, a little crack in the lower left corner of the case. An inauspicious beginning. My vague unease stemming from tenuous expectations of a certain sonic event, tempered by the unreliability of musical memory. Quickly flipping the CD over, I check the date of issue, 1978. I then scan down to locate the desired track (#8). A tamely sexy cover, our chanteuse in black leather pants and cotton shirt, a bit overly made up, but more late 70s Glamour than Hustler, black spike-heel boots with hot-pink-colored toes, the same color scrolling up the sides. Also, a deliciously libidinous title, *Totally Hot*.

The song starts out conventionally enough. A funky beat, moderate tempo, a rather mediocre lyric with predictable harmonies and form, but soon things get a bit more interesting. Our heroine, known for her sweetly melodious ballades ("Have You Never Been Mellow?" anyone), ventures into new territory, perhaps wanting to compete with booming divas like Streisand, *Before Her Parade Passes By*. Odd little strains begin creeping in, painful and forced. Repeated unpleasant cracks across the break crop up at predictable places, creating a distressing cumulative effect. But, the *Best Is Yet to Come*, as Sinatra once predicted. During the final instrumental refrain, the song's title reiterates as a final horrendous squeak (although it is only a b'), a nasal yawp so far beyond her clearly proscribed range that it elicits peals of laughter when its intent was more likely some Melba Moore qua Minnie Ripertonesque stratospheric coloration, or perhaps an effort to evoke a funky meeting of Mado Robin and Sugar Pie Desanto down *In the Basement* (this

paragraph's rapid-fire string of musical references is explained in the notes).<sup>1</sup>

What makes this tune's nimiety so odd is its general absence in the rest of the album, which contains more familiar and restrained numbers such as "A Little More Love" and a pleasantly edgy version of the oft-recorded "Deeper Than the Night." The only exception are the annoying reiterated screeches that litter the opening cut, the unusually long and rather raucous "Please Don't Keep Me Waiting," and waiting for a reappearance of such bizarre whelping is something, I assure you, you will not be doing after this grating aural assault.

Interestingly, even in her later hit "Physical" and the more generous contours of "Xanadu," we are spared these oddly intercalated vocal eccentricities. This fact, along with her enduring popularity on an international scale, raise some rather interesting questions that might have broader implications.

The most natural question is "Why?" Let's, however, reframe that inquiry, shifting from the world of music to one with which most are more familiar. Why, after Rolfering successfully for several years and having achieved a certain level of success, might a practitioner suddenly pursue (studies in) other styles or technical approaches? One answer might be a growing dissatisfaction with the routine of the Ten Series, as rewarding as it might be; a certain restlessness of spirit, a craving for the novel in the hope that some new *artistic* venture might offer a key to working with certain structural or mechanical issues with which she has had limited success.

Exploring new models and techniques is usually considered laudable. Varying our lens and shaking up our paradigm are important aspects of the growth progress, but the search for novelty without a clear understanding of both our gifts and limitations may result in the kind of dissonance that pollutes the recordings of so many misguided and self-deluded pop stars. When we look for explanations of this disquiet, we frequently seek outside justifications. We might for instance link our restiveness with that found in minds of exceptional *creatives* in order to rationalize our meanderings. We might cite the example of some folk hero or intuitive genius as the impetus for change without adequately reflecting on our decision.

For instance, those of us familiar with Einstein's approach to developing a unified field theory might take solace in his rather cavalier approach to the problem. As described by those who assisted him, Einstein would work for up to two years on a single solution, daily offering new mathematical computations for them to work out. One day he would quite unexpectedly walk in and inform them that his theory was fatally flawed and would have to be abandoned. With no remorse, he would then offer a totally new approach to the problem on which he would focus without interruption until he found that model's fatal flaw. And so it went for several decades, up until the time of his death. The fact that he never solved this problem and that he became increasingly isolated from cutting edge physics adds to the Romantic appeal of this *beautiful mind*. However, the fact that we are not privy to his thought process mitigates the aptness of such a poorly conceived parallel to our own experience.<sup>2</sup>

We might also look at the above cautionary vocal tale through a somewhat different *pince-nez*. This parabolation involves less the need for novelty than how we cope with diurnal issues in our offices, both in terms of how we work and what we create. Such choices have many motivations both intellectual and emotional and warrant thoughtful scrutiny. One interesting example is how we might variously execute a given hour of the Ten Series, one that we understand quite well, whether our filters be linear and left-brain or organic and right-brain. In each moment of this session we have a limitless number of choices even if we restrict our focus to

predetermined geography, regardless of whether our model is a line, a sequence of manipulations, a meridian, or one that addresses energetic or emotional blocks. Exploring these multitudinous options may be less interesting than learning some new repertoire, but repeated practice of the familiar may well provide an entrée to new worlds of understanding for the novice as well as the seasoned performer (in both musical and structural integration realms).

