

Vincenzo Bellini, an Autonomous Personality in Romanticism through His Libretto Thematology. Special Reference to the Absolute Tragedy of *Norma*

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Abstract

Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) was an opera composer who, throughout his short career, demanded recognition. He was a tough negotiator of the profits for his commissions and managed to live solely by his works. With the belief that the libretto is a major concept of an opera, he was particularly demanding in his choice of librettists. He preferred Romani, until he fell out with him. The failure of their last collaboration led him to Paris. For his subjects, he used his contemporary French or Italian literary works as sources. They are mainly set in the Medieval era and are characterized by tragic passion. Notable is his preference for the popular at his time mad scenes, with fragile female figures as heroines of his operas, with *Norma* being the utterly tragic romantic heroine. Bellini's consistency in the service of the tragic opera genre, ranks him among the leading Italian romantic opera composers.

Keywords: Vincenzo Bellini, libretto thematology, romanticism, tragic passion, mad scene, *Norma*

1. Introduction

Vincenzo Bellini, with his delicate appearance, served the composition of opera passionately throughout his short life. In total he wrote ten operas,³ a small number by the standards of the time. All his operas were written between 1825 and 1835, when he suddenly died. They belong to the serious genre, with the first, *Adelson e Salvini* (1825) and the seventh, *La Sonnambula* (1831), to be considered semi-seriae.⁴ He showed a preference for melancholy and dark, painful subjects. He appreciated the importance of the libretto and viewed it as the foundation of the opera, as Bellini himself stated in a letter to Galeota "... I am convinced that the libretto is the foundation of an opera".⁵ He recognized that it was essential for the composer to have close collaboration with his librettist in order to achieve the "accuracy, fire and action" in opera, which are the hallmarks of Bellini's style.⁶ He demanded to be paid more than any other composer among his contemporaries. After the success of *Il Pirata*, he demanded far more money than Vaccai, Donizetti or Mercantate ever got.⁷ From 1827 he could live entirely by his commissions. He was extremely meticulous in his choice of subjects and made no concessions, as his primary criterion was inspiration. He was looking for subjects full of passion that, as he wrote in one of his letters, the audience would weep, shudder and cry.⁸ Rosselli describes him as an "autonomous artist" who was not content to act as a hired commercial musician, but as a composer who demanded recognition, as a divinely inspired artist.⁹

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³Eleven, if we count the 1828 adaptation of *Bianca e Fernando* Osborne 1996: 313)

⁴SMART, Mary Ann. Bellini, Vincenzo *Grove Music* [online], 16.9.2022 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.02603>

⁵CAMBI, Luisa. *Vincenzo Bellini Epistolario*. Milan, A. Mondadori editions, 1938, p. 397.

⁶KIMBELL, David. *Italian Opera*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 473.

⁷Ibid., p. 475-476.

⁸SORBA, Carlotta. *To please the public: Composers and Audiences in Nineteenth century Italy*, Journal of Interdisciplinary History, The MIT Press, 2006, vol. 36, no. 4, p. 612.

⁹ROSSELLI, John. Verdi e la storia della retribuzione del compositore italiano, *Studi verdiani* 2, 1983, p. 20.

2. Librettists in Bellini's operas

The librettos of most of Bellini's operas are by Romani. In the first two he had not met him yet, and in the last, he had fallen out with him. For his first opera, *Adelson e Salvini*, Bellini borrowed Tottola's libretto from Fiorovadi's opera of the same title. For his second opera, *Bianca e Fernando*,¹⁰ he collaborated with Gillardoni. The libretto in its revised form, however, was written by Romani. At La Scala, where the opera was staged, Bellini met the official librettist of the theatre and best librettist of the time, Romani, the man with whom he would collaborate in the creation of all but one of his future works. Romani was immediately impressed by the young Sicilian and felt a deep closeness to him and sympathy for his demands.¹¹ As he later said, he sensed in Bellini, "a passionate heart, an ambitious spirit that can soar above the sphere of conventionalities where composers are bound by academic rules, and above the servitude of imitation... [From the beginning] we understood each other and fought together against the vicious condescensions of the musical theatre, equipping ourselves to eradicate them little by little with courage and peaceful patience".¹²

