

## THE POST-NAPOLEONIC IN LITERATURE AND OPERA

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Bellini's meteoric rise in Italy occurred in 1830 and 1831. In November 1831 he celebrated his thirtieth birthday, just a few weeks before the first performance of his masterpiece, *Norma*. Hailing from Sicily, this young composer had already established himself as the leading musician in the whole of Italy. It became clear that he was the natural successor of Rossini and he also found an idiosyncratic voice much quicker than Donizetti, who was his contemporary but slightly older by a few years. Carrying a glowing reputation from the *Conservatorio* and also from the famous *San Carlo*, Naples, he arrived in Milano in the spring of 1827. Milano was the fulcrum of the Italian Romantic movement; he settled here, and his two operas *IL Pirata* of 1827 and *La straniera* of 1829 further consolidated his reputation as a composer of great ability. In fact, his name became a household word all over the civilised world. In Felice Romani he found a most trusted and worthy friend. Romani would eventually become Bellini's chief collaborator, providing librettos for the composer's operas after 1829 and before leaving his Italy four years later.

Bellini composed his famous *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* in 1830. At the time he was in Venice and, apart from composing the score, he was also involved in rehearsals and the production. On returning to Milano in 1831 he discovered that the city's cultural life, particularly that associated with the theatre, was in some confusion. He himself was also suffering from bouts of severe ill-health. At the time, the group 'Giuseppe Crivelli e Compagni' was responsible for running *La Scala*. In fact, even *La Fenice* in Venice, where Bellini had just been active, was controlled by the same group. Bellini had conducted business with the Crivelli and had in fact been commissioned to produce another opera at *La Fenice*. So, naturally, his interest was to see the Crivelli do well and would have been concerned, to put it mildly, to note that the company was on the verge of collapse. More worrying was the fact that another group of opera aficionados were keen to take over their affairs. In fact, the situation was dire, as Duke Pompeo Litta and his collaborators, namely, Soresi and Marietti, had already engaged a world-class group of opera singers and were looking for ways to buy out the contract that Crivelli had drawn up with Bellini. This is clearly explained by the Bellini himself, in a letter probably addressed to Vincenzo Ferlito, who was his uncle and confidante.

Duke Litta and his associates Marietti and Soresi, want to take over *La Scala*, and they have in fact contracted the greatest singers, among them Giuditta Pasta and Giovanni Battista Rubini, together with others. They are also seeking to buy out my contract with the Crivelli group and they managed to acquire it for 1500 francs.... Then they had the nerve to pay me a visit, telling me to my face that they bought my contract to release me from the group not in appreciation of my talents. Therefore, their intention was to destroy the contract ... providing me with the option to make different demands, also giving me a choice to compose the opera either for Milano or for Venice ... they also said that during Carnival I would not be permitted to write anything else apart from this opera. Anyway, that was my idea in the first place. I asked for a commission amounting to 12,000 Austrian lire and also for half the copyright of the published version. This means that if the opera is well-liked I will earn 3,000 ducats. They conformed to everything I asked them, which I think is very lucky for me. This means that I will have earned twice the amount I would have got with Crivelli.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, however, Duke Litta's efforts to gain sovereignty over the Milan opera house came to nothing. Unfazed, he took over *La Scala*'s rival theatre, *Teatro Carcano*, where he took his brilliant singers and composers for a whole season. In the Carnival seasons of 1830 and 1831 two great premieres took place, namely, Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and Bellini's *La Sonnambula*. In the meantime, *La Scala*, together with *La Fenice*, remained under the control of 'Crivelli e Compagni'. A serious rivalry with Litta ensued for, despite having been bought out of their contract with Bellini by the Litta group, they were now in great haste to secure the services of Bellini for another two operas, one each for *La Scala* and *La Fenice*. Therefore, in just 1830, Bellini was contracted to compose three operas which would keep him very busy for what remained of his Italian career. He composed *La sonnambula*, *Norma*, and *Beatrice di Tenda* in honour of these three contracts. All of these operas had a libretto by Romani and the leading roles were all sung by the legendary Giuditta Pasta.

## The Post-Napoleonic Ambience in Bellini's Time

In the 1830s, Bellini was working in the post-Napoleonic time and Italy was far from being unified. Thus, the concept of an 'Italy' and of 'Italians' had different associations from those they do today. In 1847, Metternich had arrogantly said that Italy is a "geographical expression":<sup>2</sup> this was an infamous observation not least because it was largely true.

The three cities with which Bellini had professional affiliation, namely, Catania, Napoli, and Milano had only been part of one political body in the sixth century, in the time of the Eastern Roman Empire of Justinian. Rome and Napoli were separated by one of the most long-lasting boundaries. It was a boundary which survived even the devastation brought about by the invading Napoleonic forces in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Bellini was born and brought up in Catania. However, his studies took him to Napoli. Having had experiences in both Catania and Napoli made him a subject of the Bourbon dynasty in the figures of Ferdinand IV and Francesco I, enigmatically called 'Kings of the Two Sicilies'. Later on, for six years between 1827 and 1833 he was centred in Milano, then ruled by the Austrians. When demands of work necessitated him travelling to Genoa and Parma he was, quite literally, going to a foreign country. He needed his passport. Genoa belonged to the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia while Parma was a Duchy.