Here are just a few possible *variations* on a familiar theme. We might choose to literally recreate said hour exactly like our favorite instructor, forgetting that what we witnessed was merely one way the instructor herself might do the hour and that usually said demo is a streamlined simplification deliberately fashioned for its didactic value. This approach of course may yield rather nice results, but does not get us very far unless we use this *echoing of the familiar* to more profoundly grasp the nuances of a session we have previously observed. Another option is formulating a more intuitive approach. One manner of doing this might be to limit our technical choices to a classical manipulative protocol while seeking to see the body in a more organic or non-familiar way. Perhaps some alternate hierarchical paradigm or some intuitive seeing that suggests a resequencing or reprioritizing of how we creatively adjust the model to *this* body at *this* moment in time, whether we use a well-reasoned formulation or one that occurs to us spontaneously in the moment. Here we might push the envelope, introducing novel riffs and *fiorature* like an exceptional improviser who is ever in touch with the tradition on which he elaborates (think J.S. Bach improvising on hymns in Cöthen or Coltrane's rapid-fire riffs on some witty Cole Porter standard). Of course, like our daring diva, we run the risk of stress and strain not only on our tactile apparatus but, more particularly, on those recipients of our "inspired extemporations." We also hazard losing our way as we chase the fascial *strains*, rather like a novel improviser whose exuberant choruses so far diverge from the tune's *changes* (underlying harmonic progression) that what begins as joyful experimentation ends in some adventitious cacophony. Any lack of security with the model will certainly account for these fascial meanderings through structural labyrinths without Ariadne's thread to guide us home.

There are, however, other less tangible ways in which we can get lost even when seemingly operating safely within the Series. These of course proliferate in the land of the emotional and psychological. An obvious but not-so-quick solution to this problem is a better understanding of the affective landscape and the complexities of therapist-client interactions, a terrain so internecine that even the best of therapists err here, occasionally with extremely adverse consequences. Consider the slippery slopes of posing before and after each session, or for those pre- and post-session photos. The possible emotional ramifications of simply standing up in front of another in your underwear are so numerous that we cannot even begin to consider them here (see the quote in the notes).<sup>3</sup>

To aid me in improving my understanding, I have found it extremely helpful to obtain further guidance and education in the therapeutic realm. I now see that this knowledge has proved as critical to my work as proper breathing and support techniques are to structural integrators, pop divas and neophyte improvisers (and probably even more so).

Let's return to the musical realm. To extend our metaphor a bit, we might consider any of a number of other divas or *divos*<sup>4</sup> known for vocal excesses, many of which might be explained as much by the aesthetic of their time as any deliberate testing of their vocal limits or some spontaneously inspired effluence. Here we can offer reasons why, but such speculations about artists long dead and aesthetics of which we have a very incomplete understanding would seem to be of limited value. Perhaps a singer closer to our time, Maria Callas (1923-1977), will provide a more fruitful opportunity for posthumous speculation.

Few defunct divas still generate as much partisanship and controversy as Callas. Opera fanatics the world over worship and vilify her, some auditors expressing both sentiments when describing different performances. Here are some wonderful negative criticisms of her vocal apparatus. We find humorous descriptions of her middle register as sounding "like singing through a bottle," while her rather unpleasant upper register's wobble or "flap" received excoriating disdain. The critic John Ardoin, for example, described an offending pitch during a 1955 Aida performance as a "flapping high C (c'")

through which the entire Egyptian army could have marched.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet those who adore her “worship Callas because she makes mistakes and because she valued expressivity over loveliness.” Many relate to her because such “lapses made her a sympathetic character,” and while the “steel (steely quality of her voice) and the wobble announced a predicament; we loved the mistakes because they seemed autobiographical, because without mediation and guile they revealed a naked heart.”<sup>6</sup> The opera fanatic quoted above ends this section of his discussion as follows: “We love her for intruding, via magisterial discipline, such a range of mannerisms—a control of how a phrase might always, every moment, *mean* something.”<sup>7</sup>

As you read the excesses of language above, you might find yourself reacting negatively not only to its content but even more so to the transparent device of juxtaposing a pop diva with one of the greatest vocal artists of the twentieth century. Collocating different aesthetics, like comparing the brilliantly witty and delightfully obscene cartoons of R. Crumb with John Singer Sargent’s sublime portraiture, can often result in snobbish and divisive language. But I assure you, such is not the intent here. How slyly I stack the deck to illustrate a point, you might think. Yet, this pairing was chosen as much for its potentially humorous implications as its utility for illustrating certain ironic notions, not the least of which was poking fun at those who might react with ire to my highly contrived analogy.