Romani's verse had a musicality that was admirable of all the librettists of his time and attracted Bellini to their collaboration.¹³ Characteristic is Francesco Regli's observation, that if Romani had not existed, Italy would not have Bellini.¹⁴ For his last opera, *I Puritani*, Bellini chose Count Pepoli, an Italian poet and patriot living in exile in Paris who would later become professor of Italian literature at the University of London. At the time, however, he was still young and inexperienced and handed Bellini a mediocre libretto.¹⁵

3. Bellini's autonomous personality

Bellini in his work could become merciless and ruthless. This is evident on many occasions in the eleven opera commissions he had during his short life. For Carlo Felice's opening in Genoa in 1828, he avoided writing an opera in haste and preferred to adapt his earlier opera, *Bianca e Fernando*. In addition, he asked Romani to make the arrangement, although the original librettist was Gillardoni.¹⁶ For the opening of the Teatro Ducale in Parma in 1829, he rejected the theme of *Cesare in Egitto* offered to him by the theatre's impresario. Furthermore, he refused to collaborate with the local librettist Torriziani in order to collaborate with his favourite librettist Romani. Additionally, while Romani made at least two suggestions for themes, Bellini himself suggested, and eventually staged, *Zaira* based on Voltaire's tragedy of the same title.¹⁷ In 1831, although Bellini and Romani had originally decided to stage Hugo's *Hernani* at Milan's Teatro Carcano, they changed their minds¹⁸ and finally staged *La Sonnambula*. For the commission at the theatre La Fenice in May 1832 Romani proposed an adaptation of Dumas's drama *Christine; ou Stockholm, Fontainebleau, et Rome* but as it did not move Bellini, he was forced to write a libretto on the theme of *Beatrice di Tenda*. Regarding the latter, Romani's difficulty in getting the libretto written in time led to his rift with Bellini, and the opera was finally performed on 13 March 1833, almost a year after the commission.¹⁹

¹⁰As the opera was commissioned for a gala evening at the San Carlo theatre for the name day of the heir to the throne Ferdinando, at its premiere it was renamed *Bianca e Gerardo*, in order to avoid parallels with the king SMART, op. cit., 16.9.2022; WEINSTOCK, Herbert. *Vincenzo Bellini: his life and his operas*, New York, Knopf, 1971, p. 32.

¹¹KIMBELL, op. cit., p. 473.

¹²Gazzetta piemontese, 1 October 1835, in RINALDI, Mario. *Felice Romani: dal melodrama classico al melodramma romantico*. Rome, Ed. De Santis, 1965, p. 195.

¹³SMITH, Patrick J. *Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto*. New York, A. A. Knopf, 1970, p. 202-203.

¹⁴Quoted in RINALDI, op. cit., p. 351.

¹⁵EINSTEIN, Alfred. and A. H. F. S. Vincenzo Bellini. *Music & Letters*, Oxford University Press, 1935, vol. 16, no. 4, p. 329; OSBORNE, Rischard. *The bel canto operas of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini*. UK, Amadeus Press, 1996, p. 348.

¹⁶OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 312-313.

¹⁷MAGUIRE, Simon; FORBES Elizabeth. *Zaira*. *Grove Music* [online], 26.1.2023

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O005371>; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 323

¹⁸Half a century later, Romani's widow claimed that, jealous of the success of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* at its opening on 26 December 1830, and fearing that he might not be able to equal with *Hernani*, Bellini had asked Romani to write a new libretto for him with an entirely different, bucolic theme. Nevertheless, Bellini himself wrote on 3 January 1831 to his friend Giovanni Pattista Perruccini that *Hernani* would have difficulties with the Austrian police and that Romani thought it appropriate to change the subject OSBORNE, op. cit., 333

¹⁹BOROMÉ, Joseph A. Bellini and 'Beatrice di Tenda'. *Music & Letters*, Oxford University Press, 1961, vol. 42, no. 4, p. 320-321; MAGUIRE, Simon; FORBES Elizabeth; BUDDEN, Julian. *Beatrice di Tenda*. *Grove Music* [online], 26.1.2023 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O004854>; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 342-343.