Despite his best efforts, Metternich underrated the value of Italy. Arguably, this could be attributed to the fact that in spite Italy showing itself to be negligible in matters political, together with its geographical importance it also had a cultural authority that was of no mean significance. Like every other great nation, Italy has its dialects which its people used for everyday reasons. However, it also has a great language and a literature whose contributors rank among the most revered names in world civilisation. It also gave the world its nation's music, one whose *princeps musicae* was none other than the great Pierluigi da Palestrina. Alessandro Scarlatti, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, and others formed part of the auspicious Neapolitan School prevalent in the eighteenth century. It was still much esteemed by the time Bellini came on the scene, not least for demonstrating how music and poetry could be brought together in a manner that satisfied the Age of the Enlightenment, its hopes for sensibility, truth, and expressiveness in Art. Since Pergolesi's time, the amalgamation of Italian music, poetry, and stagecraft in opera had achieved for itself a world-wide cultural reputation and honour. In fact, not for the first time were the European musical conquests of Rossini been equated with the more daring Napoleonic conquests at war.

In Italy, opera had become part and parcel of cultural life since the Baroque period; it still is. However, it was at no time more vibrant and passionate than during the *Risorgimento*, when the Italians came together with one aspiration for a united country and independence from foreign rule. This was a spirit that swept through the country from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Napoleonic period, to the unification of the country in the 1860s. Thus, it enveloped Bellini's whole career. Opera houses sprang up everywhere, even in smaller towns, and the larger cities had several. These cultural spaces were financed mostly by the audiences, who would be season-ticket holders. Such was the thirst for opera that during the season the opera house would take precedence over any other form of entertainment; it would be the centre of the social and cultural life of its people, appealing to the intellectuals, the cultured, and the politically-conscious stratum of society.

In the Enlightenment, opera had a didactic purpose and served an educative objective. It was deemed to be morally good if that objective was to impart the virtues of a humane and increasingly cosmopolitan civilisation. However, in the more patriotic ambience of the post-Napoleonic years, what qualified as an educative purpose for composers and artists clashed with the interests of the administrators on whose sustenance the opera houses relied. As Kimbell puts it, "like many other things, opera was becoming politicised; or. Rather, opera would have become politicised were it not for the intervention of the censors".<sup>3</sup> Because of the ubiquitous presence of censors, flagrantly political plays could not be produced. Thus, questions addressing religion, nationalism, politics, which would have been of immediate concern for the more introspective patriots of the *Risorgimento*, could only be dealt with in the most indirect manner, camouflaged beneath a veneer of social respectability, a type of allegory through which the contemporary pertinence of a subject matter would need to be gauged from a story purportedly set in a far-away location and in an archaic age. Verdi's *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi alla Prima crociata* come to mind here, amongst others.

Bellini wrote and produced no fewer than ten operas between 1825 and 1833. During this time had been a student at the *Conservatorio* in Napoli after which he travelled to England and France. Although today the number of operas composed by Bellini might seem massive, compared to those produced by Pacini and Donizetti, it is actually small. These latter two composers wrote almost twenty and thirty respectively. Operatic culture in the time of the *Risorgimento* in Italy did not rely on a standard canon of well-known masterpieces, composed in various styles and coming from different periods, unlike the case today. Rather, such was the patriotic fervour that the repertoire was almost exclusively modern and Italian. A work that made it past its second decade was rare; new operas were produced every season. Therefore, one can only imagine the bewildering abundance of operas produced in theatres all over the country. A few years after the death of Bellini in 1845, the Italian journalist for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* which was published in Leipzig wrote that in the previous decade no fewer than three hundred and forty-two operas had been produced in Italy, and that one hundred and thirty novel maestros had premiered their works, amongst whom was Verdi.

What enabled composers and librettists to churn out work at this speed, singers to learn their scores, and audiences to relate and accept these works, was the sound foundation of a thriving tradition of opera production firmly ingrained in a clearly articulated social framework. This undeniable fact endowed Romantic Italian opera with a musical idiom and a formal structure which in many ways were profoundly traditional. This is as relevant to a masterpiece such as *Norma* as it is of the most mediocre work. Of any number of musical and dramatic qualities that one could readily discern in *Norma*, the vast majority of them would also be equally true of the most mundane staging of the composer's lesser contemporaries. Thus, *Norma* is representative of the loftiest level a special kind of opera can bring forth, rather than being a distinctive masterpiece in the manner of an *Otello* or *Tristan und Isolde*, or *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

### Working with Romani

It is to be noted that Romani produced librettos that reconfigure contemporary French drama. Thus, one assumes that he knew what was going on in French theatre and would have been aware of a new drama, *Norma*, by Sourmet, which had its first performance at the *Théâtre de l'Odéon* in the spring of 1831 and was received very well by the public and critics alike. Such was its success that within a very short time Romani and Bellini had settled on *Norma* for their next commission at *La Scala*. Three months after its premiere in Paris, Romani wrote to the Crivelli group that he had the structure of the libretto in place and was ready to start working on it.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, Bellini was invited by friends to spend summer with them in a quaint town on Lake Como, but was back in Milan after a few weeks and gearing up for work. He was keen on securing the services of the soprano Giuditta Pasta, and wrote to her on 1 September while she was professionally engaged in Paris:

I am now starting to work on the opera, the *Preludio* to which was only given to me yesterday by Romani. I am hoping that you will like the story. My librettist is sure that you will be impressed and will suit your very interesting character, which is similar to *Norma's*. Romani will also design each scene and adapt the characters as is necessary for opera. Perhaps you have already read the play and I would be honoured to get any ideas you may have. Meanwhile, try and secure the figurines as the characters performed them in Paris. You have my blessing to change or adapt them if they are not to your best liking.<sup>5</sup>

As early as 7 September, Bellini wrote to Giuditta Turina, with whom he had stayed in Lake Como, saying "I am pleased to tell you that I have almost composed the *Preludio* for the opera and have also drafted the opening chorus. Am quite happy with the result".<sup>6</sup>

Correspondence yields next to nothing about the following autumn period during which composer and librettist worked on the project. In fact, knowledge that it was composed and set for rehearsals in the last couple of weeks in November is available through Mercadante. He wrote to Florimo, who had been a close friend of Bellini when both were students at the Naples Conservatoire:

