

BELLINI and BEL CANTO
by
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Vincenzo Bellini was born in Catania, Sicily, in 1801 and died in Paris 1835. He was 5 years old when he mastered the piano and 6 when he wrote his first composition "Gallus cantavit". He then continued to write several pieces of sacred music, which were heard often in local churches.

He studied at the Conservatory in Naples where his first opera semiseria "Adelson and Salvini" was performed in 1825.

From the success of this work he was commissioned in 1826 to write “Bianca e Gernando”, another success which brought him to La Scala in Milano. Here his third opera *‘Il Pirata’* in 1827 led the foundation of his career. In fact it was this opera that gave him such a great reputation that it initiated the collaboration with the librettist Felice Romani, the best versifier of the time. Romani wrote the librettos for “La Straniera”, “Zaira”, “I Capuleti e i Montecchi”,

“La Sonnambula”, “Norma”, and “Beatrice di Tenda”. No other Italian opera composer of the time showed such attachment to a single librettist; for the sonority and elegance of Romani’s verses gave Bellini what he needed “to introduce a new genre and a music which should express the text as closely as possible, making of song and drama but a single thing”. Bellini needed a good libretto and good verses to fire his imagination.

In a letter to a friend he wrote about a good libretto being one with numerous thrilling 'situations' and with verses "designed to portray passions in the liveliest manner. ...Opera, through singing, must make one weep, shudder, die... Give me good verses and I will give you good music".

Bellini' lyrical style also reflects the teachings of his maestro Zingarelli, whose doctrine was that melody is the central element of music

and that it must be conceived in the simplest way possible. Bellini is to this day the most scrupulous of the Bel Canto composers, for he used solid classical principles as the basis of an emotional style that exalts melody as an expression of character.

In Bellini's operas the close relationship between music and text impressed his contemporaries so much that they often called his music 'filosofica'. Wagner wrote in 1880

“Bellini’s music comes from the heart, and it is intimately bound up with the text”. And it is true, in fact, that in his melodies the text is precisely declaimed, and with few exceptions the verbal and musical accents coincide. In a letter of 1898, Verdi praised Bellini for the broad curves of his melodies, “there are extremely long melodies as no one else had made before him”. This is indeed one of Bellini’s greatest contribution

in the world of opera.

Between 1827 and 1833 Bellini lived mostly in Milano where he had great success with “Il Pirata” in 1827, “La straniera” in 1829, “Zaira” in 1829, “I Capuleti e I Montecchi” in 1830, “La Sonnambula” in 1831, “Norma” also in 1831, and “Beatrice di Tenda” in 1833. 1833 was also the year when his passionate love affair with Giuditta Cantu’ was discovered by her husband who forced the

composer to leave Italy. Bellini fled to London where he assisted in the production of three of his operas and began the composition of the grand opera seria "I Puritani" staged in Paris in January of 1835, eight months before his death. He died alone on the 23 of September 1835 near Paris, apparently kept in isolation because of suspected cholera. His passing was mourned as a national tragedy in Italy, France and England.

- LA SONNAMBULA (The Sleepwalker)
Melodramma in two acts
Libretto by Felice Romani
Milano, Teatro Carcano, 1831
SYNOPSIS: Amina, a sleepwalker, is discovered in the bedroom of the newly returned Lord of the Manor, suspected of immorality and renounced by her fiancé, Elvino. All is forgiven when she is seen sleepwalking over a dangerous bridge.

The story of “La Sonnambula” is simple and for the most part intelligible. The action is basically concentrated on the interesting manifestation of somnambulism. The opera displays Bellini’s more mature style with heartfelt melodies and coloraturas. The role of Amina, along with that of Norma, were created for Giuditta Pasta, a lyric-dramatic soprano whose voice, according to

Stendhal, “electrified the soul” enough to drive “audiences to tears of emotion and ecstasy”. Amina is simply one of the most perfect soprano roles in Italian opera, possessing a strength of character that transcends the implausibility of the plot. She anticipates the intricacy of many of Verdi’s heroines with a warehouse of coloratura fireworks.

In Act I, as the curtain rises, there is no overture, but an orchestral introduction which leads to the offstage chorus of villagers who are happy for they are about to celebrate the marriage between Amina and Elvino. This happiness, however, fills with jealousy the heart of Lisa, who is also in love with Elvino. In the Cavatina "Tutto e' gioia, tutto e' festa" she laments that although everyone is happy, she alone

is sad because she is losing Elvino.

"D'un pensiero e d'un accento" in the last scene at the end of Act I, is the most striking musical number of the duet between Amina who claims her innocence and Elvino who calls off the wedding.

The caballetta from the Second-act aria "Ah! perche' non posso odiarti", where

Elvino expresses his feelings, is without doubt a most convincing example of Romantic melody.

In the next aria “Ah! No credea mirarti,” Amina prays for the return of Elvino’ love. This aria stands out as an example of Bellini’s “long, long, long melodies” as Verdi called it. In fact it extends over 36 bars of slow tempo and none of the first 11 matches any of the others.

