

BELCANTO
The Operas of Vincenzo Bellini
Part I

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With Joe Mancini
The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

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The Belcanto Style of Opera

- **Belcanto means beautiful singing expressing the Romantic style of Italian Operas of the first half of the 19th Century.**
- **Bellini freed the music in his operas from the rigid rules of the classical period.**
- **He emphasized expression of feelings and joined the poetry of the words with the music in often highly embellished luxurious sound and singing and in close connection to the text.**
- **In his operas in contrast to Rossini's operas some characters go through stages of development. We will discuss this further in his opera Norma. Emotions were however expressed in beautiful singing in good as well as bad characters. Even villains sang in cantabile style.**

The Belcanto Style of Opera continued

- **More than any other composer around 1830 Bellini minimized the difference between aria and recitative; so one goes flawlessly over into the other.**
- **A singer of a Bellini role has to achieve a proper balance between belcanto and dramatic tension.**

Vincenzo Bellini 1801-1835

- Vincenzo was born in 1801 in Catania, Sicily into a musical family and received his musical education first from his father and grandfather.
- He also received private lessons in Latin, modern languages, rhetoric and philosophy. He did not master correctly Italian grammar judging from his letters, but developed an innate feeling for good poetry.
- Vincenzo started composing sacred music early and in 1819 his father finally let him go to Naples to the conservatory, his grandfather's Alma Mater.
- It was customary at the Conservatory to introduce a student who had completed his studies to the public with a dramatic work.

Bellini continued

- Bellini presented in 1825 his first opera a semi-seria drama *Adelson e Salvini* in the conservatory theatre.
- Success came with his third opera *Il Pirata* in 1827 in Milan. It laid the foundation of his career.
- *Il Pirata* started his fruitful collaboration with the librettist Felice Romani who also wrote the libretto for his next six operas.
- He also worked closely together with his singers such as the tenor G.B. Rubini and the soprano Giuditta Pasta.
- Between 1827-1833 he lived in Milan and was accepted into the higher social circles.

Bellini continued

- In contrast to his fellow composers Rossini, Donizetti, Pacini and Mercadante Bellini made his living solely from opera commissions. He wrote fewer operas but demanded higher prices.
- Bellini spent his last two years in London and Paris, where his last opera *I Puritani* was a triumphant success in the summer 1835.
- He died in September 1835 from an inflammation of the large intestine with amoebae, an intestinal parasite, complicated by an abscess of the liver. He had suffered from intestinal troubles since 1830.
- He was first buried in Paris but his remains were brought in 1876 to his native Catania where they were entombed in the Cathedral.

Bellini's Operas in the present repertory

- Bellini's Operas Part I
- *Il Pirata* Libretto Felice Romani La Scala Milan 1827
- *La Straniera* Libretto Felice Romani La Scala Milan 1829
- *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* Libretto Felice Romani Teatro La Fenice Venice 1830
- *La Sonnambula* Libretto Felice Romani Teatro Carcano Milan 1831
- Bellini's Operas Part II
- *Norma* Libretto Felice Romani Teatro La Scala Milan 1831
- *Beatrice di Tenda* Libretto Felice Romani Teatro La Fenice Venice 1833
- *I Puritani* Libretto Count Carlo Pepoli Theatre- Italien Paris 1835

Il Pirata

1827 La Scala Milan

- **This is the first of Bellini's operas with a libretto by Felice Romani, a gifted librettist.**
- **The opera was their first success. Performances quickly throughout Italy and the European Continent and by 1832 New York.**
- **The opera is set in Sicily in the 13th Century. Ernesto, the Duke of Caldora and Count Gualtiero of Montalto fight for the hand of the beautiful Imogene. Gualtiero is defeated and flees into exile where he becomes a pirate.**
- **Ernesto forces Imogene to marry him to save her father.**

Il Pirata

continued

- **Gualtiero returns and wants Imogene to flee with him. She refuses because she bought her father's life and now belongs to her husband and infant son.**
- **Ernesto defeats the pirate and accuses Imogene of still loving Gualtiero.**
- **When Ernesto personally challenges Gualtiero to a duel, he is killed and the council of knights condemn him to death and Imogene goes mad.**
- **CD2, Act2, Track 13 Imogene's Mad Scene.**

Imogene's Mad scene

Translation: Joseph J. Mancini

Imogene

Oh! If I could disperse the clouds that fog my mind
day and night. Am I in my chambers or am I
entombed?

Adele

Let her rave

Imogene (taking Adele aside)

Listen!

A light breeze surrounds me

I lie on a deserted beach

Imogene's Mad scene continued

At my side, a warrior....can it be?