I spoke with our mutual friend Vincenzo [Bellini] the other day. He is in high spirits, telling me that next week he was starting rehearsals of his new opera, *Norma*. He also told me that he drafted a will, in case the audience decided to kill him, and said that he left me something: he asked me to do the same in mine! I thought this was very funny and typical of our Vincenzo.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his humour and wit, Bellini was notorious for being an exacting and difficult man to work with. He was most insistent on having things exactly the way he wanted them and this caused some pressure on Romani. In fact, his [Romani's] wife said that "it is not an exaggeration to say that Romani wrote at least half a dozen *Normas*, and all of them are wonderful."<sup>8</sup> Apart from demands made on him by the composer, Romani also had to deal with the censors. He was a responsible, mature and experienced librettist but this time round the censors were exacting and punctilious, specifically with regard to the war-march and hymn of the second Act. His wife, Emilia Branca, recounts it as follows:

The censors wanted to remove the war-hymn that was the subject of Act II:

Guerra, guerra! Le galliche selve  
Quante han quercie producon guerrier ...

and apart from this they also wanted to remove the next lines, where it was perceived that the reference to Rome is a veiled attempt to shield the real reference, which to them is Austria, and to the Roman eagle which they think is a reference to the Austrian eagle. Bellini is in an anguished state for he is now pressed for time. Romani refused to change anything else and it is thanks to his diplomacy and having friendship in high places that he managed to get through the persistence of the censors.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to "the hated Roman eagles" sung by the High Priest Oroveso in Act I was investigated with great suspicion but the librettist was ultimately not ordered to remove it. Yet, the fate of Norma's cavatina was not so privileged and an entire episode from the middle section had to be excised. As is generally the case in such matters, it was the librettist's insistence in adhering to his own dramatic vision that led to endless and time-consuming arguments. For instance, Romani persisted that neither of the two Acts should end in the traditional manner. Both the impresario and the composer disagreed with him on the matter. Again, Emilia Branca provides the details:

For the finale of the first Act the impresario really wanted to have the Druids [choir] back on stage. However, Felice thought that thematically this does not make sense as the action does not allow for it and he refused adamantly despite knowing that the audience could react negatively. He almost knew they would for at the end of the finale, although they did not hoot they were completely silent. Felice also opposed having a funereal pyre enacted on the stage and while the audience expected the traditional *grand scena ed aria drammatica* for the soprano he resisted this with force. He always said that history would prove him right and so it has.<sup>10</sup>

In this matter, Emilia's account is corroborated by the composer. Staging a production of *Norma* in Bergamo in August of the following year, he admitted that Romani had been completely right:

The terzetto which ends the first Act was brilliantly performed and superbly acted. Everyone was excited with this finale despite not having a large chorus on stage. You were absolutely correct in persisting in your views.<sup>11</sup>

So, what librettist and composer had to face in the few weeks of working on the opera were issues of censorship and the stubbornness of Romani. Basically, the librettist had to present a text, the fine nuances of which would then be sorted out with a supremely demanding composer. One notes that Bellini and Romani were living just round the corner from each other in Milano, which enabled them to meet regularly to discuss progress on their project. Evidence of these disputes emerges from the actual manuscripts, musical and poetic, rather than from letters sent across a long distance.

## The Charm of the North

Up till the end of the Napoleonic wars, Italian *opera seria* almost exclusively dealt with tales extracted from classical mythology and history. When for some reason it was desired to look elsewhere for inspiration, librettists would generally resort to the epics of Ariosto and Tasso, or the wonderful stories of Boccaccio and Boiardo. Apart from the fact that audiences would recognise and relate to the heroes of these stories, the idiom would also be infused by imagery deeply ingrained in Mediterranean locales, in the mythology the people would know so well, and in classical history. In fact, opera lovers would be entirely at home in the fictional world that these operas would be situated.

The leading male role in *Norma* is Pollione, the Roman pro-consul, and it is he who creates the bridge with this ambience, providing mnemonic triggers for the audience in his devilishly difficult aria "*Meco all'altar di Venere*". Yet, despite the heavy presence of Roman authority, the opera is actually situated among the inscrutable dense forests of northern Europe. It is a landscape more readily drenched in moonlight than sun-kissed. There are no priests but druids and eubages<sup>12</sup>, and the gods they worship hail from Teutonic mythology. Being for a number of years a professor of Classics, Romani did not venture into northern Europe without knowledge. In fact, in collaboration with a colleague, he had written and published a six-volume dictionary of mythology while still teaching at the University in Genoa, a remarkable achievement by any standards. It is a work that encompasses all antiquities and all mythologies, rather than those related exclusively to the classical world. It is a monumental work. One can then rightfully surmise that Romani was well acquainted with the type of environment he wanted for *Norma*, and his expertise would go beyond any limitations imposed by reading Tacitus' works on the more remote boundaries of the Roman Empire, or by browsing through Pliny the Younger. Romani had been responsible for making accessible to Italian scholars the most excellent scholarship on ancient Celtic mythology.<sup>13</sup>

