

emerged via social media outlets such as Facebook and the comment sections of newspaper websites. For days following the announcement, they filled up with Caballé recollections from people across the globe, these mostly taking the form of reminiscences of a peculiarly emotional and (in some cases) detailed kind—memories of first encounters with the voice and the artistry, of particular performances and recordings, of specific moments of impact, each one gratefully recalled and profoundly cherished. An obvious—though on its own, incomplete—explanation of these outpourings was the soprano’s late-blossoming popularity prompted by the duet with Freddie Mercury celebrating her native city of Barcelona as 1992 Olympic Games host. As filmed this collaboration, unprecedented and in the event wholly successful, achieved a secondary aim of exhibiting the Caballé voice and persona to a much wider and more ‘mixed’ audience than was previously the case.

In similar fashion, her passing and the emotions it stirred in me immediately revived my own earliest Caballé memories. I first encountered her live in July 1971, in a London Festival Hall concert performance of *Maria Stuarda*, and the following February at La Fenice, in three performances of *Roberto Devereux*. Both sets of appearances, but above all the *Devereux*, brought me into contact with a lyric-soprano instrument of the most rapturous beauty, fullness of ‘body’, smoothly textured emission and freedom of movement, its apparently limitless ease founded on breath control of almost superhuman security.

I’d already become aware of this Caballé via recordings. In response to her fabled New York first appearance—on 20 April 1965, to be precise, replacing the pregnant Marilyn Horne in an American Opera Society concert performance of *Lucrezia Borgia*—and the waves of excitement this event stirred, RCA launched a splendid series

■ As *Elisabetta* in ‘*Roberto Devereux*’ at *La Fenice*



of Caballé LPs, and I acquired them one after the other: *Presenting Montserrat Caballé*; the rarity series of Rossini and Donizetti arias in successive publications (the third, Verdi, was yet to come); the ‘Great Operatic Duets’ with Shirley Verrett. But the actual Caballé sound ‘in the flesh’, as floated across the concert hall and then the opera-house auditorium, surpassed my every recording-generated impression: it was unlike anything I’d ever witnessed live previously, and it was transporting.

Such aural memories remain intensely vivid all these years later: they’re with me as I write. But they’re not unique, of course: sensations of an almost Elysian bliss and radiance that Caballé released in her audiences in that first flourish of international celebrity were a commonly noted phenomenon, prompting—among other things—a flood of aptly expressive epithets in critical writing. In the words of Margalit Fox (in her *New York Times*