4. Sources of Bellini's libretto thematology

The subject matter in Bellini's operas is within the frame of the popular thematology of Italian romantic opera: love stories of hopeless love and violent death, combined with tumultuous episodes of European history and political intrigue. As sources, Bellini used contemporary to his time literary works, mainly French. Thus, out of his ten operas, in six he used French sources. Specifically, *Adelson e Salvini* was based on the gothic novel *Épreuves du Sentiment* by François-Thomas de Baculard d' Arnaud.²⁰

La Straniera was based on the gothic novel *L' étrangère* by Prévôt.²¹

Zaira on the tragedy of the same title by Voltaire.²²

La Sonnambula on a vaudeville in two acts of Scribe and Delavigne.²³

Norma on the poetic drama *Norma ou L' infanticide* by Soumet.²⁴

I Puritani on the play *Têtes Rondes et Cavaliers* by Ancelot and Saintine.²⁵ Regarding the latter opera, the title of the première was *I Puritani e i Cavalieri*, and some argue that the libretto was based on Scott's novel *Old Mortality* (1816), published in France under the title *I Puritani di Scozia* and deals with the fight between the Covenanters and the Cavaliers in 1679. But this is wrong as the plot of Ancelot's and Saintine's play has nothing in common with this novel.²⁶

For the librettos in the remaining operas he used mainly Italian sources.

So, *Bianca e Fernando* was based on the play *Bianca e Fernando allatomba di Carlo IV, Duca d' Agrigento* by Carlo Rotti.²⁷

I Capuleti e i Montecchi was based on the story of Romeo and Juliet known by Shakespeare, but the sources are mainly Italian. In particular, Romani adapted the libretto he had written for Nicola Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo* (Milan 1825). That was based on the play of the same title by Luigi Scevola. Romani himself though, in the introduction of the libretto of Bellini's opera, noted as a source Giuseppe Foppa's libretto for Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo* which in turn was based on a 15th century novel by Masuccio Salernitano. But Romani made such big changes that the influence of this particular work is small.²⁸

Beatrice di Tenda was based on Monticini's ballet of the same title and on Flores' play *Beatrice di Tenda* (1825).²⁹

Finally, for *Il Pirata*, he used the five-act gothic tragedy *Bertram* (1816) by the Irish clergyman and author of several gothic romances, Maturin. Nevertheless, Romani probably used the French translation performed at the Théâtre Facart in Paris and published in 1821.³⁰

Some of the operas are based on historical figures.

In *La Straniera* the leading role refers to Agnès of Andechs-Merania (ca. 1180-1201). Agnès married Philippe II Auguste of France (1165-1223, ruled from 1180) after he renounced his second wife, Ingeborg of Denmark. Philippe had three children with Agnès. In 1200, however, the act of renunciation was condemned by Pope Innocent III, so the king was obliged to expel Agnès, who died shortly afterwards, and to take back the odious Ingeborg.

²⁰ORREY, Leslie. The Literary Sources of Bellini's first opera. *Music & Letters*, Oxford University press, 1974, vol. 55, no. 1, p. 25, OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 24, 310.

²¹OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 319.

²²MAGUIRE, Zaira, op. cit.; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 323.

²³OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 334.

²⁴DAVID, Ephraim. Dialectic *Norma*: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Bellini's Opera. *The Opera Journal*, National Opera Association, 2021, vol. 54, no. 1, p. 5; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 337-338; KIMBELL, David. *Norma*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 24-25.

²⁵OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 348.

²⁶Ibid., p. 348-350.

²⁷Ibid., p. 312.

²⁸COLLINS, Michael. The Literary Background of Bellini's "I Capuleti e di Montecchi". *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, University of California Press, 1982, vol. 35, no. 3, p. 532-533; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 328.

²⁹BOROMÉ, op. cit., 321; MAGUIRE, Beatrice di Tenda, op. cit.; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 342-343.

³⁰MAGUIRE, Beatrice di Tenda, op. cit.; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 317.

