

Belcanto
The Operas of Vincenzo Bellini
Part II

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Bellini and his Operas

Part II

- **In my part I Bellini and his Operas lecture I presented you with his life, a discussion on Belcanto Singing and 4 operas of his opera period from 1825 to 1831.**
- **I will here summarize for you the discussion on the period of Belcanto in Bellini's time, give you an overview of his operas and then present to you his last three operas from 1831 to his death in 1835.**

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 emphasizes expression of feelings and joined the poetry of the words with the music in often highly embellished luxurious sound and singing in close connection to the text.**
- **In his operas in contrast to Rossini's operas some characters go through stages in development.**

Belcanto Style of Opera

- 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.
- 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.

Operas by Vincenzo Bellini

Adelson e Salvini (1825)
Bianca e Ferrando (1826)
Il Pirata (1827)
La Straniera (1829)
Zaira (1829)
I Capuleti e i Montecchi (1830)
La Sonnambula (1831)
Norma (1831)
Beatrice di Tenda (1833)
I Puritani (1835)

Norma

Premiere Theatre de L'Odeon Paris 1831

- In April 1831 Norma, a new play by Alexandre Soumet had a successful premiere in Paris.
- Felice Romani soon started fashioning his libretto for Bellini's Norma for his la Scala commission. Much input into the libretto came from Bellini himself and Bellini's trusted friend the Soprano Giuditta Pasta, the first Norma.
- The story of Norma carries elements of the Greek myth of Medea, also a priestess of the moon goddess, and of the Germanic virgin prophetess Velleda, who fell in love with a Roman officer.

Norma

continued

- Norma was transported to the mystic forest of the Gauls and became the Druid priestess worshipping the moon goddess and the terrifying war god Irminsul, who is depicted as a broken off stump of an oak tree bearing the weapons of the Gauls.
- The rebellion of the Gauls is a veiled allusion to the Italian's National awakening under the Risorgimento.

Norma

continued

- **Norma, the chaste virgin priestess, is seduced by the Roman consul Pollione and bears him in secret two sons. She holds off the rebellion of the Gauls against the Romans telling them the time has not been ripe to start a war.**
- **Pollione's love for the formidable Norma , who he is beginning to fear, wanes and at the beginning of the opera he has fallen in love with the beautiful virgin novice priestess Adalgisa, who is beginning to yield to him but is guilt ridden to break her vows.**

Norma

continued

- **The opera begins with the Romantic setting of the forest around the Irminsul with Norma's father Orovesco leading the frustrated Gaul warriors, who are wanting Norma to call for war.**
- **Orovesco's aria with the chorus of the warriors is a beautiful duet where the solo voice is a counter part to the chorus, Bellini's freer style. The prelude sets the mood.**
- **Norma appears and sings the prayer " cast Diva" to the chaste Moon Goddess, telling the Gauls**

Norma

continued

- They can't make war without her prophesy
- DVD 1, Act 1, Chapter 11 "Casta Diva"

- Pollione's love duet weakens Adalgisa's resistance, but her guilt feelings drive her to confess to Norma that she broke her vows.
- Norma, fearing she lost Pollione's love and feeling guilty about her own sins, not recognizing first that Pollione is Adalgisa's lover, forgives her and releases her from her vows.

Norma

continued

- Once she realizes that Pollione betrayed her, she becomes the avenging terrifying priestess, worshipping the war god Irminsul and swearing to destroy the treacherous Romans.
- DVD 1, Act 1, Chapter 24
"Oh, diqual sei tu vittima"

- Adalgisa recoils from Pollione's treacherous love and swears to bring him back to Norma and their children. She goes to the Roman camp to persuade him.

Norma

continued

- **Norma in her despair having lost Pollione's love and fearing that her children will be slaves or worse if Pollione is taking Adalgisa back to Rome, is coming close to killing them. Here is the analogy to Medea. She can not bring herself to execute the horrible task.**
- **Adalgisa is unsuccessful in persuading Pollione to return to Norma. She sings a heart rendering duet with Norma about their friendship.**

DVD 2, Act 2, Chapter 7 " Mira, o Norma"

Norma

continued

- **Pollione is discovered by the Gauls trespassing in the sacred forest where the novices live.**
- **Norma in her fury being betrayed, rings the gong to call the Gauls to war and declares a sacrificial victim has been found. A priestess having broken her vow will find her death on a pyre.**
- **The terrified Pollione pleads pitifully with Norma not to divulge Adalgisa's name.**
- **The opera culminates in Norma's recovery of all her most noble and fully human attributes:**
- **Love-romantic, maternal, filial, self-sacrifice and**

Norma

continued

- **Courage.** Her character grows in dimension. These qualities of her character simultaneously redeem Pollione and Orovesco to help them to become human and overcoming their own selfish feelings.
- **Norma sacrifices herself and identifies herself as the faithless priestess and Pollione finally understands her noble character and finds his love for her again.**
- **DVD 2, Act 2, Chapters 18,19 and 20**
- **After Norma's nobility softens Orovesco's fury and grief, he promises to take care of the children.**

Norma

continued

- **Norma and Pollione are going together to their death on the funeral pyre.**
- **The finale with the scene of the identification of the sacrificial victim is a tour de force for the prima Donna and a pinnacle in Bellini's and Romani's dramatic operatic collaboration.**

Beatrice di Tenda

Teatro la Venice 1833

- This is one of the originally less successful Bellini operas, composed for the Venice Carnival season.
- Felice Romani, the librettist, was overworked writing also libretti among others for Donizetti and Mercadante and did not give Bellini his libretto in time, so that Bellini also worked under stress to complete the opera for the Carnival season.
- This conflict about Beatrice di Tenda led to the break up of Romani's and Bellini's relationship.