Can it be Gualtiero..? I am bound to Ernesto

He talks.. He calls for his son..

Our son? Safe.. I saved him from mortal blows.

My vigil protects him from the wrong doers.

I embrace him, he forgives me better still, he loves
me.

Innocent one. I implore you! Your innocent smile
conveys love, forgiveness and mercy

Imogene's Mad scene continued

Your parent speaks

Tell him, oh! Tell him to breathe

You are free for me;

As he turns, he glances back compassionately

{ From the council chamber comes an ominous sound }

The sound resounds everywhere?

It trumpets announces the final day

Oh, hear it..!

La Straniera

La Scala Milan 1829

- Libretto by Felice Romani
- The opera moved quickly to other Italian stages, internationally was heard in New York 1834. In 1969 Montserrat Caballe sang Adelaide in concert in Carnegie Hall.
- Studying the opera's music, Berlioz made an interesting comment: In the cause of the first four measures of the song "Giovine rosa", the cause of the particular hue of Bellini's melodies can be discovered. That cause, which it is easy to find, not only in all his operas, but even in most

La Straniera

Berlioz's discussion on Bellini's melodies continued

of his phrases, is the *predominance of the third note of the major mode*. By its proximity to the fourth, which is only a halftone above it, that note at times takes on the aspect of a leading note, and gives the song expressiveness that is very tender, more often still sad and desolate.

La Straniera

The Plot

- **King Philippe-Auguste (1165-1223) abandoned his beautiful wife Agnes, who retreated in disguise veiled, grieving to a humble cottage at a lake as Adelaide, La Straniera by the villagers.**
- **Her brother Count Valdeburgo watched secretly over her safety nearby.**
- **Count Arturo of Ravenstel falls in love with the beautiful stranger, who is responding to him.**
- **Arturo suspects Valdeburgo is Alaide's lover and in a duel Valdeburgo is injured and pushed into the water.**

La Straniera

continued

- Adelaide comes out of her cottage, takes the sword out of Arturo's hand and is covered with blood . During a storm the villagers discover her and accuse her of murder.
- The delirious Adelaide sings of her love as evil and is torn by remorse.
- You will hear this scene as an example of the opera's music.
- CD 2, Act 1, Track 3 "Un grido i o sento"

Act 1 Finale

Adelaide's Mad Scene

Translation Joseph J. Mancini

- {A storm brews over head, crowds (angry) shout out! Adelaide is delirious}

Coro

"Murderess! Yes you know who you are!"

Adelaide

I hear someone crying out

{voices surge}

Adelaide

Are they lamenting Arturo's death?

Adelaide's Mad Scene

continued

Everyone becomes silent
There I am forgiving you for your unjust
condemnation

Adelaide

No one answers
They glare at me irreverently
Their lament is void of devotion and respect
All of you are united against me!
My tears flow as the heaven thunder.

Adelaide's Mad scene

continued

How can you accuse me of Arturo's murder!
I who wanted him, have lost him.
There is no forgiving you for your unjust
condemnation.

Coro

Unworthy person
Heaven scorns you
The thunder announces its rage.

La Straniera

Plot continued

- During Adelaide's trial Valdeburgo reappears, having survived the duel.
- (here are typical long Bellinian melodies where the voice is not often accompanied by the orchestra)
- The judge has Adelaide unveiled and recognizes in her Queen Agnes of France, the King had just died.
- Arturo in despair stabs himself and cries out "return to your homeland across my dead body" leaving Adelaide/Agnes delirious again.

I Capuleti e I Montecchi

Teatro La Fenice Venice 1830

- Libretto by Felice Romani, after reworking a libretto that he did for Nicola Vaccaj's *Giuletta e Romeo* from 1825.
- This is Bellini's version of the tragic story of Romeo and Juliette which is not based on the Shakespeare play but on the resources from which Shakespeare wrote his play.
- There is no Paris, Benvolio and Mercutio or a nurse in this opera. Instead Tebaldo (a tenor) is the husband Juliette's father chooses for her.