The rest of the idyll of the opera is fiction. The plot is set in Brittany and it contains many Gothic elements: lakes, forests, castles, monasteries, bards and troubadours.³¹ *Beatrice* refers to the historical figure of Beatrice Laskaris di Tenta, who, with her first marriage, became Countess of Biandrate. Her husband's death left her a wealthy widow and Facino Cane married her for her fortune. However, he abused her and by scheming succeeded in having his wife condemned to death.³²

Finally in *I Puritani* Bellini develops two parallel stories: on the one hand the love story of Elvira and Arturo and on the other hand the historical and political background of the time, the civil war between the Puritans and the Cavaliers shortly after the execution of Charles I in 1649 and while in power the Puritan Oliver Cromwell.³³³⁴

5. Venue of Bellini's operas

All of Bellini's operas were commissioned for theatres in Italy except for the last one written for the Théâtre Italien in Paris. Unlike Rossini and Donizetti whose target was a commission from Paris - and the success of their operas eventually brought it - what prompted Bellini to leave Italy was the failure of *Beatrice di Tenda*.³⁵

6. The era in which the plots of Bellini's operas take place

Many of Bellini's operas are set in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance - periods that are embellished in the minds of 19th century people. Thus, *Bianca e Fernando* is set in the Sicilian town of Agrigento in the thirteenth century.³⁶

Il Pirata is set in Sicily, in and around the castle of Caldora in the thirteenth century.³⁷

La Straniera in and around the castle of Montolino, circa 1300.³⁸

Zaira in Jerusalem at the time of the Crusades.³⁹

I Capuleti in thirteenth-century Verona.⁴⁰

Beatrice in the castle of Binasco near Milan in the 15th century.⁴¹

I Puritani finally, is set in Plymouth, England in 1649.⁴²

7. The fragile female figure as a main character in Bellini's librettos

The subject matter of Bellini's opera libretto is, for the most part, devoted to a central female figure whose psychological destruction is expressed in the then-popular mad scene, and is caused by weak, unstable or cruel men. In this respect, Bellini's work could be characterized as feminist.

Il Pirata is the opera where the mad scene is encountered for the first time, not only in Bellini but also in the bel canto opera. In this opera, the protagonist Imogene is accused both by her husband, Ernesto, and her ex-lover, Gualtiero, for sexual betrayal. At the end, Gualtiero kills Ernesto, is arrested and sentenced to death and Imogene loses her mind. Most of the heroines in Bellini's operas have the same fate.

³¹SETA, Fabrizio Della; WEIR, W. Mark. From Romance to Drama and Opera: "L'Étrangère" and "La straniera", *Acta Musicologica*, International Musicological Society, 2011, vol. 83, no. 2, p. 268.

³²HALE, Sarah Josepha Buell. *Woman's record, Or, Sketches of all distinguished women, from the creation to A.D. 1854: Arranged in four eras: With selections from female writers of every age*. New York, Harper & Bros, 1855, p. 145-146.

³³MAGUIRE, Simon; FORBES Elizabeth; BUDDEN, Julian. Puritani I. *Grove Music* [online], 26.1.2023 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O006929>

³⁴Cromwell belonged to the faction of Puritan parliamentarians who opposed the royalist knights MORRILL, S. John, ASHLEY, Maurice. *Oliver Cromwell English statesman*[online]. 8.10.2022 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oliver-Cromwell>.

³⁵BOROMÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

³⁶SMART, *op. cit.*

³⁷MAGUIRE, Simon; FORBES Elizabeth. Pirata, II. *Grove Music* [online], 26.1.2023 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O003633>

³⁸JELLINEK, George. *La Straniera* (1829). *The Opera Quarterly*, Oxford University Press, 2001, vol. 17, no. 3, p. 487.

³⁹OSBORNE, *op. cit.*, p. 323-324.

⁴⁰MAGUIRE, Simon; FORBES Elizabeth. Capuleti e I Montecchi. *Grove Music* [online], 26.1.2023 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O004891>

⁴¹MAGUIRE, Beatrice di Tenda, *op. cit.*

⁴²MAGUIRE, Puritani I, *op. cit.*

Thus, in *La Straniera* Alaida collapses on the lifeless body of her lover. In *I Capuleti*, Juliet dies with her lover. Even in *La Sonnambula*, which is considered semi-seria, the theme is similar. Amina is accused of infidelity when she sleepwalks in another man's bedroom the night before her wedding, and her fiancé refuses to believe her innocence, until a second episode of sleepwalking puts her life in danger. In this opera that deviates from tragedy, the heroine is tender and not driven to the extremes of drama. She unconsciously surrenders to a dream world and returns only when she is reunited with her lover.

In *Norma*, the priestess of the Druids Norma, experiences hell because of her secret relationship with Pollione, the *Roman proconsul in Gaul*, who was the enemy of her people and is condemned to death by fire to appease the goddess. In *Beatrice* the unfortunate heroine maintains integrity and reason in the face of male violence and physical torture and is ultimately condemned to death.

