



■ Caballé as Norma at Covent Garden in 1978, with Grace Bumbry as Adalgisa

donnas'. For me, at least, this holds only partly true: the full portrait of the Caballé performing persona comes across as much more complex. Yes, she was ample of form and, especially in later years, limited in movement. Yes, her cancellations were disappointing—almost all, she would later argue, caused by a succession of formidable health problems. Her apparent disdain for the niceties of production regularly aroused comment. (For instance, in the 1972 revival of the all-black-and-white Visconti production of *La traviata* that occasioned her Covent Garden debut, she insisted on wearing her own colourful 'lucky' costumes. In later-era performances alongside Pavarotti, a frequent tenor co-star, the unwillingness both displayed about ever venturing up stage ramps or stairs provided a familiar item of backstage gossip.)

The crucial 'old-fashioned' point about Caballé as operatic soprano was the primacy of response she demanded for her singing. In later years, especially when taking part in 'routine' revivals rather than in works specially mounted for her, she could fail to live up to expectation, and more than once did. But in the right role and performing circumstances the impression she achieved of music, role and interpreter all seamlessly unified could become a nobly elevated one. In my contribution to OPERA's first 'In Character' supplement (pp. 26-7) dealing with that 1972 *Roberto Devereux* Elisabetta in Venice, I attempted to argue the point as follows: 'She may not have been a "specific" singing-actor, in the Callas, Mödl, Barstow, Stratas or Silja line, but in this opera she commanded a magnificently authoritative stage presence, in which qualities of stillness, economy of gesture, concentration-in-repose all played their part in amplifying the serene majesty of her singing.'

What was not 'old-fashioned' about Montserrat Caballé was her personal unstuffiness. The rapport established with Freddie Mercury was un-prima-donna-like. (Peter