

## Scene V: Bel Canto and Drama Clash (1816-1840)

### **Gioachino Rossini** (1792-1868)

In 1812, a 20-year-old composer from Pesaro, Italy scored two important triumphs in the opera house. The first was his “comic farce” *La Scala di Seta*, which premiered in Venice on May 8, the second a “melodramma giocosa” *La Pietra del Paragone* which premiered at La Scala in Milan on September 26. Although he had already written five other operas, all of which have disappeared, before *Scala di Seta*, these were the two that put him on the map. The music was fast-paced, with several “patter” arias in which the use of language was itself part of the comedy, and so tightly structured that, despite spoken dialogue, it moved along at a hectic pace, often using long crescendos to heighten the jollity in which all the singers (and orchestra) joined in.

After *La Pietra del Paragone*'s premiere, Eugène de Beauharnais, the Emperor Napoleon's Viceroy, was so taken by the work that he gave strict instructions not to draft him into military service. “I cannot take it upon myself to expose to the enemy's fire such a precious existence; my contemporaries would never forgive me. We are perhaps losing a mediocre soldier, but we are surely saving a man of genius for the nation,” he is quoted as saying.<sup>1</sup>

The ironic thing is that Rossini rode to fame by enhancing a style of comic opera that had already been invented—by none other than Gaspare Spontini, prior to his coming to Paris. His 1799 comic farce, *La Fuga in Maschera*, sounds so much like Rossini that the resemblance is absolutely uncanny—but Rossini, being only seven years old at the time, hadn't even started composing. Understandably, then, Spontini didn't have as high an opinion of Rossini as everyone else in Italy did. Listening to *La Pietra del Paragone* without actually watching a good stage production (two of which have been uploaded on YouTube), one is, of course, dazzled by all the vocal effects and pyrotechnics, particularly those sung by the mezzo-soprano (Marchese Clarice)...but that's all they were, brilliant comic effects. Without knowing the text, they could be singing about anything.

Rossini hit his stride, however, a year later with a much more original comic farce, *L'Italiana in Algeri*. This was so popular that it was later performed not only in England but also in America; yet it was eclipsed three years later by his most popular and enduring opera, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. This one was such a hot ticket that it completely obliterated the previous version of the opera which had been written by Giovanni Paisiello, and which was still occasionally performed at the time Rossini's version premiered. Indeed, *Il Barbiere* was the first of Rossini's operas to become a true international “hit.” When the composer traveled to Vienna, he was granted an audience with Beethoven, who ran up to him and said, “Rossini! The composer of *Il Barbiere!* I embrace you!” But Beethoven also gave Rossini a piece of professional advice that he ignored: “Don't ever try to write a serious opera. It's not in your temperament.”

Not only was this advice ignored after meeting Beethoven, Rossini had already written quite a number of serious operas: *Demetrio e Polibio*, his very first (written in 1806-09), *Tancredi*, *Aureliano in Palmira*, *Sigismondo* and *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*, all before *Il Barbiere*, then *Otello*, *Armida*, *Adelaide di Borgogna*, *Riccardo e Zoraide*, *Ermione*, *La donna del lago*, *Maometto II*, *Zelmira*, *Semiramide*, *Le siege de Corinthe* and others afterward. Rossini's *Otello*, for some strange reason, still has its adherents, but the music not only isn't as good as Verdi's, it's wholly inadequate not only for Shakespeare but for drama, period. Bouncy rhythms, tuneful melodies and a preponderance of bright major keys abound in it, as they would in a depressingly large number of “bel canto” *opera serie*. All were structured around bouncy, major-key tunes

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<sup>1</sup> William Weaver, liner notes to Vanguard CD of the opera.

with lots of runs, trills and high notes, and all remain pretty much awful—yet some of them are still performed today, and people apparently like them.