I Puritani finally focuses on the fragility of the heroine Elvira and her mental disorders. Elvira is pure and fragile, with a kind soul, living in an entirely idyllic world, on the border between reality and fantasy. The climax of her drama occurs when she thinks that Arturo has abandoned her for another woman and thus she loses her reason.

8. Other signs of romanticism in *Il pirata* and *La Sonnambula*

Il pirata, has highly romantic plot with the unfortunate protagonist Gualtiero as the model for the tortured romantic hero. The byronic hero, now in exile and leader of a band of Aragonese pirates and former loyal to the house of Manfred, is in love with Imogene, of the rival house of Anjou. But she was forced to marry Ernesto, Duke of Caldora. Gualtiero returns and kills Ernesto at a duel and is condemned to death. When Imogene learns it, loses her mind. The libretto is based on a gothic novel. The opera opens with a shipwreck, which is a favourite romantic topic. *Il Pirata* played a considerable role in the development of Donizetti's and Verdi's romantic opera.⁴³

In *La Sonnambula* Bellini uses an uncommon situation for his subject, in this particular case sleepwalking, which at his time is considered highly romantic and popular.⁴⁴ Interesting is the choice of the place where the opera takes place. While Scribe's *Sonnambula* was set on the Provence island of Camargue, Bellini's opera is set in a Swiss village in the Alps. Bellini himself originally seems to have given the title *La Sonnambula* ossia *I due fidanzatissimi* (*The Sleepwalker or the Engaged Swiss*). This is evident from a letter he wrote to a friend at the beginning of January 1831, where he mentioned that he had begun to compose *La Sonnambula* ossia *I due fidanzatissimi*.⁴⁵ The second title that soon dropped, clearly locates the opera in Switzerland, which is made particularly clear from the beginning that the heroine walks on the Alpine hills and the villagers descend the Alpine slopes. We have no indications from the opera's contributors about the reasons they placed it in that particular place. It is probably a hasty choice, as the *Hernani* that Romani was preparing before starting *Sonnambula*, was unfolding in the Alps. Nevertheless, there was a fashion in the operas of the time in setting the plots in the Alps as they are characterized as idyllic and pure and at the same time, with their imposingness, they give the feeling of the imposition of nature on humans and create awe in their souls.⁴⁶

9. The opera *Norma*

From the beginning of the 19th century there was a trend for subjects related to northern Europe and its history. The diversity and distance from the Christian Mediterranean area stimulated the imagination of Bellini's contemporaries, both in Italy and in France, as it combined the search for a new aesthetic experience with nationalist and political allusions and reflected the clash of incompatible cultures.⁴⁷

Norma, which opened La Scala's carnival season in December 1831, is set during the Roman Empire in the forests of northern Europe, rather under the moonlight than the sunlight. It depicts the small, seemingly primitive, society of the Gauls trying to find a way to co-exist with the overwhelming power of the empire, both culturally and politically.

⁴³Maguire, *Pirata II*, op. cit.

⁴⁴EINSTEIN, op. cit., 328, OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 334; SENICI, Emanuele. *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2005, p. 21.

⁴⁵CAMBI, op. cit., p. 121.

⁴⁶SENICI, op. cit., p. 4, 26, 43.

⁴⁷KIMBELL, 1998, op. cit., p. 24.

They try not to lose their identity through their sense of space (especially the forest), their customs (racial freedom and respect for women) and their secular, religious and cultural life. Their gods are those of German mythology and their priests are druids.⁴⁸ Norma is the high priestess of the Druid temple.⁴⁹ The theme refers to the Greek mythological character of Medea who murdered her children to avenge her lover who abandoned her.⁵⁰

Medea's story is appalling even by the standards of Greek mythology and depicts the darkest sides of the human mind and the destructiveness of unbridled passion. The myth has fascinated dramatists throughout the ages and is consonant with the preferences of Romanticism. The first extant tragedy with the theme, is Euripides' *Medea* (431 BC). Since then it has been used repeatedly in Latin, French and German tragedies that remained in history and returns to the subject matter of the Romantic era.⁵¹ Norma is certainly not Medea. She is a witch and priestess who serves the moon goddess in a remote and mysterious land beyond the borders of the civilized world. She falls in love with a hero from the classical Mediterranean realm and gives birth to his two sons. When her lover leaves her for another woman, she is overwhelmed with a passion for revenge to the point of considering murdering her children.⁵²