Let me admit, I love Callas warts and all. Let me also confess that I love her excesses, her simultaneous vulnerability and rigorous discipline, the dizzying succession of nuance, drama, pathos, garishness, strain and sublime refinement that characterized her singing throughout her career. What makes her voice even more unfathomable is that not only can we find all these elements in any performance, they may even commingle uncomfortably in a single aria. This complexity is perhaps the source of the critics’ discomfort, this uneasy cohabitation of controlled refinement and strain.

What an interesting image. Its analogies for Roling® are delightfully fortuitous. Let me also share that the vulnerability and the risk-taking that I adore in Callas I also

prize in my work and that of so many fellow practitioners who expose the wounds of others through connecting more fully to their own. Such vulnerability is highly risky but yields, I believe, the greatest creative and artistic rewards.

Similarly, our work is replete with analogous conflicts of force and nuance, of refined order and simultaneous compensatory strain. Just as the dynamic bodies with which we interact manifest a complex relationship of compromise, imbalance and equipoise, unresolved dissonances of adaptability and translation, so our discipline wrestles with these conflicts, seeking to impose control while allowing order to simultaneously manifest. Yet this very notion of an imposition of will, a key to the Callas aesthetic, is a difficult notion for most of us to intone.

Although I doubt Callas ever felt uneasy with her fame or her cult following, she certainly heard the imperfections in her voice. Yet, for her the voice was an instrument to be controlled and disciplined. Many of us also sense the flaws in our performance, usually going further by questioning the beauty of its execution. We also struggle with any imposition of will particularly when our audience is not as appreciative of our gifts as we might expect them to be. We therefore constantly dance with the notions of creating and allowing, with directing and responding, with discipline and freedom; musical as well as somatic metaphors all, evoking the Callas aesthetic at every turn.

We may wish to further discipline our voice but we more often question whether this subjugation is a matter of *the will to power*<sup>8</sup> or a will to surrender. We might also ask whether or not ego-driven recastings of our understanding and the co-opting of mediating techniques will actually elevate our performance while having a simultaneously palliative effect on our intimate audience. Such are important questions. Ones that many may not choose to ask, but ones that, once posed, should serve to encourage further study and send us back to our practice rooms again and again.

The obvious implication is that the Callas example raises many more interesting questions than the still-popular Olivia Newton-John, because Callas endures as a more complex and powerful presence on every level and because her gifts and defects

continue to generate such remarkable partisanship and interest. She is cult and cult endlessly fascinates, particularly when conjoined with genius and vulnerability. This “sacred monster,”<sup>9</sup> as she has been called, would have been a fascinating creator in our realm, and had she done bodywork, would have generated loyal fans and staunch critics.

Sounds a bit like Ida Rolf and her legacy doesn’t it? While we should exercise some restraint in overelaborating the analogy, there are some interesting parallels. Both were powerful artists, both devoted their lives to perfecting their technique, and both proved seminal figures who reshaped their respective disciplines, and whose lives and careers, though on the surface far apart, offer an interesting if tangential germ for further cross-pollinations.

Our Callas and Newton-John examples can also serve as cautionary tales, ones that warn of the risks of pushing beyond our limits, the risks of failed perfectionism, the price we pay for driving ourselves and others beyond our and their limits, the rewards and penalties of a single-minded pursuit of any creative and artistic goal. While not every practitioner will face these issues on such epic scales, most of us who devote our lives to this discipline soon become aware of the price we pay for such focus and readily surrender to all its inevitabilities.

Along similar lines, when my teacher Jan Sultan said that doing this work gradually changes you, moving you further inward, making you more introspective, I instantly understood at a deeper level why Roling resonated so poignantly with me. It was precisely this introspection and private obsessing that had dominated so much of my life, this mode of consciousness having shaped me long before I became a Roling practitioner.

The world of music, seemingly more externalized, is more accurately one of introspection and isolated discipline as well, one where years of repetition and sacrifice shape the creative act of performance. One where the artist returns repeatedly to seminal compositions and thereby gleans new insights and creative possibilities in the familiar. In both worlds we surrender ourselves to the technical: to the scales, interval drills and endless études, which are analogous to the memorizations of anatomy, techniques, cueings and the

numerous specifics of each hour. At its most fundamental level, this is the bedrock of the creative process.