The “Ah! non giunge” is one of the showpieces of Italian opera. The wedding is back on, and in this brilliant cabaletta Amina conveys the happiness of a tender soul rejoicing at being enabled to cast off sorrow.

- I PURITANI (The Puritans)

Opera in three acts

Libretto by Carlo Pepoli

Paris, 1835

SYNOPSIS: Lord Arthur Talbot, a royalist, is about to marry Elvira, niece of the Puritan George Walton; but in aiding the escape to France of Henrietta Maria, widow of King Charles I, is thought to have deserted his bride, who goes mad in consequence, recovering her sanity when he returns.

I Puritani is Bellini's last and most sophisticated opera. Its premiere was a sensational success, due also to the fact that it was performed by four of the finest voices of any time. The casting was decided before the composition of the opera and it included four singers who afterwards toured for many years as a team and were called the "Puritani Quartet".

They were Giulia Grisi, soprano; Giovanni Battista Rubini, tenor; Antonio Tamburini, baritone, and Luigi Lablache, bass.

“I Puritani” is something of a Bel Canto manifesto and the only reason it is not performed very often is that there are very few singers able to sing the lead roles. In order to perform Bellini in a suitable way,

it is necessary to find a style of singing that achieves the proper balance between bel canto and dramatic tension.

The sparkling coloratura “Son vergin vezzosa”, which is heard offstage, is a ‘polacca’ of great lyrical beauty and it expresses Elvira’s joyful exuberance. In Act II, after Sir George’s romance, “Cinta di fiori...” there is Elvira’s mad scene “Qui la voce sua soave”, a melody of

infinite pathos and beauty, perhaps the loveliest and most purely musical of all 18th century mad scenes.

The duet “Suoni la tromba” in the second-act finale is a war-like melody which anticipates The Risorgimento spirit of 1840; it then became the theme on which Liszt composed a collective set of piano variations.

NORMA

Opera in two acts

Libretto by Felice Romani

Milano, La Scala, 1831

SYNOPSIS: Norma, a Druid priestess, discovers an intrigue between the young novice, Adalgisa, and Pollione, a Roman proconsul, the father of her two children. Having vainly tried to induce him to reduce

him to renounce Adalgisa, Norma accuses Herself publicly of having betrayed her country and religion. She is condemned to be burned alive. Pollione, moved by her courage decides to share her fate.

Like the rest of the world, Bellini himself regarded “Norma” as his masterpiece. This was the finest text he worked with and with it he fulfilled his dream of “portraying

passions in the liveliest manner”. His obsession with the integration of words and music (an obsession which was called by his contemporaries ‘filosofica’) and the many revisions by Romani, led him to produce an opera in which the verbal and musical accents coincide and blend perfectly, without diluting the lyrical quality of the work as a whole.

What is “Norma” about? For many admirers in the middle of the 19th century this opera was the quintessence of the “Italianicity” of Italian opera; the Risorgimento overtones of the dramatic action fitted that interpretation like hand in glove. The character herself is a priestess, a prophetess and a wise woman; she is lover and mother; betrayed mistress and avenging fury; she is redemptress and sacrificial victim.

The role was designed for the ‘encyclopedic’ genius of Giuditta Pasta and it is difficult to find in the whole repertory of opera another role that portrays womanhood in such Encyclopedic fashion. And with “Norma” Pasta, in her mid thirties, made her debut at La Scala. Other great Normas have been Giulia Grisi, Lili Lehmann, Rosa Ponselle and Maria Callas.

The many different aspects of Norma's temperament are best portrayed in the liturgical aria 'Casta Diva', which in the libretto is described as a 'preghiera', and which forms the centerpiece of the entire opera. The languid and poignant prayer for peace to the chaste goddess, the moon, is a long melody which builds from measure to measure, perfectly proportioned, gentle

yet full of passion and which makes an unforgettable impact when well sang.

In the aria 'Oh! Di qual sei tu vittima' Norma warns Adalgisa that she is the victim of a treacherous seducer; and it was better to have died than to have fallen into the hands of such a man.

The expressive duet between Norma and Adalgisa 'Mira, o Norma' contains extensive coloratura for both singers and is followed by a brilliant 'Si', fino alle ore estreme', in which they again sing in thirds to proclaim their friendship. After Norma has begged Adalgisa to marry Pollione and look after their two children, Adalgisa displays her devotion in a touching melody.

In 1973 Andrew Porter wrote in the 'The New York Times' that "Norma" remains one of the 'most demanding parts in opera, both vocally and dramatically. It calls for power, grace in slow cantilena; pure, fluent coloratura; stamina; tones both tender and violent; force and intensity of verbal declamation; and a commanding stage

presence. Only a soprano who has all these things can sustain the role. There have not been many such sopranos”.

Now, on different note, I want to share with you something else about Bellini, who was a renowned ‘buongustaio’. When you go to restaurants in Italy and especially in Sicily, if you order ‘Pasta alla Norma’ you are served Bellini’s favorite Sicilian dish,

which was named so in his honor.

It’s penne with fried eggplants and pecorino cheese.

And after all, we all know that music is food for the soul.