Despite the close connections between Medea's and Norma's stories as mothers abandoned by the father of their children, the motivation behind the latter's infanticide thoughts is more complex than the jealousy, rage, and revenge - feelings that characterize Medea. Norma seems to believe that her children's lives would be unbearable in both Gaul and Rome because of their origins and the circumstances of their birth: in Gaul they would face torture and in Rome shame. In the end, she doesn't kill them. Instead she does everything in her power to save their lives. This highly significant departure from the classical pagan tradition of Medea can be attributed to the Christian concept of the sanctity of motherhood. Regarding this parameter, Romani seems to have been influenced by Chateaubriand, the so-called father of French Romanticism. Chateaubriand in his works uses a wealth of depictive and evocative descriptions that apparently fascinated Romani.⁵³ Bellini and Romani however, took elements from other sources as well: Jouy's libretto *La vestale* (1807) for Spontini, and Romani's own earlier librettos *Medea in Corinto* (1813) for Mayr and *La Sacerdotessa d' Irminsul* (1820) for Pacini.⁵⁴

When Norma was staged in Rome in 1834, the papal censors insisted that it be called *La forest d' Irminsul*, which indicates a connection with Pacini's opera. However, *Norma* and *La Sacerdotessa d' Irminsul* do not have many similarities. Pacini's opera is set in the era of Charlemagne and its heroine Romilda, is the priestess of Irminsul as Norma. Romilda loves Ruggiero, the leader of the hostile Norman army of Charlemagne, but for political reasons she is pressured to marry Prince Clodomiro, son of the slain Saxon king and patron of the Druids. In Pacini, therefore, the rivalry focuses, not on two women but on two men, Clodomiro and Ruggiero. Nevertheless, Pacini felt that Romani in many places copied his earlier libretto and was unhappy with it.⁵⁵

⁴⁸KIMBELL, 1998, op. cit., p. 20,25.

⁴⁹Druid priestesses were the high priestesses of the Gauls. Although married, normally lived in shrines where they served. They enjoyed the same esteem as their husbands, and took part in political and religious events with them. Mortals revered them primarily for their divination abilities. There were other high priestesses who lived celibate lives and these were the Vestals. The main work of the high priestesses was to consult the stars and foretell the future, often by interpreting the entrails of human sacrifices KIMBELL, 1998, op. cit., p. 20-21.

⁵⁰DAVID, op. cit., p. 5.

⁵¹KIMBELL, 1998, op. cit., p. 16-17.

⁵²Ibid., p. 17.

⁵³DAVID, op. cit., p. 4-5.

⁵⁴OSBORNE, p. 338.

⁵⁵KIMBELL, 1998, p. 22-23; WANGPAIBOONKIT, Parkorn. Rethinking Operatic Masculinity: Nicola Tacchinardi's Aria Substitutions and the Heroic Archetype in Early Nineteenth-Century Italy. *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 7).

Romani, being a professional classical scholar, had a good knowledge of the subject.⁵⁶ Because of this familiarity, he helped to the introduction of the Celtic tradition to the Italian public.⁵⁷ Bellini constantly intervened, revising and trimming the libretto. He and Romani didn't employ the fifth act of Soumet's drama, a mad scene where Norma sinks into an abyss.⁵⁸ Bellini was initially reluctant to name the opera after his heroine. He preferred to give it a different name from that of the original French tragedy and to create a stir with a title such as *La serva druidica* or *La druidessa* or *I druidi*. But none of these titles satisfied him and, since his impresario could not wait longer, he finally named it *Norma*.⁵⁹ *Norma* is considered Bellini's masterpiece, although the first-night audience in Milan did not appreciate it.⁶⁰ Perhaps the composer presumed the success due to the good cast of singers, but this did not happen. In fact, the initial reaction of the audience was lukewarm. By the third performance however, the singers felt more comfortable in their roles and the opera received positive critics from the audience.⁶¹

