



# Words Set to Music

## The Inspired Collaboration of Vincenzo Bellini and Felice Romano

“Bellini is one of my predilections because his music is strongly felt and intimately bound up with the words.”

Richard Wagner

“[Bellini is] rich in feeling and in a melancholy entirely his own. Even in his less known operas... there are long, long, long melodies such as no one wrote before him. And how much truth and power of declamation there is...”

-Giuseppi Verdi

“A man who does not love Vincenzo Bellini does not love Music.”

-Arrigo Boito

“Carve in your head in adamantine letters: *the music drama must draw tears, inspire terror, make people die, through singing.*”

-Vincenzo Bellini



Vincenzo Bellini. After an oil painting by Natale Schiavoni, 1830. Courtesy of the Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester.

If any Italian opera can be called "sublime," that opera is *Norma*. It unites Classical nobility and restraint with the urgent passions of Romanticism. Dramatic vehemence is expressed in gorgeous bel canto singing. Above all this is an opera where music is inextricably bound to words.

*Norma* was the creation of two men working together: the young composer Vincenzo Bellini and his librettist Felice Romani. Romani was a seasoned man of the theatre, the finest poet of his day, an indefatigable writer whose talents were much in demand. In the course of a year he would produce five to seven libretti, frequently missing deadlines. *Norma* was his 65th libretto, and he lavished on it all his art, even delivering it on time.

Romani was the official librettist at La Scala, Milan's premier opera house, when he met the young and ambitious Vincenzo Bellini, newly arrived from Naples in April of 1827. Bellini had

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already composed two operas. *Adelson e Salvini* was his graduation piece after six years of study at the Naples Conservatory, and *Bianca e Fernando* debuted successfully at San Carlo in 1826.

There was an immediate rapport between the two men. Friendship and mutual respect led them to collaborate on seven operas between 1827 and 1833. Romani later wrote that "[From the first] we understood each other, and united we struggled against the vicious conventions of the musical theater, girding ourselves to eradicate them little by little by dint of courage and loving perseverance." This bond would be tested as they began working together.

Felice Romani devoted far more time to Bellini's operas than he did to the works for any other composer. The maestro demanded revision after revision, and the exasperated Romani obliged him. Autograph texts for successive drafts of *Norma* contain numerous corrections and instructions in Bellini's hand. Some changes were major, like Bellini's insistence that a verse be rewritten with a different number of syllables per line so that it followed the rhythm and cadence he intended, or when he struck out whole arias and ensembles. Other alterations were seemingly minor: in one such instance Bellini changed a single word from the conditional to the present tense to heighten the emotion. Romani also asserted himself, as when he adamantly refused Bellini's demand that "Casta Diva" and *Norma*'s ensuing *caballeta* be followed with a prayer by Adalgisa. He rightly judged that two consecutive prayers would not work dramatically.

While Bellini was indeed inspired by Romani's verse, *Norma* was not created solely from the new libretto. At that time it was customary for composers, working under stringent deadlines, to repurpose their own music. Bellini was no exception. He too revisited his earlier work and tortured the words to fit existing melodies.

The notion that Felice Romani and Vincenzo Bellini labored side by side in perfect harmony is one of the myths that collected around Bellini after his death. Tensions between the perfectionist maestro and the self-important and contentious poet eventually came to a head after the fiasco of *Beatrice di Tenda* in 1833. Their nasty dispute was carried out publically in the newspapers, with escalating recriminations, character slurs and self-justifications. They never worked together again, though both men later regretted it. There was a rapprochement and plans for future collaborations after the desperate composer realized that he needed Romani's plots and words to create the kind of musical dramas he envisioned. But it never happened: Bellini died in Paris on September 23, 1835 at age 33. For the rest of his long life Romani would mourn this tragic loss.

- Rachel Stuhlman for the Opera Guild of Rochester