*Norma* was not the librettist's first effort into the mythological world evoked in Romani's writings. Eleven years previously, Giovanni Pacini's opera entitled *La sacerdotessa d'Irmisul* had a libretto by Romani and it was given a very successful first performance in Trieste, at the *Teatro Nuovo*. Although the opera was revived many times and in different Italian theatres, it had never been published and, therefore, one cannot assume that Bellini even knew of it. Nonetheless, Pacini's title for his opera does cause one to make connections. In fact, when *Norma* was performed in Rome in 1834 there was heavy censorship, this time coming from Papal quarters, insisting that it be re-titled *La foresta d'Irmisul*.<sup>14</sup> Despite the best efforts of Bellini's adversaries, *Norma* has little similarity with Pacini's work, which is set in the sixth century of Charlemagne. Yet, Romilda, who is the heroine in Pacini's opera and, like Norma, the Druidess of Irmisul, is also engaged in an amorous intrigue that transgresses the boundaries of religion and race. This intrigue forms the main bone of contention in the plot. The difference between the two plots lies in the fact that in Pacini's opera the rivalry and hostility is between two men, namely, Ruggiero and Clodomiro, rather than between two women as it is in *Norma*. Occasionally, Romani, like any excellent librettist, would fathom the depths of emotional and psychological drama, ones that plague the leading roles in *Norma*. He does this by resorting to impressively similar text. Like her counterpart Adalgisa, Romilda is torn apart between the cruel claims that religious loyalty and love make on her:

Io t'amo e la colpevol fiamma invan  
Tentai spegnar del Nume  
All'ara. Un Dio più forte  
Mi ti dipinge in ogni oggetto al guardo;  
Ma fuggo in van e mi distruggo ed ardo

When at the end of the first Act Romilda is found guilty of sexual passion and brought to account in front of her own father, the High Priest, a heated verbal exchange ensues between them which, in some of its details, prefigures the end of *Norma*'s second Act:

<i>Sacerdote:</i>	Con qual cor tradisti, o perfida, Nume, patria, onore e fè?
<i>Coro:</i>	Come del ciel il fulmine Non pimobò sopra te?
<i>Romilda:</i>	Di scusarmi io non pretend. Degna pena è morte a me. Padre ascolta ...
<i>Sacerdote:</i>	Intesi assai. T'allontana, orror mi fai. Sei l'obbrbio, indegna figlia, Della mia canuta età.

Within the wider framework of both operas, these are little details. Yet, professional rivalry caused Pacini to take offence, regarding *Norma* as being too close to his own work. Consequently he fell out with the librettist.<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly, the literature of the British Isles and Northern Europe in general disengages itself from the conventional classical and Christian perspectives so typical of Christian Mediterranean, asserting its difference and its arcane quality in a distinctive voice. It was an attempt to merge novel aesthetic experiences with patriotic and/or political hopes; a fashionable search for Ossian and the Hermann trilogy of Klopstock respectively. Both had reflected the confrontation of irreconcilable and conflicting civilisations, the former nostalgically, the latter in an hortatory idiom. This was a subject matter that could be put to sophisticated tendentious objective with the onslaught of the Napoleonic age, when a new imperial civilisation took over the continent, spreading havoc in its wake by questioning conventional values, traditions, and loyalties.<sup>16</sup>

Literature à clef sprouted in Italy as well, some of which shows direct influence from Romani's *Norma* libretto. Pindemonte's *Arminio* comes to mind here, as well as Monti's 'Bardo della selva nera'. With regard to Pindemonte's text, the dramatic parallels with *Norma* are remote. The hero here is Hermann the Cheruscan, arguably one of the more valiant of ancient Teutonic warriors, a formidable foe who yields to the desire to proclaim himself monarch. The Napoleonic parallel here is tangible. Together with Thusnelda, Hermann is the main character whose tragic inner dilemma is preyed upon by evil advisers, a situation redolent of Iago. Steeped in this moral and psychological crisis their son is destroyed and they also find themselves on the verge of destroying the physical and emotional well-being of their daughter Velante too.

Yet, despite having different plots, both texts show an allegiance to the same range of literary themes and an identical imaginative world. Both are set on the fringes of northern Europe, in a period when the arm of the Roman Empire stretched most. They also share a tight-knit, primitive society trying to negotiate a compromise with an overwhelming power, both political and cultural, that a cosmopolitan empire represents. It is a community that struggles to assert and maintain its identity through its natural habitat – the wood; through its unique social and moral conventions – tribal independence, the reverence of woman; and also its own idiosyncratic sense of propriety in the religious and cultural life. This last feature is represented in the chorus that end each Act, eulogising the Germanic gods, promulgating virtue, sublimating their society's history into hymns, sermons, and elegy, and foreseeing a glorious future.

### The Libretto

In his own time, Bellini was regarded as a composer/philosopher. Unlike Rossini, his predecessor, his music is inextricably linked with the words he sets. He has been described as the "one who truly restored Italian music", as demonstrating allegiance to the demands of traditional training at one of the world's greatest conservatoires, namely, the one at Napoli.<sup>17</sup> He is alleged to have been particularly loyal to what his composition tutor, Girolamo Crescenti, called "l'imitazione del discorso", that singing must always be faithful to the dictates of poetry.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it comes as no surprise that his collaboration with Romani was the most important one of his career, more relevant and significant to the development of his creative genius even than his relationship with the legendary soprano Giuditta Pasta or the equally world-famous tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini. Francesco Regli observes that "[w]ithout Romani Italy would have lost Bellini".<sup>19</sup>

Romani and Bellini first met when the composer went to Milano in 1827. Romani had already had experience as a practising librettist for close to fifteen years, churning out on average eight librettos in any one season, most of which would then have been produced at *La Scala*. So, on meeting him, the composer found an immeasurably more experienced man of the theatre than he himself was, one who had collaborated with the major composers that Italy had to offer. Despite such experience, however, the genius that exuded from Bellini inspired Romani, resulting in an enduring professional friendship that enhanced both men's careers. Romani also imbibed a stronger dose of solicitude from Bellini than of the many other famous composers with whom he had worked so far.