Beatrice di Tenda

Introduction continued

- The opera has been criticized that the action in the libretto lacks dramatic expression in the music; Bellini was under too much pressure.
- In contrast to Norma, Beatrice di Tenda has been rarely performed after the revival of the Belcanto Operas in the middle of the 20th Century.
- This production from the Zurich Opera House from December 2001 corrects some of the dramatic weak points.
- The direction is focused, there are cuts to drive the action faster. The singers are excellent particularly Edita Gruberova.

Beatrice di Tenda

Introduction continued

- **The chorus in this opera is a bland reflection of the action and in this production is in the dark background.**
- **Unfortunately the time of the plot was moved to the 20th Century as is very common in European houses. This takes the ambience and believability Of the medieval story away, so do the costumes.**

Beatrice di Tenda

The Plot

- **Beatrice di Tenda is the widow of Facino Cane, a war hero. She is now married to Filippo, who feels overshadowed by his mature wife, and has fallen in love with Agnese, Beatrice's lady in waiting.**
- **Agnese however is in love with Orombello, who in turn is secretly in love with Beatrice. She rejects his feelings.**
- **Agnese is outraged with jealousy when she discovers Orombello's secret passion and steals documents from Beatrice's chambers.**

Beatrice di Tenda

The Plot continued

- **Filippo, the villain, uses these as proof of Beatrice's infidelity and puts both Beatrice and Orombello under arrest.**
- **Under sever torture Orombello breaks down and admits his passion and implicates Beatrice.**
- **In the second Quintet of Act 2, which is considered the best part of the opera, Beatrice defends herself with honor; Orombello retracts his confession, made under torture.**

DVD Act 2, Disc 2, Chapter 6 "Al tuo fallo ammenda festi"

Beatrice di Tenda

The Plot continued

- **Beatrice endures her torture with honor and does not make a confession.**
- **Both Orombello and Beatrice are nevertheless condemned to death by Filippo.**
- **Agnese is driven by remorse to confess her crime to Beatrice, who rejects her first with indignation but forgives her when she hears Orombello's voice from prison urging her to forgive Agnese as he forgives her.**

DVD 2, Act 2, Chapters 12, 13, 14 'Nulla dissio', "Angiol di pace", " Chi giunge?"

Beatrice goes with her honor preserved to her death

I Puritani

Premiere 1835 Theatre-Italien, Paris

- **Bellini came to Paris in 1833; this opera is his contribution to the Grand French Opera of Paris.**
- **The libretto by exiled Count Carlo Pepoli did not give him the beautiful verses of Felice Romani, with whom he broke up over the stress of Beatrice di Tenda, but this opera contains some of the most beautiful music he wrote.**

I Puritani

The Plot

- **The story is set in England in the year of 1650 during Cromwell's rebellion just after Charles I lost his life on the block in 1649.**
- **It is however a love story in turbulent times not a political story.**
- **Elvira is in love with Arthur, whose family had been on the side of the fallen Stuart Monarchy. Her family is fighting with the Puritans along the side of Cromwell and her father promised her hand to Richard, a captain in Cromwell's army.**

I Puritani

The Plot continued

- **Richard is also in love with Elvira and is grief stricken that she rejects his love.**
- **George, Elvira's uncle is touched by her grief having her hand promised to a man she does not love.**
- **George appeals to his brother to give Elvira to her beloved Arthur and finally Elvira's father relents.**
- **Arthur comes to the wedding and sings the beautiful aria "A te o cara amor"**

DVD 1, Act 1, Scene 3, Chapter 11

I Puritani

The Plot continued

- **At the arrangements of the wedding ceremony a woman prisoner, who is held at the castle, appears. She is the widow of Charles I, Henrietta, who is about to be condemned to death by the Rebel Parliament.**
- **When Arthur discovers that she is the former Queen of England Henrietta, he takes pity on her and helps her to escape to safety wearing Elvira's wedding veil.**
- **When Elvira discovers that Arthur left with the prisoner, she goes mad.**

I Puritani

The Plot continued

- **Arthur is condemned to death. Elvira's mad scene, observed by Richard and George is one of the high points in the opera.**

DVD 2, Act 2, Scena and Aria Chapter 4

" Orendetemi la spemi"- "Qui la voce sua soave"

- **George pleads with Richard to have mercy on the condemned Arthur on behalf of Elvira. Richard finally sets his love aside and gives up to hunt Arthur to his death.**

I Puritani

The Plot continued

- **They sing one of the big friendship duets where unrequited love is diverted to the glory of war and in this case the course of the Puritans.**

DVD 2, Act 2, Chapter 7

"Riccardo! Riccardo! Il duol che si mi accora"

- **Arthur returns to Elvira's home hunted by the Puritans. He sings to her and she recognizes his voice with joy and is beginning to recover her senses.**
- **The Puritans capture him. Elvira realizes that he is condemned to death; both want to die together.**

I Puritani

The Plot continued

- **A messenger brings the news that the Puritans were victorious and everybody including Arthur has been pardoned.**
- **Elvira and Arthur are joyously united.**

DVD 2, Act 3, Chapters 14 and 15 Finale

"Credeasi, misera! Da me tradita" " Suon d'araldi?"

I Puritani

Closing Remarks

- **This opera has sublime melodies even though the plot is somewhat bizarre and the libretto by Count Pepoli is considered inferior to Felice Romani's verses.**
- **This opera proves Arthur Axelrod's point that a poor plot with beautiful music still makes a good opera.**
- **We enjoy Bellini's operas for their lyricism, the beautiful legato and coloratura and the passion expressed in his melodies.**