

## I *The composition of the opera*

### Preliminaries

The years 1830 and 1831 marked the climax of Bellini's Italian career: the young Sicilian (he celebrated his thirtieth birthday in November 1831, little more than a month before the premiere of *Norma*) was already the most sought-after composer in Italy, evidently the heir to Rossini, quicker to find a distinctive voice than his slightly older contemporary Donizetti. He had arrived in Milan in April 1827 with an enviable reputation earned both at the Conservatorio and in the opera house in Naples; and in his new home, the centre of the Italian Romantic movement, he had confirmed that reputation with two operas, *Il pirata* (1827) and *La straniera* (1829), that were fast carrying his name over the whole civilized world. In the theatre poet Felice Romani he had found a friend and trusted collaborator who was to be his librettist for all the remaining operas he composed before leaving Italy in 1833.

Bellini spent the first months of 1830 in Venice, composing *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and supervising its rehearsals and staging. Returning to Milan in April, exhausted and in wretched health, he found the city's theatrical life in a state of some turmoil.

At the time La Scala (and indeed La Fenice in Venice from which Bellini had just returned, so circumstances are unlikely to have taken him completely by surprise) was run by a group called 'Giuseppe Crivelli e Compagni'. Since Bellini had a contract with Crivelli for another Venetian opera, he had some interest in the fortunes of the group, and will have observed, perhaps with concern, that it appeared to be on the point of collapse, and that another triumvirate of enthusiasts was bidding to take over its affairs. Duke Pompeo Litta and his businessmen colleagues, Marietti and Soresi, had signed up a starry

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ensemble of singers, and were now eager to buy out Crivelli's contract with Bellini, as the composer explained in a letter written at about this time, probably to his uncle Vincenzo Ferlito.

Duke Litta and the two businessmen Marietti and Soresi, having got into their heads the idea of taking over La Scala, and having for that reason signed up Pasta, Rubini and other celebrated performers, have done their utmost to buy my contract from Crivelli; eventually they got it for a settlement of 1500 francs . . . Then they came to see me, and told me that they had purchased my contract only to release me from Crivelli, and not to buy me and my talents; and so it was their intention to tear up the contract . . . giving me the choice of making different demands, and providing that I should be required to compose the opera either for Venice or for Milan . . . and adding that in the Carnival season I should be unable to compose anything but this opera. Since that was my intention in any case, as I told them when they bought me from Crivelli, I have asked for a fee of 12,000 Austrian lire, the equivalent of two thousand four hundred ducats,<sup>1</sup> and for half the ownership of the printed edition, which, if the opera is a success, will bring me three thousand ducats in all. They have agreed to everything; I have been very lucky over this, because in this way I shall earn virtually twice as much as I was contracted for with Crivelli. (Date and address are missing; Cambi 1943, pp. 251–2)

In the event Litta's hopes of taking over La Scala foundered. He therefore decided to set up his brilliant team of performers and composers for a season in the rival Teatro Carcano; and it was there, during the Carnival of 1830–1, that Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and Bellini's *La sonnambula* were to have their premieres. Meanwhile Crivelli e Compagni resumed at La Scala and La Fenice. Having lost their original contract with Bellini to Litta's group, they now hastened to engage him for two further operas, one each for Milan and Venice. Thus in a very short space of time in the spring and summer of 1830 Bellini entered into the three contracts that were to occupy him for the entire remainder of his Italian career, producing the three operas *La sonnambula*, *Norma*, and *Beatrice di Tenda*, each with a libretto by Romani, each with Giuditta Pasta in the principal role.

### **A composer's career in post-Napoleonic Italy**

Something must be said about the cultural environment in which Bellini worked. And one had best begin from the fundamental point that Italy as a nation-state did not exist in his time, and that therefore the words 'Italy' and 'Italian', already occurring several times in these opening paragraphs, carried rather different connotations from those they do today.