By general consensus, the only good serious operas by Rossini are *Moïse et Pharaon*, an 1827 rewrite of his 1818 *Mosé in Egitto*, and his last opera, *Guillaume Tell*. I have recordings of both, and actually like them despite their weaknesses—but I disagree with most opera goers on what their weaknesses are. I tend to tolerate the very tunes-with-high-notes sections that everyone else loves, although some of these moments do have a smidgen of drama in them, instead preferring the darker, more serious music. The interesting thing about them is that they were the first politically motivated operas in history, thinly-veiled protests to Italy being occupied by foreign powers, first by Napoleon's empire and then, after his downfall, by the Austrians via the Congress of Vienna—the latter, ironically, partially engineered by Napoleon's former viceroy, the very Eugène de Beauharnais who had protected Rossini against being drafted to fight for the Emperor. Also, so far as I was able to discover, *Mosè*, in either of its incarnations, was the first *opera* based on a Biblical story. All previous pieces based on the Bible were religious passions or oratorios. Let us examine both and determine how successful Rossini was. I shall refer to *Moïse et Pharaon* simply as *Mosè* because it is most often performed nowadays using an Italian version of the 1827 French libretto. Although recordings of the 1818 original exist, it is clearly an inferior opera.

### *Mosè* (1827 revision)

In *Mosè*, a surprisingly decent (for Rossini) overture is followed by a shockingly bouncy tune in F major to introduce the Israelites. To Rossini's credit, he switched to F minor (but with the same bouncy rhythm) as the chorus introduces Moses to us. When Moses sings, he, too, is in the minor, but it doesn't stay there for long. Back comes the chorus, and we're back in the major again—and then Moses starts singing the bouncy music that started the scene. Perhaps you can picture Moses, wearing a straw hat, carrying a cane, and tap-dancing his way across the stage to this music, but I for one have a hard time with that. Moses and the chorus tap-dance their way to the finish of this scene.

Yet there are some truly dramatic moments in this opera; they just come later, after all the entertainment. Rossini's librettist added some spice to this otherwise dry Biblical tale by inventing a love affair between the Pharaoh's son Aménofi (Osiride in the Italian original) and an Israelite woman, Anaïde (Elcia in the original); after Moses ends the plague of darkness over Egypt because the Pharaoh promised to release them when light returns, Aménofi persuades the High Priest to have his father force the Jews to stay, which he does. Another invented plot twist is that the Pharaoh's wife, Sinaïde (Amaltea in the original), has secretly converted to Judaism (yeah, right!), and as soon as Moses, feeling betrayed, threatens to have fire rain down on the Egyptians, the Pharaoh changes his mind again and tells Moses and his kinfolk to get out of Dodge City as soon as they can.

There's a lovely and dramatically effective scene for Moses, Anaïde, Maria and the chorus in Act I, "Dio possente in pace," which is sung *a cappella* and indeed almost sounds like a prayer, and Moses' ensuing recitative (with orchestra) is also quite effective...yet the latter leads to a bouncy tune (albeit in the minor) for the chorus. Rossini just couldn't help himself, and yet this incongruous tune leads to a really nice vocal ensemble for the principals—which then receives the "Rossini crescendo" treatment. Back and forth we go through the first act, including a reprise of Moses' dance tune, but at least the serious moments range from fully to semi-dramatic, and for the most part he avoided writing coloratura fireworks for his soloists, although the tenor role of Aménofi does contain some florid passages. The first half of the lovers' duet is surprisingly well-written, contrasting semi-arietta passages with strophic sung recitative, but eventual-

ly Rossini caves in and gives his audiences a pretty tune that has only a tenuous connection to the drama (and yes, there are a couple of coloratura runs in there for the soprano).

Yet compared to previous *opera serie* by Rossini, and even several of Verdi's early operas such as *Ernani*, *Mosè* is at least a relatively strong score. The opening of the second act, with dramatic orchestral chords underscored by rolling tympani, is especially effective, especially when followed by a chorus in the minor, and Rossini skillfully blended this into the ensuing ensemble scene with Pharaoh, Aménofi, Sinaïda and the chorus; this section is a small masterpiece, no question about it. The following scene, in which Pharaoh announces that once the Israelites leave his son will be married to a foreign princess, is also surprisingly dramatic. But then, at the climax of the scene, Rossini reverts to his bouncy-cheerful-tune mode, thus spoiling the effect. And, of course, there's the transcendent chorus towards the end of the last act, "Des cieux où tu resides" ("Dal tuo stellato soglio" in the Italian translation), which Rossini only wrote because there was a complicated change of scenery before the last scene of the opera and the stagehands needed roughly four minutes to effect it.

