

Bellini, *Bel Canto* Master. Part 1

Part I. The first half of the composer's short career and *La sonnambula*.

Part II, in January, his later life and *I puritani*.

Carol Crocca



Act I, Amina and Elviro, (Natalie Dessay and Juan Diego Florez)

Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1835) was the youngest of the three great bel canto composers in the first part of the 19th century, the others being Rossini (1792–1868) and Donizetti (1797–1848). While Rossini was more renowned and influential in many ways, and Donizetti justly popular, prolific and skillful, Bellini is considered to have brought bel canto to its apogee and have taken the lead in shaping the Romantic period that was to come. He wrote ten operas, all semi-seria or tragic, and no comedies in the traditional buffa style. *Il pirata* (1827), *I Capuletti e I Montecchi* (1830), *La sonnambula* (1831), *Norma* (1831), and *I puritani* (1835) are in all in performance today. (Note 1.)



Act II, Amina and Elviro with villagers

Bellini was born in Catania, Sicily into a musical family. As a very young child, his father gave him piano lessons and he was given rudimentary schooling by the local priest. He was an accomplished pianist at age five, had an excellent musical ear and memory, and wrote his first composition at six. At seven, he began studying composition with his grandfather, and at the age of eighteen went to study at the San Carlo Conservatory in Naples. There he eventually became the pupil of Nicola Zingarelli, who encouraged him to diverge from the standard contrapuntal studies and develop his talent as a melodist. (Thank you, Zingarelli!)



Vincenzo Bellini, portrait by Jean-François (circonflex on the 'c.') Millet, 1814-1875

Bellini had a very successful operatic debut as a student with *Adelson e Salvini*, was commissioned to write an opera for the Teatro San Carlo, and was then asked to go to Milan, where he composed *Il pirata*. Happily, the librettist for that work was the accomplished and renowned poet, Felice Romani. The partnership was a marvelous fit, and Bellini's subsequent seven Italian operas were all composed to his libretti. *Il pirata* was so well-received that Bellini had now achieved success with the public at a very early age.

By 1830, he wrote, 'My style is now heard in the most important theatres in the world and is heard with the greatest enthusiasm.' (Quoted by Friedrich Lippmann in Masters of Italian Opera, W.W. Norton & Co., NY, 1980, p. 160.)

These successes made it possible for Bellini to achieve something different from the standard fate of contemporary composers. Rather than going rapidly from one opera to the next, he liked to compose slowly, demanded higher fees, and never sought or accepted any official teaching or administrative post, the goal of other composers who sought a secure source of income. He was able to live well on his composing fees, often helped by living at the homes of friends, and valued his independence.



Act II, closing scene, Amina sleepwalking

Obviously, Bellini had no lack of self-regard, and he was often difficult and demanding, insisting on his view in various disagreements with opera management and librettists. He was very concerned about the singers who would perform his work and would refuse to finalize a contract until they had been engaged, contrary to the usual custom. Personally, he was blond, very slim, handsome and something of a dandy in his dress, with an elegant demeanor and popular in society. He had an habitual, somewhat melancholy, expression, and was once described as 'a sigh in pumps.'

Singers were important to Bellini not only for his own artistic purposes, but because in the *bel canto* period, singers reigned. This is described by Phil J Goulding:

In the bel canto period, opera belonged, not to composers, conductors, librettists, or proprietors, but to the singing stars. The public was not looking for the ideal blend of drama and music, for unity of structure, for character development, or for Shakespeare-like understanding of the human condition. It wanted to hear the superstars belt out the arias."

Ticket to the Opera, Fawcett Books, New York, 1996, p. 324

Dramatically, Bellini liked a libretto with thrilling situations and the opportunity to write passionate music, one of the characteristics of Romanticism. He is particularly praised for congruence of words and music: the text of the libretto is precisely declaimed and the verbal and musical accents coincide. Perhaps the most renowned characteristic of his music, however, is what Verdi termed those 'long, long, long melodies.' His music is full of melodic curves of wide span, which he achieved through a variety of techniques. A well-known example is *Casta diva* from *Norma*. (Note 2) He was determined to distinguish himself from Rossini, the superstar of the time; one way was to use less coloratura (extended passages of ornamental singing, which helped give 'bel canto' its name) and when used, he integrated it with the text.

La sonnambula, his first mature masterpiece, was also his first triumph. The premiere was at the Teatro Carcano in Milan, March 1831. It is described as follows

Thanks to the combination of the exquisite lyricism of Bellini's full maturity and the incomparable vocal arts of Pasta and Rubini [lead soprano and tenor] the early performances of *La sonnambula* provided some of the most blissful evenings in the annals of Italian opera.

Holden, Amanda, ed., The New Penguin Opera Guide, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p 50.

In *La sonnambula*, the chorus participates in the drama, creating a sense of the community in which the story takes place. This is a relatively new development used by Bellini to good effect.

Some highlights:

Act I, scene i: The duet of Almina and her fiancé Elvino, 'Son geloso del zefiro errante' ('I am jealous of the wandering breeze') is full of melody, directness of expression, and the integration of text and music for which Bellini is celebrated.

Act II, scene i: Elvino's aria expressing his bitter feelings at Amina's supposed betrayal, 'Tutto e sciolto'-'Ah perche non posso odiarti' ('All is undone'-Ah, why can't I hate you?') evidences the composer's ability to give passionate musical voice to strong emotion.

Act II, closing scene: Amina's aria, 'Ah! non credea mirarti' ('Ah! don't believe what you see') is a superb example of those long, long melodies of which he was the master.

Note 1. *I puritani* will be given on January 10 at the Met Live in HD; *Norma* will be featured at OGR's Beat the Blahs series, also in January.

Note 2. For a technical discussion of the musical methods used to achieve those long melodies, see Lippmann, Friedrich, Vincenzo Bellini in Masters of Italian Opera, opus cited in text, p.170.

References in addition to those already cited in the text:

Parker, Roger, ed., The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1994.

Weaver, William, ed., The Golden Century of Italian Opera, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1988.



P.O. Box 244, Pittsford, NY 14534

eMail: info@operaguildofrochester.org