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Metternich's observation, in 1847, that the word 'Italy' was nothing more than 'a geographical expression' was, however notorious it has become, largely true. Catania, Naples and Milan, to name only the Italian cities with which Bellini had most to do, had not formed part of a single political entity since the time of Justinian's Eastern Roman Empire in the sixth century. One of the most enduring frontiers in Europe divided Naples from Rome; it was a frontier which survived even the havoc wrought by the conquering Napoleonic armies in the early years of the century. As a boy in Catania and a student in Naples, Bellini was a subject of the Bourbon monarchs Ferdinand IV and his successor Francesco I, 'Kings of the Two Sicilies', as they were curiously styled. In Milan, the centre of his activities from 1827 to 1833, he was a resident of the capital city of one of the Italian provinces of the Austrian Empire. When he went to produce new operas in Genoa or Parma he was to all intents and purposes going abroad, to the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia and the Duchy of Parma respectively, and he needed his passport.

Nevertheless, Metternich underestimated the potency of the word 'Italy', perhaps because he overlooked the fact that, negligible as its political weight may have been, it had in addition to its geographical significance a very considerable cultural authority. Italy, despite the ubiquitous use of dialect for everyday purposes, had a language and a literature graced by some of the most honoured names in European civilization. It had a music too, a music whose chief adornment historically was the *princeps musicae* himself, Pierluigi da Palestrina. The Neapolitan school of the eighteenth century – Alessandro Scarlatti, Pergolesi, Vinci, and their successors – was still revered in Bellini's time for having shown how poetry and music could be joined together in a way that satisfied all the Age of Reason's aspirations towards expressiveness, sensibility, naturalness and truthfulness in art. The fusion of Italian poetry, Italian music and Italian stagecraft in the art of opera had, since Scarlatti's time, acquired an international cultural prestige which it still enjoyed. Indeed, the European 'conquests' of Rossini, the most brilliant of the younger generation of opera composers, were sometimes compared with those of Napoleon on the battlefield.

In Italy itself, opera had formed an indispensable ingredient of civilized life since the latter part of the seventeenth century; it continued to do so into the twentieth century. But at no time was it cultivated more passionately than during what came to be known as the *risorgimento*,

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the ‘rising-up-again’ of the Italian people to nationhood and independence, a movement which extended from the Napoleonic period down to the Unification of Italy in the 1860s, and which therefore embraced the whole of Bellini’s career. Even small towns had theatres for opera; the larger ones – Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples – had several. The way they were administered and financed (the greater part of the audiences were box-holders, season-ticket-holders, so to speak, who had their own ‘private’ accommodation in the theatre) made them, during the season, the centre of a city’s social life, a gathering-place for the cultured, intellectual, politically conscious classes.

During the course of the eighteenth century it had come to be widely recognized that opera had an educative mission. As long as that mission was to teach the values of a humane and cosmopolitan civility there was no reason to view it as anything but benign. In the more nationalistic atmosphere of the post-Napoleonic age, however, artists’ ideas of what constituted an educative mission were sometimes at odds with the interests of those local potentates on whose support the theatres depended. Opera was becoming politicized; or rather opera would have become politicized were it not for the intervention of the censors. Because of them it was rarely possible for overtly political drama to be staged. What therefore happened was that those questions of politics, nationalism, religion, social ethics, that were of the most urgent concern to the more reflective Italians of the *risorgimento* could be explored only indirectly, in disguise, as a kind of allegory in which the contemporary relevance of the theme had to be read from a drama ostensibly set in a distant place and a remote age.

Between 1825, when he was still a student at the Naples Conservatory, and 1833, when he left Italy for France and England, Bellini composed and produced ten operas. By the standards of the time it was not a large number: in the same period Giovanni Pacini composed nearly twenty, Donizetti not far short of thirty. The operatic life of *risorgimento* Italy, unlike that of today, did not depend on a fixed repertory of established masterpieces in many styles and from many periods. On the contrary, it was an overwhelmingly Italian and an overwhelmingly modern repertory: an opera that survived twenty years was a great rarity; every season new operas were composed in astonishing abundance and produced at theatres all over the peninsula. Some years after Bellini’s death, in 1845, the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*’s Italian correspondent reported that during

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the previous eight years 342 new operas had been staged in Italy, and 130 new maestros had made their debut (Verdi and 129 others!).