All of this, and more in this opera, tells you that Rossini *knew* how to write dramatically. Compared to any of the operas discussed in the previous chapter, however, at least half of it sounded shallow, often losing a musical connection to the drama in the text. Unfortunately, opera audiences ate this style up. They were rather tired of the dramatic school of opera with its "lack of tunes" they could hum on their way out of the theater, and wanted entertainment mixed into their serious scores, thus tunes and rhythms which had previously been solely the province of comic operas were now routinely incorporated into serious works. Listeners had no problem at all listening to music that sounded more like music-hall entertainment on the opera stage, and the more you could cram coloratura runs and high notes into them, the more they ate it up.

In addition to the de-emphasis on drama, the bel canto composers also simplified the harmonic shifts—some subtle, some sudden and quite dramatic—which had been a part of the musical vernacular since the time of Lully. Opera was headed down a path of mass consumption but artistic decline from which it did not recover, with rare exceptions, for a century.

Although there are several recordings of *Mosé*, particularly in the Italian-sung version of the 1827 score, the only one that really satisfies me in terms of dramatic conducting in conjunction with dramatic singing is the old 1956 Philips recording with Nicola Rossi-Lemeni (*Mosè*), Mario Filippeschi (*Aménolfi*), Giuseppe Taddei (*Pharaoh*) and Caterina Mancini (*Anaïde*), conducted by Tullio Serafin. Serafin is the only conductor to minimize, as much as possible, the cheap, bouncy rhythms of the score and zero in on its dramatic aspects. In addition, Rossi-Lemeni, though not possessing the most powerful or resonant bass voice of his time, is clearly much deeper into the character than any of his competitors, and Mancini, a soprano more famous for her belt-'em-out high notes than subtlety, actually sings a more sensitive performance of *Anaïde* than anyone else. The only flaw in the casting is that Filippeschi, who had started out as a "bel canto" tenor, could no longer smoothly negotiate his runs by 1956. They sound rather clumsy, in fact, but he otherwise gives a sterling performance of the role.

The biggest drawback is that, due to lack of LP space, Serafin severely truncated Act III, both by shortening sections that he included and omitting some music (though, inexplicably, he gives us the whole of the ballet music, which he *did* cut in live performance), but this is a small price to pay. Besides, most of the music he cut or truncated is superfluous.

### ***Guillaume Tell* (1829)**

Throughout the period from 1809, when Spontini's "spectacle" opera *Fernand Cortez* premiered, to 1827, the year of Rossini's revised *Mosè*, French opera had been inching towards "spectacle" works with large stage sets, massive choral forces, and a load of characters all sing-

ing exciting, tuneful music, but it wasn't until 1828 that Daniel-François Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* gave the genre a name: Grand Opéra. Listening to Auber's opera today, we realize that it is so feeble as to make Rossini sound like Beethoven, but it was a huge hit and, from that point on, composers rushed to create long-winded works, generally four or five acts and lasting close to four hours of performance time (not counting intermissions), to give the public their money's worth. Eventually, the Grand Opéra style even infected Italian composers, and the craze for this kind of work lasted, unfortunately, into the late 19th century.

Thus by the time *Guillaume Tell* hit the Paris stage on August 3, 1829, Rossini was continuing a genre that had just recently been developed and, despite its flaws, it was clearly superior to *La Muette de Portici*. Yes, it's overlong and has a decent amount of superfluous music; it is by no means the unqualified masterpiece that others claim it is; but it was good enough to stay in the repertoire—at least, in France. The Italian censors were not so stupid as to not recognize the political allusions to the situation in Italy at that time, thus its performances in Rossini's home country were severely limited. The Teatro San Carlo in Naples produced it in 1833, but then did not give another production for roughly a half-century. The first performance at Teatro La Fenice in Venice did not take place until 1856. By some strange irony, despite the censors in that city, Vienna staged 422 performances of it between 1830 and 1907—and *they* were the ones Rossini was protesting in the first place!