The poetry of the opera doesn't concur with the explosive style of the later librettists of the melodrama. On the contrary, it is in that straight through line of very well expressed and noble feeling which might be directed to Metastasio. Furthermore, the anachronistic theme with the Greek elements, is at first sight reminiscent of the style of Metastasio.^{62,63} Nevertheless, *Norma* is much more than a post-Metastasio opera seria. It expresses complex and varied emotions on the part of its heroine, especially at the end of the opera, when she decides to save her children and sacrifice herself. In addition, the opera also hints nationalistic messages. These relate to the parallel of the Roman Empire with Napoleon's spread across Europe. Both the Roman Empire and Napoleon questioned local values and legitimacy and destroyed local customs and traditions. The nationalistic messages are expressed through the independence of the Druids and their hostility to the Roman conquerors.⁶⁴

The opera revolves around three characters - Norma, Pollione and Adalgisa - and all the others are ancillary. Norma's father, her confidante, even her children, exist only to elevate and make the emotions of the main characters more expressive. In turn the three main roles exist to elevate and make more expressive the emotions of one of them: Norma. The characterization of Norma - a priestess in the Druid forest, a wife in love, a mother, jealous but nevertheless forgiving - must be seen as one of the great characters in the entire history of opera. Norma is not dominated by hatred, as is usual in melodrama, but by understanding and forgiveness.⁶⁵ She overcomes her conflicting emotions, she cares for her children, she asks for forgiveness for her unfaithful lover, and finally she goes to her death. By doing these, she regains the love of Pollione who chooses to die with her. Furthermore, Pollione in his capacity as a Roman commander, serves as a link with the "civilized" world.⁶⁶ Diametrically opposed philosophers found food for philosophical thought in *Norma*. Thus Giuseppe Mazzini wrote in 1836 in his work *Philosophy of Music*: "...Bellini was a transitional genius, a link between the Italian school as it was formed in our day and that of the future. A mournful voice between the worlds..."⁶⁷

⁵⁶The finest achievement and what remained of his incumbency as a professor at the University of Genoa was a dictionary of mythology and antiquity which he wrote in collaboration with a colleague of his and published in 6 volumes between 1809 and 1825. This monumental work includes all mythologies and antiquities and not just those of the classical world KIMBELL, 1998, op. cit., p. 20.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 20

⁵⁸DAVID, op. cit., p. 8; OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 337-338.

⁵⁹KIMBELL, op. cit., p. 13.

⁶⁰OSBORNE, op. cit., p. 337-338.

⁶¹KIMBELL, op. cit., p. 14.

⁶²SMITH, op. cit., p. 204.

⁶³Metastasio belonged to the Arcadian Academy that endorsed the clear dramatic organization, the rigor of the structure and the clarity of the style, in the model of the ancient Greek drama and its didactic and moral function Ibid., p. 204.

⁶⁴PLATINGA, Leon. *Romantic Music*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1984, p. 140; SMITH, op. cit., p. 205; KIMBELL, op. cit., p. 24.

⁶⁵SMITH, op. cit., p. 205.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 206.

⁶⁷MAZZINI, Giuseppe. *Life and Writings of Joseph Mazzini in VI vols: IV Critical and literary*. London, Smith, Elder & Co, 1891, p. 50.

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in 1844 in his work *On the Aesthetics of Poetry* that *Norma* is a tragedy of extraordinary perfection, a true model for the tragic design of a theme, the tragic development of its plot, and its tragic resolution. In addition, it succeeds in elevating the heroine above the earthly, which is also transmitted to the listener. And this is achieved in a completely natural way, which characterizes the true nature of tragedy".⁶⁸

10. Conclusions

During his short career, Bellini chose exclusively subjects that inspired him and that were based on the French and Italian literature of his time. The majority of them takes place in the Medieval era and have strong mystical, demonic and melancholic elements. They express the deepest feelings of the human soul, especially the female one, with the heroine's loss of identity as a way of reaction to the masculine cruelty and escape from reality. *Norma* is the composer's highest achievement. Inspired by Medea of the ancient Greek tragedy, Bellini's *Norma* is a multidimensional character who goes far beyond her. Whilst the first murdered her children to avenge her lover, Norma thought of this in order to save them. The way the plot is handled in the opera ranks it to the ultimate romantic tragedy and Bellini among the leading romantic Italian opera composers. At last, Bellini's cooperation with his librettist Romani, with whom he collaborated on most of his operas, is a major factor that took off his career.

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⁶⁸SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Band II, 1844.

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