Composers and librettists could only produce new work at this rate, singers could only learn it and audiences only digest it, on the basis of a flourishing tradition of operatic practice set in a clearly understood social framework. This circumstance gave nineteenth-century Italian opera a musical language and a formal structure that were in many respects deeply conventional; this is as true of a masterpiece like *Norma* as of the most witless hackwork. Of any ten musical and dramatic facts that one might note in the case of *Norma*, seven or eight would be equally true of the most routine production of Bellini's lesser contemporaries. *Norma* is therefore not a unique masterpiece in the way that *Falstaff* or *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* or *Pelléas et Mélisande* are; rather it represents the highest of which a particular *type* of opera is capable.

**Collaboration with Romani**

Virtually all Romani's librettos were based on dramas from the contemporary Parisian theatre. This presupposes that he took the trouble to keep well in touch with theatre life in the French capital; and he will therefore have noticed that on 16 April 1831, *Norma*, a new play by Alexandre Soumet, had had its successful premiere at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. Within a few weeks he and Bellini had agreed that Soumet's play should be the model for their forthcoming La Scala commission. On 20 July Romani reported to Crivelli that he had finished planning the libretto (l'orditura) and was about to set to work writing it (Roccatagliati 1996, p. 100).

Bellini spent the summer months at Moltrasio on Lake Como as a guest of the Turina and Cantù families. By the end of August he was back in Milan, ready to begin work, and on 1 September he wrote to Pasta, who at the time was singing in Paris:

I now have to apply myself to the opera of which Romani gave me the Introduction [in Cambi 'the plot' [intreccio]] only yesterday. I hope that this subject will prove to be to your taste. Romani believes it will be very effective, and absolutely ideal for your encyclopaedic character, because that's the sort of character *Norma* has. He will design the scenes in such a way that they bear no resemblance to other subjects, and touch up the characters, and even change them, if that prove necessary to get the best effect. You will have read it already [the play, presumably], and if any thoughts about it occur to you,

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do write to me; in the meantime, make sure you get hold of the figurines of the characters as they are performed in Paris, and if you think it a good idea you could even improve them a bit if you feel they are not in the best taste. (Adamo, in Adamo and Lippmann 1981, p. 164, from Lippmann 1977, pp. 283–4)

By 7 September Bellini could report to Giuditta Turina, ‘I have almost finished the Sinfonia for the opera and sketched a chorus for the *Introduzione*, and am not displeased with them’ (Cambi 1943, p. 281).

Almost nothing is known about the autumn months during which Bellini and Romani worked on the opera. The information that it was finished and ready for rehearsal towards the end of November or the beginning of December comes to us second-hand via Mercadante in a letter to Florimo, the dearest friend of Bellini’s student years in Naples. The context of the letter is a request from Florimo to Mercadante to collect autographs of famous musicians for the album of the young Duchess of Noja.

It is already twenty days ago that I sent [the album] to Bellini with a covering letter. He was happy to agree, and I think it will interest you if I repeat one of his paragraphs, which made me laugh heartily. ‘On Monday I shall start rehearsing my opera *Norma*, and I believe you will be doing the same.<sup>2</sup> I have made my will, in case they murder me, and remembered to leave you something; in case the same should happen to you, I beg you not to forget me.’ I thought that was witty, and I’m sure you will be of the same opinion. (Letter of 12 December 1831, Adamo, in Adamo and Lippmann, 1981, p. 166, from Pastura 1959b, p. 294)

Bellini was a demanding and sometimes difficult composer to work with. Emilia Branca, Romani’s wife and biographer and, it must be said, no impartial observer, describes him as so tireless in his insistence on having everything exactly right that ‘without undue exaggeration, one could assert that Romani wrote more than three *Normas*, if you want to add together all the variants that we have found, all of them beautiful’ (Branca 1882, p. 172).

The demands to which Romani was subjected during the composition of the text were various, and of course they did not all stem from Bellini. As librettist, he was also responsible for dealing with the censorship, and though this was something he was experienced in and probably rather good at, it did in this instance prove irksome, notably on the subject of the Act II war-hymn. Branca’s version of the incident is as follows:

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Nor did [the censorship] wish to permit the war-hymn in the second act:

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

and still less did it approve of the following lines, where it claimed to perceive the name of Austria instead of that of Rome, and the Imperial eagle instead of the Roman eagle. Here too variants are found in the sketches, corrected by orders from above . . . Bellini was desperate; time was pressing; our poet, who didn't wish to change any more, thanks to his conciliatory manner and the influence he enjoyed with the governing directors of the royal theatres, finally succeeded in foiling the insistent opposition of the censors. (*Ibid.*, pp. 172–3)

The allusion to 'hostile eagles' in Oroveso's Act I aria was also scrutinized with profound suspicion, but ultimately allowed to stand (*ibid.*). On the other hand, still according to Branca, a whole section from the *tempo di mezzo* of Norma's cavatina was removed at the insistence of the censors. (For further details, see the discussion of this movement in Chapter 4.)