Since this is one of Rossini's most famous operas, a plot synopsis is unnecessary, thus we'll get down to brass tacks. Everyone in the world knows the overture, and although it is clearly Rossini's best, it oddly does not contain a single theme to be heard in the rest of the work. Following the dramatic, rousing conclusion of this piece, we get pleasant, pastoral music, neither good nor bad, but pretty much a time-killer since it says nothing. This is followed by a pleasant chorus of peasants: another scene-setting piece, it goes in one ear and out the other. Even worse, this is followed by a pleasant but completely unnecessary tenor aria sung by a fisherman who is a peripheral character, never to be heard from again in the rest of the opera. More time-killing music, albeit time-killing music with a high C in it ("Hey, listen to THAT! Everyone applaud!"). Tell's entrance, however, takes some of this music, transfers it to the minor, and makes something surprisingly dramatic of it right off the bat...but here comes that ol' fisherman again for a reprise of his aria, now with Tell and a chorus of women chiming in. They all sing together as fishy-man hits another high C. Whoop-de-doo.

Then a surprising change of pace, as the horns, playing all by themselves, explore some hunting themes which lead into dramatic, fast music which alternates between minor and major with chorus. Not really bad at all, and it cleverly leads into music sung by Edwige, Arnold and Tell, then a fairly interesting chorus. The horns return, reading now into a rousing chorus. It's obvious, at this point, that Rossini had tried something new, making the chorus of peasants a "character" in the opera...and, for the most part, succeeding. This *was* an innovation, and an interesting one, though he ends this chorus in a predictable, formulaic fashion.

It must also be acknowledged that, from start to finish, the music he wrote for the principal character is essentially and consistently dramatic. Tell comes across as the forceful leader he was, and does so without cheap effects, exaggerations, or coloratura runs. Arnoldo, on the other hand, is simply a man of action despite his love for Mathilde, but if you accept that on its own terms his music is appropriate if sometimes a bit too show-offy. An excellent example is the duet "Ah, Mathilde!" which he sings with Tell, and although Rossini makes a fine contrast in this duet between the very serious, strong-minded hero and his impetuous, less thoughtful sidekick, the profusion of high notes, though fun to hear, are distracting because they are unnecessary. Yet, after the duet proper is over, this scene continues in an interesting fashion, building drama as the tempo accelerates and the music changes. And then, a device that is just a simple way to end the

music, and which Rossini will use time and time again in this opera: the orchestral fanfare ending on a major chord, then a pause for... applause. And probably lots of it. In this manner, he intentionally undermined some of the most dramatic moments in this work by making them nothing more than “Ta-daaa!” moments for the audience. This, too, would be a device used by Italian opera composers for the next 40 years.

Rossini continues in this fashion, hit and miss, for the remainder of the opera. Some good scenes, a few really great ones, and too many moments of innocuous “filler” music. Most of the characters are finely drawn musically—Mathilde, Tell’s son Jemmy, old Melcthal and the villain Gessler—without caricature or exaggeration. In these respects, *Tell* well deserves the praise it has gotten, but then there are all those other moments. I forgive him the ballet music because that was inserted against his instincts to meet Parisian convention, but several of the others, such as the wholly superfluous chorus in Act I, make one very frustrated at the results. One of his greatest achievements in this work is the Act I finale. After a dramatic stop-time duet in which Tell decides to row the renegade Leuthord across the lake, there’s a rare example of turning his famed “Rossini crescendo” to dramatic rather than a comic one, with Jemmy excitedly leading the charge with rocket-like high notes (for once, used dramatically rather than just for show) above the chorus of peasants trying to stop the invaders from pushing them back. This was yet another masterful moment in this work, as are the outstanding Mathilde-Arnoldo duet in Act II and the scene where Tell shoots the apple off Jemmy’s head. “Resta immobile” may well be the most deeply moving aria Rossini ever wrote.

There are three stereo commercial recordings of *Guillaume Tell*, two in French and one in the Italian translation, and ironically it’s the Italian-language performance that is the best, with Sherrill Milnes as Tell, Luciano Pavarotti as Arnoldo, Della Jones as Jemmy, Mirella Freni as Mathilde, Nicolai Ghiaurov as Gualtier and Ferruccio Mazzoli as Gessler, conducted by Riccardo Chailly.

Following the success of *Guillaume Tell*, however, Rossini completely retired from opera. My own thoughts on the subject are three: 1) he probably knew he couldn’t top *Tell*, so he didn’t even try; 2) he was tired of fighting with impresarios who didn’t like this or that about his work, fighting with librettists who didn’t always give him what he wanted, as well as fighting with censors; and 3) he had become extremely wealthy in a fairly short period of time, and just wanted to live a quiet life, writing more music when and if he chose to, which he did. Truthfully, like Tell, he had shot his arrow, hit his mark, and won the contest. Let the other bel canto boys fight it out.