In a genuinely-felt tribute written after the composer's untimely death in 1835, Romani jotted down his initial impressions of the man. He observed "a passionate soul, a throbbing heart, a mind ready to soar beyond the boundaries within which it was constrained by academic codes and the subservience of simulation. We hit it off immediately and persisted in our belief that musical theatre had to snap out of its vicious conventions if it wished to thrive. We armed ourselves to destroy these conventions bit by

bit, by courage, perseverance, and love”.<sup>20</sup> In this light, therefore, any effort at scrutinising the music of Giovanni Bellini as a discrete entity from Romani’s words would be a futile one. Thus, in the final part of this paper, I will try to analyse score and text together, making critical observations on the structural layout of what is arguably the best-known aria in the opera and certainly one of the most ravishing in the canon.

Typical of opera in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Bellini’s masterpiece qualifies as a ‘number-opera’. By this one understands a score made up of sections such as choruses, arias, duets, trios, quartets or more and, naturally, grand finales. Yet, *Norma* can also be appreciated as a scene-opera. From this perspective, the separate arias, duos, etc that occur within one specific scene are joined by musical and dramatic continuity, by tonal cohesion and occasionally also by thematic repetition. A clear example could be the first scene of the second Act which is set in Norma’s abode. The score indicates that it is a *Preludio, Scena, e Scena e Duetto*. The musical flow is as *legato* as Bellini’s melodies. It unravels in a tonal development of utmost simplicity, from the D Minor around which the *Preludio* is constructed, going to C Major and then to the latter’s dominant (F Major) which brings the beautiful duet to a close. It is noted that the main thematic content of the initial *Scena* is taken from the *Preludio*. Perhaps more ambitious planning goes into the very first scene of the opera, the simply wonderful mistletoe ritual made up of the traditional *Coro d’Introduzione*, a *Cavatina* for the High Priest, a *Recitativo e Cavatina* for the leading tenor, Pollione, another choral ensemble, and the famous *Scena e Cavatina* of Norma, the highlight of the entire opera. This more complex dynamic is thematically, structurally, and stylistically fused by the repetition of the battle music that one immediately acquaints with the Gauls. Thus, when the well-known ‘*Casta Diva*’ makes its initial appearance on the orchestra it does so in its original key of G Major. Taken collectively with the previous scenes leading up to it, it therefore is contextualised within a tonal spectrum of G Major, C Major, Eb Major, and back full circle again to the key of G, until in the *cabaletta*, the soprano is given free rein to drift into her own private and anguished emotions with an abrupt change to the remote F Major key.

Naturally, it is the libretto that gives structure to the story, organising episodes into discrete scenes. It is also the libretto that makes a clear distinction between lines composed for *recitative* or for the respective *scena* – a quite liberal sequence of *settenari* and *endecasillabi* with sporadic rhyme at times as well although it is not strictly required, and those lines written for the grand arias, ensembles, and choruses, which are generally put together in strophic form and would adhere to a regular rhyme and metre. It is surprising that Romani’s versification in *Norma* is limited. In two of the main choral interjections, namely, the *Norma viene*’ which occurs in the third scene of the first Act, and the bellicose ‘*Guerra, Guerra!*’ which happens in the seventh scene of the second Act, Romani makes use of the *decasillabi* based on an anapaestic stress pattern which Manzoni had both perfected and made popular. The very last scene makes copious use of *quinari accoppiati* while in other scenes, for instance the first one of the second Act ‘*Dormono entrambi*’ and right at the beginning of the ultimate episode, ‘*All’ira vostra*’, the verse style known as *versi a selva* associated with the recitative are broadened into authentic *versi sciolti*. Added to this, the final conclusive structure of the text uses *versi a selva* exclusively for the recitatives, and *settenarti* and *ottonari* for the more emotionally-gripping sections such as arias, duets, and so on. In fact, the many stretches of *ottonario* verse-structure are the first of its kind in Italian opera. Romani’s solitary venture into *quinari* for one of the arias was rejected outright by Bellini and sent back for rewriting. While the technical, structural tropes on which the libretto is built are standard fare for Italian operas of the first decades of the nineteenth century, the artistic value of the whole text is unique.

Romani was as proud of the libretto as Bellini was, stating that in the whole Bellini repertoire, *Norma* was “*la più incantevole rosa della ghirlanda*”.<sup>21</sup> The work was also highly regarded by eminent German composer and philosopher, Richard Wagner who, together with Arthur Schopenhauer, lauded it unreservedly as a paradigm of how a libretto for the tragic opera genre should be like. Similarly to the widespread enthusiasm for the librettos of the eighteenth-century Metastasio, the libretto was iconic as a literary work in its own right. Although there is the traditional love-triangle that leads to the tragic outcome, the opera does not feature anything conventionally romantic; there is no evil character, no Byronic exile, no supernatural predetermination.

Rather, in a simple plot clothed in a rare dignity one finds there the finest hopes of the most refined artistic minds of the time: an attempt to reconfigure the tragic literary forms of classical Greece; to endow opera with a realistic, humane psychology; to profess an apposite new concept of nationhood by portraying leading characters and the masses committed to a freely-chosen, spiritual unity of purpose. This tallies

with Romani's own words regarding the hopeful paragon the librettist fashioned for scholars and critics: "to observe the mores, respect the feelings, purge the vices, and laud the virtues of the motherland".<sup>22</sup>

### Of chaste Druids and Divas – Fidelity or Betrayal? *Scena e Cavatina (Norma)*

#### Setting of Act I Scenes iii and iv

The vivid and precise detail in which Norma is initially described is more indebted to Chateaubriand than to Soumet. She stands majestically at the high altar, shining like an inspired goddess. Dressed in virgin white, with a garland of vervain adorning her loose hair, she holds a golden sickle in her hand. This moment has been much anticipated and carefully prepared, and when it happens it establishes itself as one of the most authoritative and awe-inspiring entrances in the repertoire. It is announced by a solemn procession and accompanied by religious adjuncts, and when she finally appears, Norma is unrelenting in her stance against the bellicose Gauls. A discerning audience would know that the stress placed in this and many other scenes on the prerequisite to balance a rebellious spirit with endurance and patience falls squarely within the context of the 1831 failed uprisings. Indeed, the opera was written shortly afterwards.<sup>23</sup>

