

The newest #MeToo atrocity: Opera singer Plácido Domingo comes under attack

By David Walsh
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On August 13, the Associated Press posted an article by Jocelyn Gecker alleging that Spanish opera singer Plácido Domingo had sexually harassed a number of women over a period of several decades. Eight female singers and one dancer have accused Domingo of making unwanted advances, some of the incidents occurring 30 years ago.

Domingo is one of the most remarkable figures in opera history. Since his debut in Mexico City in 1959, he has sung an almost unthinkable 150 roles (by comparison, Enrico Caruso sang 60 and Maria Callas approximately 50).

In 2018, when praising Domingo was still permitted, the *New York Times* cited the comment of Joseph Volpe, the former general manager of the Metropolitan Opera: “If you look at the history of singers in opera, he stands by himself... If there was ever a giant in any industry, it’s Plácido Domingo. He’s unmatched.” The *Times* went on, “Now 77, well past the age at which most star singers retire, Mr. Domingo has performed nearly 4,000 times in a six-decade career, recorded more than 100 albums, and become a household name.”

Gecker’s AP article is an effort to smear and damage Domingo’s career and standing. In the #MeToo campaign’s already time-honored, McCarthyite manner, every woman cited but one makes anonymous claims. Furthermore, “None of the women,” Gecker admits, “could offer documentation, such as phone messages.”

Patricia Wulf, the only one of the accusers to give her name, acknowledges—in a separate interview with NPR—that Domingo never touched her inappropriately or harmed her singing career in any way. He pursued her, and she rebuffed him. It’s hard to know what punishment would be too severe for such conduct!

There is growing revulsion at or distrust of the destructive, antidemocratic methods of the #MeToo witch hunt. The AP story about Domingo seems a somewhat belated and tired, though vicious, effort to pump air into an increasingly deflated balloon.

Opera houses in the US responded to Gecker’s article with the spinelessness that one associates with such institutions. The Philadelphia Orchestra rescinded its invitation to Domingo to appear at its opening night gala concert September 18. The orchestra piously explained that it was “committed to providing a safe, supporting, respectful and appropriate environment.”

Announcing the cancellation of an October 6 concert featuring Domingo, the San Francisco Opera explained that the decision “to cancel the concert was made after recent news reports of multiple allegations of sexual harassment.” It continued: “Though the alleged incidents reported did not take place at San Francisco Opera, the Company is unable to present the artist on the War Memorial Opera House stage.

“San Francisco Opera is committed to its strong anti-sexual harassment policy and requires all Company members to adhere to the highest standards of professional conduct. San Francisco Opera places a great priority on creating a safe and secure environment where everyone can focus on their work and art, and in which colleagues are treated with

respect, dignity and collegiality.”

Such people simply have no shame. To point out or repeat the obvious: the opera company has blackballed the 78-year-old Domingo, the most distinguished opera singer of the past half-century, on the basis of a single AP story filled with vague and impossible to corroborate charges.

The Los Angeles Opera, where Domingo has been general director since 2003, in its statement announced that it would “engage outside counsel to investigate the concerning allegations about Plácido Domingo.” The statement continued: “Plácido Domingo has been a dynamic creative force in the life of LA Opera and the artistic culture of Los Angeles for more than three decades. Nevertheless, we are committed to doing everything we can to foster a professional and collaborative environment where all our employees and artists feel equally comfortable, valued and respected.”

The Metropolitan Opera in New York, on whose stage Domingo has appeared *every season* since 1968-69, was awaiting the results of the LA Opera inquiry before making any “‘final decisions’ about Domingo’s future at the Met, where he is scheduled to appear next month,” according to Gecker.

European singers and opera companies responded differently. Spanish soprano Davinia Rodríguez, according to the Europa Press news agency, said she “never felt the least indication of what they [the women in the AP story] accuse the maestro of.” She added that Domingo had always shown her and other performers and theater workers “the greatest respect, with the humility and generosity that so characterizes him.”

Fellow Spanish soprano Pilar Jurado remarked that Domingo had always behaved “as a perfect gentleman” with her. A third Spanish soprano, Ainhoa Arteta, asked pointedly, “What’s wrong with the fact that a man likes women?” Arteta also told the Spanish daily *El País*, “I know he is not a harasser; I’d put my hand in the fire on it.”

None of the European opera companies announced cancellations of events involving the singer. This may not be entirely high-minded, since considerable financial interests are involved. However, Helga Rabl-Stadler, president of the Salzburg Festival in Austria, issued an honorable statement in Domingo’s defense. She wrote, “I have known Plácido Domingo for more than 25 years. In addition to his artistic competence, I was impressed from the very beginning by his appreciative treatment of all Festival employees. He knows every name, from the concierge to the secretary; he never fails to thank anyone performing even the smallest service for him. Had the accusations against him been voiced inside the Festspielhaus in Salzburg, I am sure I would have heard of it.”

Rabl-Stadler continued: “Furthermore, as a jurist by training, my assumption is ‘in dubio pro reo’ [when in doubt, for the accused]. I would find it factually wrong and morally irresponsible to make irreversible judgments at this point, and to base decisions on such judgments. Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser, Executive Director Lukas Crepaz and I all agree that Plácido Domingo should perform in [Giuseppe Verdi’s] *Luisa Miller* at the 2019 Festival as planned.”