### ***Spontini: Olimpie* (1819, revised 1826)**

All the while the “Rossini revolution” was going on, Gaspare Spontini was seething, knowing that the younger man’s style was built on his own which he had rejected as too shallow for something as serious as opera. Fortunately, he had one more great opera up his sleeve for Paris before he moved on to Germany, and that was *Olimpie*. The libretto by Armand-Michel Dieulafoy and Charles Brifaut, based on Voltaire’s play of the same name, reached back once again to historical drama. Antigone, King of a part of Asia, and King Cassandre of Macedonia are complicit in the murder of Alexander the Great; they were also at war with each other, but are now ready to be reconciled. The snag in the peace talks is the slave girl Aménais, with whom both kings are in love. The other snag, unknown to either, is that Aménais is really Alexander’s daughter Olimpie in disguise. As an extra fly in the ointment, her mother (and Alexander’s widow) Statira is disguised as the priestess Arzane, and it is she (posing as a priestess) who denounces the proposed marriage of Aménais to Cassandre, accusing him of Alexander’s murder.

In the second act, Olimpie and Statira reveal their true identities to Cassandre, but ironically Olimpie defends Cassandre against her mother’s accusations because he once saved her life.

Mom, however, is unconvinced, and plots with Antigone's army to kill Cassandre. During the clash, however, it is Antigone who is mortally wounded; just before dying, he admits that it was he alone to killed Alexander, which makes Olimpie and Cassandre free to marry. Boy, is mom's face red!

Perhaps to compete a bit with Rossini, Spontini wrote a surprisingly peppy score for this very serious drama, including a surprisingly lightweight opening chorus but, still being Spontini, the music uses quickly contrasting tempi and tries to sound more martial and less like Italian dance music. He also wrote more continuous and unified scenes, and the orchestrally-accompanied sung recitatives have more *gravitas*. In short, *Olimpie* sounded like more mature and sophisticated Rossini, one might say a possible post-*Tell* Rossini mixed in with elements of Gluck. Even more so than *La Vestale*, the different scenes of *Olimpie* are also better bound together and more continuous; each of the three acts thus flows like a river, changing tempi and mood but in an almost real-time manner. Each exchange of dialogue, duet, chorus and aria grows out of the one preceding and is cleverly dovetailed into the one succeeding it.

Another Rossini-like feature of *Olimpie* is a more conscious use of catchy melodies—again, not as pop-music or concert-band-related as Rossini's, but clearly more tuneful than previously. What amazes the listener is how well Spontini walks this artistic tightrope throughout the opera, never losing sight of the underlying drama of the story even though the end result is probably more tuneful and accessible to an average audience than *Vestale* was. Yet in listening to the first-act duet “Vous, amis de la gloire, et vous, peuples fidèles,” one notices the more elegant mordents (turns) in the vocal line and a much more sensitive treatment of the French language. Rossini was very good at mimicking the rhythms of French in his French operas, but it still didn't sound completely idiomatic; Spontini does.

There are also, here, a few “Ta-daa!” moments at the ends of ensembles, as one heard in *Guillaume Tell*. The difference is that Spontini immediately picks up the music to begin the next scene without pauses for applause. And, as usual, Spontini makes much more of sudden key changes, not only in moving from scene to scene but sometimes within scenes, all of which propel the drama with an almost implacable drive forward. There is a tremendous amount of nervous energy in *Olimpie* that is absent from his other great operas, even from the much later *Agnes von Hohenstaufen*. *Olimpie* envelops the listener in a continuous stream and storm of music, with occasional moments of relaxation before it is urged forward once again. It was a remarkable and unique achievement. The Olimpie-Cassandre duet in the first act, for instance (“Ô doux accents, bonheur supreme”), almost has the drive of early Verdi, but with more of a French than an Italian melodic line.