Sometimes it was Romani's stubbornness in standing by his own dramatic vision that was the source of the protracted debates. It seems clear, for example, that it was he who insisted – despite the imprecations of the impresario, and despite even Bellini's doubts – that neither act of the opera could be allowed to finish in conventional fashion. Again we depend on Branca for the clearest account of what is supposed to have happened:

The impresario ardently besought the poet to bring back the Druids [at the end of Act I], but since the action did not permit it, Felice Romani, who already in other productions had emancipated himself from the pressures of the stage, and intended to free melodrama entirely from convention, flatly refused, even though he was doubtful of the public's approbation. And he wasn't far wrong, because when the curtain fell, if they didn't whistle . . . at least they were dead silent. Neither did Romani agree with the impresario about the [second act] finale, or with the singers, or with the theatre people. They wanted the funeral pyre on the stage, they wanted the customary grand *aria di forza* for the prima donna. Here too, firm in his resolution and in his views, he let people have their say and went on directly ahead, confident that time would prove him right, as it has done. (*Ibid.*, p. 167)

This time Branca's account is confirmed, in part at least, by Bellini himself who, after a revival of the opera in Bergamo the following summer, acknowledged that Romani had been absolutely correct:

The trio could not have been better performed. They act it well and strongly; it thrilled everyone, and they found it a beautiful finale, even

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without the *pertichini*, the druids and druidesses and other choruses added simply to make a racket. You were quite right to insist that that is how it should be. (Letter of 24 August 1832, Cambi 1943, p. 320)<sup>3</sup>

Censorship problems and passages where Romani felt he had to insist on having his own way were presumably the exceptional incidents in the weeks of work on *Norma*. Essentially his task was to draft a libretto, the finer details of which would then be hammered out in accordance with the demands of an exceptionally exigent composer. We may of course presume a dialogue: Romani was not a man simply to take instructions, like, say, Verdi's Piave. As Bellini came to compose the first version of this text something will have displeased or dissatisfied him, or created technical or expressive difficulties he was unable or unwilling to solve. Or, in the course of the discussion Romani himself will have had second thoughts. Because composer and poet lived close to one another in Milan and obviously met frequently during these weeks, the evidence for these remarks comes not from letters or other unambiguous documents; it comes from the various layers of their manuscripts, musical and poetic. (See Chapter 4.)

### Collaboration with the singers

Scarcely less important than Bellini's relationship with Romani was that with his singers, for no Italian composer of this period could create his operas in a kind of idealistic vacuum, hoping that somehow the right performers would materialize. Operas were written for particular companies, performing in particular theatres during particular seasons. The commercial pressures under which these companies operated meant that their success needed to be immediate. It would have been madness for a composer not to write to his singers' strengths: the particular qualities of their voices, their styles of acting, their taste. An essential stage in the preparation of any opera in the *primo ottocento* was getting to know one's singers.

The minor roles presented no problems, for little or nothing was required in the way of taking account of the performers' idiosyncrasies. In any case Bellini knew them both: Marietta Sacchi, his Clotilde, had taken part in two Bellini premieres, as Adele in *Il pirata* and as Fatima in *Zaira*. His Flavio, Lorenzo Lombardi, also sang in the premiere of *Il pirata* as Itulbo, and Bellini had worked with him

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again at the Milan premiere of *Bianca e Fernando* (in which he sang Uggero).