We can also relanguage this construct in a more elevated manner, evoking high art as all Rolwing® practitioners should. In both worlds, the technical informs the artistic and, on certain occasions, this act of creation manifests spontaneously, a transcendent evocation of the ecstatic, an intuitive entrainment between performers, between soloist and orchestra, between practitioner and client. Such was the goal of Callas' art and that of many others whom we do not here credit for their rigor and will.

To make a final parallel, Callas and Newton-John would have been very different practitioners but each would have offered interestingly divergent approaches to our discipline, just as their contrasting styles, vocal apparatus and musical journeys serve as oddly contiguous models for the artist's journey. A curious metaphor, but one that speaks to the more subtle aspects of our work, the dimensions of the creative and individual, the subjective and the artistic. For this alone may we thank them for sharing their voices with us.

## NOTES

1. This string of vocal puns is perhaps too *Fast and Furious*, so here is a bit more information. First, most folks over forty will remember Olivia Newton-John's popular hit, "Have You Never Been Mellow." Barbra Streisand's spectacular rendition of "Before the Parade Passes By" from *Hello Dolly* is one of the most gloriously moving moments in musical filmmaking. Most should recall Frank Sinatra's beautifully restrained and ultra-cool rendition of the pop standard, "The Best is Yet to Come." If not, put it on your short list. Melba Moore was a popular R&B singer of the 1960s and 1970s, known for her dramatic sustained high notes, such as in her 1976 live performance of "Lean on Me." Minnie Riperton (1947-1979) was a remarkable, but short-lived, 1970s pop star whose 1974 top-40 hit, "Loving You," contains an incredibly pure high f'. Mado Robin, a minor and rather dull French coloratura of the 1950s and 1960s, is in *The Guinness Book of Records* for singing the highest recorded pitch, a b-flat"—a minor 7th above high c", although it may be argued that this dubious distinction more properly goes the freakishly unpleasant

voice of Ellen Beach Yaw, who recorded in the 1910s, and whose suspect high e-flat"" is as unsatisfying a peep (masking as a pitch) as I have ever heard. Sugar Pie DeSanto was a wonderful R&B singer of the 1960s who recorded a funky duet called "In the Basement" with the more well-known and spectacularly visceral Etta James of "Tell Mama" fame. Note: According to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Second enlarged ed., 6th Printing (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1973), the singer Lucrezia Agujari 1743-1784, is said to have had a c'", p. 920. See also the *naming of pitches* discussion which explains the octave designations used here, pp. 678-79.

2. An interesting account of Einstein's creative process is discussed in Paul Halpern's wonderful *The Great Beyond: Higher Dimensions, Parallel Universes, and the Extraordinary Search for a Theory of Everything* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004), pp. 169-170. An additional bit of serendipity is that Olivia Newton-John is the granddaughter of theoretical physicist Max Born, a contemporary of Einstein, who is credited with coining the phrase *quantum mechanics*. For more on this, see: Lederman, Leon M. & Hill, Christopher T., *Symmetry and the Beautiful Universe* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), pp. 219 and 346 (chapter 10, fn. 10).

3. During our mentoring, Les Kertay shared a remark with me that went something like this: 'Ray, the moment you forget how difficult it is to stand up in front of another human being in your underwear is the moment it can become a problem.' Thanks for that gem Les, among many. Any distortions of the pithy original are solely my responsibility.

4. Here the musical pun is that there is really no male equivalent for diva, so I fabricated one, and the fact that this term is a homonym for a wacky and short-lived 1980s New Wave band, *Devo*

("Whip It!") was hardly fortuitous. Another inane question that this silly pun raises is whether we should call Farinelli, the most famous Italian castrato of the Baroque Era, a diva, or divo?

5. Koestenbaum, Wayne, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 137. By this point the observant reader with nothing more important to do might have noticed the similarity of dates, recording dates of 1976, 1977 and 1978, Callas' death 1977, Rolf's and Riperton's deaths, 1979. This is either a wonderful coincidence or I am stuck in a late 1970s time warp. I fear it is the latter.

6. Koestenbaum, *ibid.*, p. 137.

7. Koestenbaum, *ibid.*, p. 142.

8. A reference to a volume of Nietzsche's collected writings published posthumously under that title. Nietzsche was a tragic individual who attempted to transcend his many physical limitations through his brilliant and inspired writings, hence, an apt choice for our discussion.

9. A reference to a coffee-table biography of Callas: Galatopoulos, Stelios, *Maria Callas: Sacred Monster* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).