The pagan element of the story is nowhere more stark than in the fact that this scene takes place by the "*Nume irato e fosco*", namely, the sacred oak of Irminsul. It will eventually signal the moment for revenge and war. However, Norma's supplication invokes the moon, another chaste deity, the "*casta diva*". Using this imagery to address the moon, Norma allegorises herself. Despite the fact that she is engaged in a sexual relationship with the Roman Pro-Consul, Pollione (with whom she has two children), Norma is chaste at heart and no amount of sexual activity can indent the purity of the soul. The final words of the opera attest to this: "*Io son felice / Ah più non chiedo / Contenta il rogo io ascenderò*" – the damning fires of hell being translated by the poetry of Norma into the Dantean purifying fires of the *Commedia*. The prayer evokes peace not war. Yet, the political undercurrents of the scene are powerful: "eagles" are abhorred for putrefying the sacred woods and temples; the reference to Brennus serves as a good trope of those studious dips into history to which the idealists of the *Risorgimento* project were prone; moral degradation and corruption is identified as the cause of the vulnerability of great powers. In its original draft, these associations prevailed throughout to the point that even Norma's aria had expressed resentment of the "*perfida gente / Che per pace catene le dà*". If one goes by Romani's wife's observation,<sup>24</sup> the censorship of parts of this scene made the final section less subtle but emotionally more resonant than it had been. Originally, the cabaletta commenced when in anguish she recognises that love was the absolute and unshakeable imperative despite the fact that it had made her a traitor. As it now stands, the cabaletta is the expression of a tormented woman who is no longer sure of her beloved. Naturally, the allusions would be lost on us had we not already encountered her lover, Pollione, who had spoken of his love for the younger Adalgisa.

This cabaletta is a formal aside, and its sensational value cannot be underestimated. Norma stands right at the spiritual centre of her society; indeed, she is that society's most revered figure. She is committed to it by sacred pledges, religiously enacting rite and ritual. She is prepared to challenge hostile forces among her own people and even among gods to safeguard the love of a man who is reviled by all and sundry around her, a man who is disdainful of all that she holds closest to her heart. Her infatuation for Pollione is manifest by the recurrence of the line "*Ah! bello a me ritorna*", and reaches a climax in the heretic hyperbole that ends it "*E vita nel tuo seno / Il patria e cielo avrò*".

It is not clear whether Bellini makes use of any structural cues from the lines that the chorus sings in the background to Norma's cabaletta. He does not take advantage of the inebriating rhythm of the dithyrambic *decasillabi*. Rather than breaking it halfway through, Romani-style, devoting four lines to describing the scene and the next four to divination, he structures it in a two-line and a six-line paradigm. The architectonic quality of the piece is, essentially, reliant upon purely musical means, mainly contrasts in tone and colour, and these are conveyed by the orchestra. The majority of it is taken up by the march of the Gauls, which has already been heard halfway through Pollione's aria. (This is indicated in the A and B below.) However, this is now hedged in by the hymnic majesty of x,y, z as indicated:



Prelude/ March /Prelude + chorus lines 1-2/March + chorus lines 3-8/Postlude [Prelude variation]

x, y, etc /A A' B Coda / x, z / A A' B Coda / x, y etc. (link)

The process develops into an alternation between ‘anthem’ and ‘march’. One could say that it is a style which explains the range within which Verdi’s idiomatic style of his *Risorgimento* period oscillates. In between these alternations, virtually nothing contributes to the dramatic or the rhetorical. There is no distinction between orchestra and band throughout the military march episodes: both play together. The full orchestra plays the *Preludio*, yet when excerpts from it reappear in the middle choral episode, x – z, it is empowered by the aristocratic tones of the brass only, together with bassoons. The ominous drum-rolls that had been heard in the *Preludio* are substituted by anticipatory silences in the *Postludio*. This reminds us of Luigi Nono’s acclaim for what he calls the “explosive emptiness” of Bellini.<sup>25</sup>

Broadly speaking, the musical structure of this *Scena e cabaletta* tallies exactly with that of the libretto. It is made up of twenty-six *versi a selva* for the initial *recitativo*, thus wrapping up the *Scena*. This is followed by 8 *ottonari* and two more for the choral interjection contributing elements for the *Aria*. These *ottonari* sustain the conversation structure for the mid-point of the piece. Finally, 8 lines together with another 4 *tutti* verses of *settenari* give the material for the cabaletta. Throughout the *Scena*, which is the first part of this episode, Norma knows that her authority is being undermined then swiftly re-established. This is reflected in the increasing dense orchestral structure which is refined again respectively. She levels authoritarian and commanding phrases into the silence around her, establishing her supremacy in the very first bars. These are fortified by massive chords on the orchestra in military double-dotted rhythm, and given dynamic colour by bringing in the horns and the trombones. There are many tension-inducing tremolos. The one identified in the *Figure 1* below is indicative of a threatening figure emerging deep down in the brass section, an active, determined counterpoise to the ominous awakening in the bass of “*Meco all’altar*”, which the audience has already heard Pollione sing (see *Figure 2*).

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

The libretto states that the aria ‘*Casta Diva*’ is a ‘*preghiera*’. A lengthy preamble, which serves both as a harmonic bridge and a thematic expectancy enables Norma to enact ancient ritualistic ceremonies with

*“il sacro vischio”*. In order to endow this piece with more expansiveness, Bellini creates two four-line strophes from the librettist’s eight lines, making these the framing columns of a grand ternary structure.