I Capuleti e i Montecchi

Plot continued

- **Romeo is a Mezzo-Soprano**
- **The story prominently deals with the aristocratic Ghibellines (Romeo's followers) and the bourgeois Capulets of Capellio (Juliette's father) and Tebaldo's followers to gain dominance in Northern Italy.**
- **The theme of Romeo and Juliette has been presented in several operas starting in 1776 by Benda, to Zingarelli (Bellini's teacher), Vaccay to Gounod (1867) and Zandonnai (1922) to symphonic poems by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky/others**

I Capuleti e i Montecchi

Plot continued

- **The essence of the doomed love of Romeo and Juliette in Bellini's opera is the same.**
- **Bellini borrowed music from his unsuccessful opera Zaira (1829) for this opera. Self borrowing was a standard mode for composers of his time. He salvaged beautiful melodies so Zaira in a way was the mother of some of the operas that followed.**
- **In my opening lecture in 2009: How 2 composers treat the same plot, I compared the Tomb Scene of Bellini's opera from the Belcanto period with Gounod's opera of the French Romantic period.**

I Capuleti e i Montecchi

Plot continued

- The opera starts with the strife of the Guelph's and the Ghibelline's . They were fighting over the dominance of the towns and land in medieval Italian history.
- Romeo comes as a peace envoy in disguise to the Capulets, who reject him angrily.
- Act 1, Chapter 9, "Ascolta"
- The difference between Bellini's Juliette and Gounod's is her inability to separate herself from her tyrannical father Capellio.

I Capuleti e i Montecchi

Plot continues

- When Romeo begs to flee with him, she is unable to leave her father's palace and follow him. Romeo is heart broken.

Act 1, chapter 15

"Ah! Crudel, d'onor ragioni"

- Lorenzo is a medical doctor in Bellini's opera. He protects the love of Romeo and Juliette and gives her the potion that will simulate her death.
- Romeo and Tebaldo meet in a battle when the Montagues storm the Capulet palace.

I Capuleti e i Montecchi

Plot continues

- Juliette's funeral cortege passes by and both lament crest fallen about their lost love.
- I presented previously to you the beginning of the tomb scene with Romeo's cavatina "Ecco la tomba". You will now hear the end of the tomb scene when Capellio ask the Chorus "who killed them?" The chorus of the Montagues and Lorenzo answers: "you cruel man"

Finale Act 2, Chapter 11 and 12,

"Ah! Tu bell'anina"

"Ah crudel, che mai facesti!"

I Capuleti e i Montecchi

Remarks to the Tomb Scene

- In 1832 in a performance in Bologna Maria Malibran who sang Romeo substituted the tomb scene from Vaccaj's opera for Bellini's since she felt it would represent her voice better. For a time other singers have done the same. Today it is customary to present Bellini's version.
- The tomb scene is one of the most heart breaking death scenes in opera.

La Sonnambula 1831

Teatro Carcano Milan

- Libretto Felice Romani, based on a play by Eugene Scribe and C. Delavigne
- La Sonnambula has a Romantic pastoral setting in Switzerland.
- The opera starts with the celebration of the betrothal of Amina, the foster daughter of Teresa, owner of the village mill, to Elvino a wealthy village farmer.
- Amina's entrance aria "Come per me sereno" is a beautiful cantabile sostenuto and is one of Bellini's most beguiling melodies. It is an expression of innocence and happiness of young love and the cabaletta "Sovra il sen la man mi posa" which is sung with the enthusiastic support of the chorus is one of Bellini's most exhilarating melodies full of sheer delight, rapid descending scale passages and its joyously carefree coloratura. This is truly Bellini's signature style.
- DVD clip # 7 cavatina clip 8 cabaletta The Love Duet Chapter 11 follows presenting Elvino and Amina

La Sonnambula continued

- The celebration is interrupted by the arrival of a stranger, who is encouraged by the inn keeper Lisa to stay in the village because it is too dangerous to proceed in the dark.
- The villagers tell the incredulous stranger about a ghost walking at night through the village.
- Elvino is jealous of the stranger who had paid attention to Amina and complaints to her in a duet.
- Lisa identifies the stranger as the late Count's son, who was feared dead. She goes to his room of her inn and flirts with him. She flees to an adjacent room losing her handkerchief when she hears a noise.

La Sonnambula continued

- Suddenly the door opens and Amina comes sleepwalking into the room and falls down on his sofa where the villagers find her when they come to pay their respect to the Count.
- Elvino is enraged with jealousy and accuses Amina of faithlessness and takes his ring back from her and leaves the heartbroken Amina. She tries to plead her innocence but to no avail.
- The count proclaims her innocence and tells the villagers that she is a sleepwalker, a sonnambulist. The villagers at first don't believe him.

La Sonnambula continued

- Suddenly Amina appears and proceeds walking on the shaky mill bridge in her sleep.
- This scene is a close parallel to the mad scenes in Bellini's operas.
- Elvino and the villagers begin to understand the truth and Elvino puts the wedding ring back on her finger. The Finale brings Elvino and Amina joyfully back together.
- Act II, Chapter 36 and 37
"Oh! Se ma volta sola" . Ah! Non credia mirarti"