It was very different in the case of the other singer with whom Bellini had already worked, his Norma, Giuditta Pasta. She had 'created' the role of Amina in *La sonnambula*, and was to go on to 'create' that of Beatrice di Tenda. But her part in Bellini's life was much more than that of a great artist. She was, in Tintori's words, 'a woman of exquisite sensibility', and since he first met her, probably in the summer of 1828, Bellini had come to regard her as a trusted friend and counsellor. He and Romani used to draw her into their discussions about suitable subjects for new operas: she was involved in the choice of both the abortive *Ernani* in July 1830 and *Beatrice di Tenda* in the autumn of 1832 (Weinstock 1972, pp. 91, 125; Cambi 1943, p. 256), and very likely of *La sonnambula* and *Norma* too. In 1828 she had advised Bellini on the financial arrangements he was making for a prospective visit to London. The respect she inspired enabled her to exert a calming influence on him when the strain of rehearsal stretched his brittle temperament to breaking point (cf. the incident recorded by Branca at the dress rehearsal of *La sonnambula* (Adamo, in Adamo and Lippmann 1981, p. 150)). 'When I begin to speak of that divine woman,' he once told her husband, 'my mind doesn't give me terms to express what I feel' (letter of 28 April 1832, Cambi 1943, p. 312).

Although Pasta was a great singer already in her mid-thirties, *Norma* was to be her debut at *La Scala*. Adamo may speak for the many who had found this

a surprising fact, which can be explained only by taking account of certain allusions which recur in Bellini's letters, about the hostility of a 'powerful person' towards the celebrated soprano; everything gives us to believe that the person was Duke Carlo Visconti di Modrone, at the time superintendent of the Milanese theatres, and shortly afterwards also the impresario of *La Scala* . . . Obvious confirmation of the hostility of Modrone with regard to Pasta is the fact that, after he had taken over the management of *La Scala*, the singer was excluded from it for a further four years. (Adamo, in Adamo and Lippmann 1981, p. 177)

Be that as it may,<sup>4</sup> *Norma* was to be one of the operas with which, for the rest of her career, she was most closely associated, and a number of documents and anecdotes testify to her role in its creation.<sup>5</sup> Her great *sortita*, and specifically its *cantabile* 'Casta Diva', is the subject of a familiar anecdote recorded by Scherillo. Allegedly Pasta

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at first refused to sing the aria, finding it ill suited to her vocal qualities:

The maestro used all his powers of persuasion, but with little success. They made a pact: she would keep the piece for a week, going over it again every morning; and if at the end of the seven days she was still averse to performing it, Bellini promised to change it for her. Matters took their inevitable course: 'Casta Diva' was one of the pieces which secured the singer's triumph! (Quoted by Adamo, *ibid.*, p. 166, from Scherillo 1882, p. 84)

Given the state of the autographs of both the score and the libretto, there can be no doubt that 'Casta Diva' was assiduously and long toiled over. That may be felt to provide some circumstantial support to Scherillo's anecdote, as may the gift Pasta subsequently made to Bellini, which had something of the flavour of a peace-offering. On the day of the premiere, she presented him with a richly embroidered parchment lampshade and a posy of artificial flowers made from cloth. The gift was accompanied by a gracious note:

Permit me to offer you something that was of some comfort to me in the immense nervousness that always torments me when I find myself little fitted to perform your sublime harmonies: this lamp by night and these flowers by day were witnesses to my studies for *Norma*, and no less of the desire I cherish of being always more deserving of your esteem. (Adamo, in Adamo and Lippmann 1981, p. 167, from Pastura 1959b, p. 295)

Pasta's role in the transposition of 'Casta Diva' from G major to F major can only be guessed at. G major, the key of the autograph, is clearly the 'right' key, approached from the previous recitative via a characteristic Neapolitan modulation, left again by the G pivot note of the *banda* that launches the *tempo di mezzo*. But almost all printed editions (Sullivan's Royal Edition is an exception) and manuscript copies are in F, and it seems doubtful whether it was ever performed in G major until Callas did so in 1953 (Weinstock 1972, p. 273). Brauner's conjecture that Pasta sang it in G, but that then, with Bellini's approval, it was transposed for the benefit of the larger number of prima donnas who would be unable to cope with it in the high key (Brauner 1976, p. 116) seems less plausible than the 'tradition' that the transposition was made for Pasta. It is the kind of concession the composer might well have been willing to make if it helped persuade her that the music did suit her voice.

For Bellini was prepared to be indulgent towards the 'divine' Pasta in a way that he was not towards singers in whom he had a less