A’	A’’	B	A’’’
Introduction	Verse 1 (Solo)	Chorus & Solo descant	Verse 2 (Solo) with choral <i>pertichini</i>

The main episode, marked A’’, takes the form as indicated above, namely, X, X<sup>c</sup>, y, y’, Z, and all material except for Z is also found in the instrumental preamble which is the music that accompanies the sacred mistletoe ritual. It is interesting to note that Bellini gives the beautiful melodic interest to the flute, one of the most ancient instruments possessing a clear, pure, and chaste timbre. Then, a note of exquisite pathos creeps in in a Minor mode, and this is given more depth by bringing in the plangent oboe. Thus, the unravished purity of the flute blended with the passionate sensuality of the oboe finds its synthesis in Norma. Bellini’s *“melodie lunghe, lunghe, lunghe”*<sup>26</sup> is nowhere more exquisitely portrayed than in this gorgeous aria, notable for its slow uncoiling of the poetry, in the recurrences and stately melismas that are dispersed throughout the piece. Singer and song become one: Norma is the music and the music is Norma. The audience is absorbed into a world of the most delectable sonority, of ecstasy even, carried beyond time and space by the undulating rhythms that dissolve the harmonies, together with the magic that the soprano weaves through swaying, soaring, plunging, creating intoxicating moments that opera had rarely seen or heard before.

The soprano becomes a religious authority; the religious authority is a diva. In this multiplicity of roles Norma brings all under her harmonious spell while she maintains focused in her purpose with her incantations. From a harmonic perspective, the interest emerges from the long drawn-out, embellished and even occasionally chromatic appoggiaturas that can be found in the X episode. These are given added power in the subsequent y and y’ sections, from which the composer goes back to the tonic key via a lingering passing-note (B natural) which, again from a harmonic point of view, does not have much sense. It just demonstrates the exclusive sovereignty of the melodic line against a rather opaque and even circumspect harmonic framework. This harmonic disposition reaches its apotheosis in the sonorous intoxication, what one recognises as the ‘Klangrausch’ of the Z episode. As can be observed in Figure 3 below, a III<sup>7</sup> vi progression is lovingly and seductively extended by three chromatic appoggiaturas against a sustained pedal note A.

The musical score for the aria 'Il sacro vischio' from Norma is presented in three systems. The first system shows the soprano line with lyrics, a choral line, and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Spar-gi in ter-ra, ah... quel-la pa-ce, Spar-gi in ter-ra, spar-gi in ter-ra quel-la...'. The piano part includes a 'sempre cresc. al ff' marking and a 'p' marking. The lyrics for the piano part are: 'pa-ce, Che-re-gnar-re-gnar-tu-fai-nel-ciel, quel-la pa-ce, Che-re-gnar-tu-fai-nel-ciel, quel-la pa-ce, Che-re-gnar-tu-fai-nel-ciel'.

Figure 3

The march of the Gauls is briefly reintroduced halfway through and some of the rhythmic patterns and melodic inflections seep into the subsequent section. This passage anticipates Verdi’s *Risorgimento* style of duplicating soloist with chorus to add strength and intensity. An interesting characteristic, which is heard twice, is the progression of 7<sup>th</sup> chords which follow chromatically. As can be observed in Figure 4 below, this is placed within an orbit of 5ths on the words “*quando il Nume irato e fosco*”.



Figure 4

This fact occurs simultaneously with an abrupt shift to a ‘*piano*’ dynamic level on pizzicato strings, almost symbolically reflecting a sense of hushed-up conspiracy.

Towards the end of the middle section, Norma, as Druid and diva, retreats into her own private world of turbulent emotions. A chromatic half-cadence imparting wistfulness is reminiscent of Phrygian cadences prevalent in the previous century and mostly found in-between Sonata movements. This half resolution enables the original key of F Major to make a comeback that still sounds fresh and new. This retreat into self asks that the cabaletta is also provided with a longish orchestral introduction. It is posited rather uncertainly between the rhythmic bellicose Gaul music already heard and the melismatic raptures that Norma will soon embrace. When she sings the melody the texture is immediately made much lighter and the martial rhythms are evened out. She soars effortlessly on gorgeous coloratura that reminds the listener of the more haunting melodies of Chopin, and with incredible virtuosity she abandons herself to ravishing *bel canto* ecstasy which almost acts as a musical conceit to the “*Casta Diva*” aria. This cabaletta is equitably poised between perfect symmetry and improvised structure.

A A'	b b'	A □ Coda
4 + 4 bars	2 + 2 bars	2 + 7 bars

As can be observed in Figure 5, of particular interest is the manner by which the composer delays the cadential finality of the choral and orchestral forces to bring in short yet very effective interjections of cantabile singing on the words “*Ah! Riedi ancora qual eri allora*”.



Figure 5

For these snippets, as it were, intriguingly, Bellini keeps two lines of text from an earlier draft of the libretto.

At this point, the choral forces are no longer compatible with Norma’s mood and both the development and the coda are composed in clearly different styles from the music sung by the soprano: beyond Norma’s own personal dreams and aspirations the world outside reeks of vengeance. As has already occurred in Pollione’s cabaletta, an emotional wall has been erected that separates the foreground from the background, the solo singing voice and

the wider musical world of chorus and orchestra respectively.

With such poetry in “*Casta Diva*” Bellini weaves arguably one of the most beautiful arias ever written. Characteristic of Bellini’s *bel canto* are his long legato phrases which give the impression that the singer is actually even singing over the rests, prompting the comparison with Milton’s words “notes of many a winding bout of linked sweetness long drawn out”.<sup>27</sup> The final aim of the art of *bel canto* as exemplified in *Norma* is to make of the human voice a potent agent of musical emotion.