The Hamburg opera house indicated that Domingo's November 27 appearance remained unaffected. "As a public institution we neither tolerate nor trivialize sexual assaults, but we are also bound by the principles of the rule of law in our actions. Valid contracts with the concert promoter exist for the appearance of Plácido Domingo," the Hamburg opera commented in a statement. "Subject to further developments, the concert will therefore take place as planned."

The respect shown by the Salzburg Festival and the Hamburg opera for the principle that the accused is innocent until proven guilty is as commendable as the San Francisco and Philadelphia operas' attitude is deplorable but, one must ask in this case, "innocent" or "guilty" of precisely what?

Gecker begins her dishonest article in this manner: "For decades, Plácido Domingo, one of the most celebrated and powerful men in opera, has tried to pressure women into sexual relationships by dangling jobs and then sometimes punishing the women professionally when they refused his advances, numerous accusers told The Associated Press." The claim that Domingo "sometimes" punished the women "professionally" is perhaps the most serious allegation here.

Gecker later asserts, "Seven of Domingo's nine accusers told the AP they feel their careers were adversely impacted after rejecting his advances, with some saying that roles he promised never materialized and several noting that while they went on to work with other companies, they were never hired to work with him again."

Even a smear should make some sense. Gecker actually recounts only seven, not nine individual stories, of which "roles he promised [that] never materialized" show up in four—or perhaps five (if "I can connect you with people" constitutes such a promise).

This, of course, takes for granted that the various anonymous accusers are telling the truth.

In her interview with NPR, Patricia Wulf, when asked if she had suffered "any professional consequences by rebuffing him [Domingo] over and over again," responded, "No, I didn't. I didn't suffer anything careerwise. In fact, it was interesting: He and the company kept hiring me. And that was great." And this is the only individual who was prepared to speak on the record.

This is Gecker's list of the other allegations: "One accuser said Domingo stuck his hand down her skirt and three others said he forced wet kisses on their lips—in a dressing room, a hotel room and at a lunch meeting." There is such a thing as a slap in the face.

Gecker and the various accusers argue that the women were often fearful of rejecting Domingo's advances more forcefully because of their relative lack of power given his enormous stature in the opera world. If, in fact, the singer propositioned the women from that sort of position, it is not to his credit. Egotism and self-centeredness are not unknown in that field.

Responding to the AP story, Domingo observed in a statement that the allegations "from these unnamed individuals dating back as many as 30 years are deeply troubling, and as presented, inaccurate." He suggested it was painful to hear that he had upset anyone "or made them feel uncomfortable—no matter how long ago and despite my best intentions."

The singer went on, "I believed that all of my interactions and relationships were always welcomed and consensual. People who know me or who have worked with me know that I am not someone who would intentionally harm, offend, or embarrass anyone. However, I recognize that the rules and standards by which we are—and should be—measured against today are very different than they were in the past. I am blessed and privileged to have had a more than 50-year career in opera and will hold myself to the highest standards."

Gecker's view of sexual relationships smacks of the semi-Victorian, semi-Puritanical strain that has overwhelmed portions of the American upper-middle class, at least in their public pronouncements: men are

predators, women are innocent flowers who need some sort of protection against such beasts.

According to another AP story, cultural journalist Leonetta Bentivoglio, writing in the Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica*, observed that the fact that Domingo "was a Don Juan was something everyone knew, and in the promiscuous theater world he is not alone." She went on: "We must add that his charm has always attracted a crowd of women, and often it was he who had to defend himself."

The AP notes that Bentivoglio recalled an incident "at a Paris hotel during Domingo's 'Three Tenors' heyday with Luciano Pavarotti and José Carreras, when he asked journalists to pretend to accompany him in the elevator 'to escape to his room without being followed by some beautiful young women,' who were in pursuit. 'These are difficult stories to tell in the slippery era of #MeToo,'" Bentivoglio added.

Gecker and the Associated Press went to considerable time and effort to produce their shabby piece. They interviewed dozens of people in various parts of the US to come up with one alleged act of inappropriate touching, three "forced wet kisses" and numerous unwanted propositions from primarily unnamed sources. Why?

Does Gecker, who also played a role in the effort to destroy 81-year-old conductor Charles Dutoit's reputation in 2017, want to make a name for herself in the manner of Ronan Farrow of the *New Yorker* or Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey of the *New York Times* with their claims against Harvey Weinstein?

Perhaps, but larger issues are involved.

The #MeToo campaign expresses the interests of upper-middle-class layers fighting for advancement and privileges in a cutthroat atmosphere on university campuses, in the media and elsewhere. Artists such as Domingo, Dutoit, James Levine and others are merely collateral damage in this regard. Their heads must roll as part of the process of making room for "fresh blood."

At the same time, the sexual witch hunt serves the purpose of diverting attention from the broader, ever more threatening social and political situation. Desperate to prevent the emergence of a left-wing, progressive opposition to the Trump administration's fascist attacks on immigrants, its warmongering and its policies of "everything for the rich," the Democratic Party and its orbit have latched onto the anti-Russian hysteria and the #MeToo drive as means of distracting and energizing affluent petty-bourgeois layers.

However, such efforts have their limits. It is possible that the Domingo smear campaign may backfire, or simply fall flat. In its own fashion, such an outcome would be a sign of political maturation and the growing popular radicalization.

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