German Romantics such as E.T.A Hoffmann were inclined to believe that instrumental music served best as “the language of the unknown Romantic spirit world”, transporting the listener “through the ivory gate into the kingdom of dreams”.<sup>28</sup> One may feel that of the Italian composers of the early nineteenth century Bellini must be counted the supreme Romantic precisely because he shows that song, the aria, too has this mysterious, irrational power, a magic that transcends the understanding of words.

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- 1 Date and address are missing, in L. Cambi, *Vincenzo Bellini: epistolario* (Milano: 1943), pp. 251-2
  - 2 Letter to the Austrian Ambassador to France, dated April 1847, quoted by R.B. Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 276.
  - 3 D.R. Kimbell, *Vincenzo Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 4.
  - 4 A. Roccatagliati, ‘Libretti d’opera: testi autonomi o testi d’uso’, in *Quaderni del Dipartimento di linguistic e letterature comparator*, 6 (Bergamo: 1996), p. 100
  - 5 M.R. Adamo & F. Lippmann, *Vincenzo Bellini* (Torino: 1981), p. 164, in F. Lippmann, ‘Belliniana’, in *Il melodrama italiano dell’ottocento. Studi e ricerche per Massimo Mila* (Torino: 1977), pp. 283-4
  - 6 Cambi, p. 281
  - 7 Letter of 12 December 1831, in Adamo and Lippmann, 1981, p. 166, in F. Pastura, *Bellini second la storia* (Catania: 1959b), p. 294
  - 8 E. Branca, *Felice Romani ed i più riputati maestri di musica del suo tempo* (Roma: 1882), p. 172
  - 9 *ibid.*, pp. 172-3
  - 10 *ibid.*, p. 167
  - 11 Letter of 24 August 1832, Cambi, p. 320
  - 12 Eubages is the name of a category of priests or philosophers among the Celts or Gauls. They were, according to Ammianus Marcellus and other historians, a group of druids who spent their time in research and in the contemplation of the mysteries of nature. Among the Greeks, the word ‘eubage’ corresponds to seer or holy man.
  - 13 Norma is a Druidess. According to Romani, a Druidess is the wife of a druid, sharing in the esteem which the great mass of people had for her husband, and like him took part in both political and religious affairs. Above all, they were celebrated for their skill in divination, and although at one time the Druids had also taken part in prophecy, they had abandoned this function to their wives almost entirely. There were other Druidesses who lived celibate, as Norma was supposed to have done, and these were the Gauls’ Vestals. There were others again who, although married, lived regularly in the temples where they served. A third category was allotted to serve at the altars. The principal office of the Druidesses was to consult the stars, to take horoscopes and to predict the future, most often by consulting the entrails of the human victims they themselves sacrificed. Strabo has left us details of these atrocious ceremonies as they were practised among the Cimbri, who were a branch of the ancient Celts. Druidesses were even more respected among the Germans than among the Gauls. The former undertook nothing of the importance without having first consulted these prophetesses, whom they regarded as inspired; and even when they were certain of victory, they would never have dared go into battle if the Druidesses were opposed to it. The temple of Irminsul where Oroveso and Norma preside is named after a god. However, it is not known if this god was the God of War, namely, the Greeks’ Ares, or the Latins’ Mars, or whether it was the famous Irmin [Hermann], whom the Romans called ‘Arminio’, the conqueror of Varus and the avenger of German liberty. In that part of ancient Germany which was inhabited by the Westphalian Saxons, close to the River Dimmel, rose a large hill, on which was situated the temple of Irminsul, in a township called Eresburg. This temple, doubtless remarkable neither for its architecture, nor for the statue of the god, placed on a column, was most remarkable for the veneration it inspired in the people, who enriched it immensely by their offerings. The abbot of Erperg, who lived in the thirteenth century, assures the readers that the ancient Saxons worshipped only trees and streams and that their god, the Irminsul, was itself nothing but the trunk of a tree

stripped of its branches.

14 Rinaldi 1965, p. 126

15 *The Grove New Dictionary of Opera*, s.v. 'Romani'.

16 Or indeed to grubbily tendentious purpose; for whatever one's views on the phenomenon of Napoleon, it is surely dismaying that so fine a spirit as Heinrich von Kleist could ever have imagined his *Hermannsschlacht* to be edifying.

17 See the critics quoted by S. Maguire, *Vincenzo Bellini and the Aesthetics of Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (New York & London: 1989), pp. 184-54

18 Maguire, p. 45

19 Quoted in M. Rinaldi, *Felice Romani: dal melodrama classic al melodrama romantic* (Roma: 1965), p. 351

20 *ibid.*, p. 195

21 *Gazzetta piemontese*, 8 April 1836, 15

22 Quoted in Rinaldi, p. 193

23 G. Erasmi, 'Norma ed Aida. Momenti estremi della concezione romantica', *Studi verdiani*, 5, Parma, 1988-9, p. 98. Early in 1831, stimulated by the July Revolution in Paris, a series of patriotic revolts had occurred in Modena, Bologna and Parma.

24 *cf.* p. 74

25 E. Restagno, *Nono*, (Torino 1987), pp. 16-17, cited in M. Pieri, 'Trentaquattro piccolo film più uno per Vincenzo Salvatore Carmelo Francesco Bellini', in Cescatti (ed.), *Tutti i libretti di Bellini* (Milano: 1994), xxvi

26 D.R. Kimbell, p. 55.

27 J. Milton, 'L'Allegro', in *Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 285.

28 E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Letters 1800-1805*, translated and edited by G. Graham-Oakes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 114, 68.