In a way, then, *Olimpie* was something new: almost a symphony for solo voices, chorus and orchestra...one might say a dramatic cantata converted into a staged opera. Although, of course, I have no proof of this, I think it a strong possibility that, later in life, Verdi may have chanced across the score of *Olimpie* (possibly recommended to him by Arrigo Boïto, who was an intellectual who was interested in German and French as well as Italian operas) before embarking on the score of *Otello*. The dramas presented in each of these two works is, of course, very different, as was Verdi's musical solutions, but at bottom the similarities are surprisingly strong. There is nothing in *Olimpie* that even remotely suggests any contemporary Italian opera (except, in terms of melodic construction, *Guillaume Tell*) or in fact any Italian opera before *Otello*, but once you've heard *Olimpie* you'll swear that it was *Otello's* French great-grandfather.

Act II opens with stately, dramatic music in F, initially played by the horns over low strings, that (naturally) morphs into F minor just prior to the chorus' entrance—yet it still occasionally dips back into the major. The duet between Statira and the Hierophant (high priest) has dramatic string tremolos and “driving” bass lines behind the voices, then later “stop-time” or-

chestral chords and sudden, upward-rushing string chords, devices that Rossini never used, which heighten the drama. Yet this act, with its more strophic vocal lines and stop-start pacing, is closer to *Vestale* than the other two...not a bad thing, just not forward-looking. But Act II is constructed on a somewhat more intimate scale, for it is here that several of the issues noted in the synopsis are worked out between the various characters. Act III, which represents the battle, confession and death of Antigone, is nearly as driving in a frenetic manner as the first. Listen, for example, to the scene “Seigneur, Cassandre est libre” with its rapid alternation of the various voices in the ensemble as well as the rhythmic push forward—and then, towards the end, a sudden slowing down of tempo as the key suddenly jumps from E major to G major by way of a diminished chord. Such sudden key shifts are present in later Verdi, but if such things ever did occur to Rossini, he clearly did not use them; his aim was not purely dramatic music, but “dramatic entertainment,” which is not the same thing.

At “Quels accents affoyables,” all hell breaks loose in one of those wonderful Spontini orchestral outbursts that suddenly fill the hall with a thundering tremor of massed sound. The militaristic music builds and increases, suddenly using cross-rhythms (again, a device that never occurred to Rossini), rising harmonies during a bass recitative, a choral-orchestral crescendo, then quietude for a bit. Later on, after an exquisite choral-vocal passage, the opera wraps up in a brief but spirited blaze of glory.

There are two excellent recordings of *Olimpie*, both (happily) in French, although both have cuts in the score. Despite the sometimes fluttery voice of Kate Aldrich as Statire, the preferred version is the one with Karina Gauvin (*Olimpie*), tenor Matthias Vidal (*Cassandre*) and Josef Wagner (*Antigone*), conducted by Jérémie Rhorer on Bru Zane. The earlier recording, though boasting starrier names in the cast (Julia Varády, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Franco Tagliavini), somehow misses the mark, in part because none of them can sing French well enough for the words to have the right “point” in time with the musical rhythms.

### ***Vincenzo Bellini* (1801-1835)**

The shortest-lived of the big three bel canto composers, Vincenzo Bellini left us, in my view, with three masterpieces. Everyone knows *Norma* and the less dramatic but exquisitely lovely *La Sonnambula*, but not that many are as intimately familiar with *Il Pirata*, thus I will spend considerable space on it. Born in Catania, Sicily to a musical family (his grandfather, after whom he was named, had studied at the Naples Conservatory), he was a child prodigy and as such spoiled and preened over. Thus it isn't surprising that he developed a snobbish attitude towards others, including his fellow composers, who he considered to be beneath him. His letters to a former fellow student of his, Francesco Florimo, reveal some of the most condescending things any known composer has ever committed to paper. He certainly was a genius, but he lorded it over everyone else and made himself out to be the martyr any time one of his operas flopped.

But the opera we will consider first was anything but a flop, and although it is frequently overlooked it is one of the most important and influential operas of its time.

### ***Il Pirata* (1827)**

To the best of my research online, *Il Pirata* appears to be the first opera to use the later-overworked plot formula of the good nobleman driven from his domain by an evil one who either lays low in hiding for several years or takes on the mantle of a thief or vagabond in order to eventually win back his estate and the hand of a lady he loves. If this plot device now seems hackneyed, it was certainly fresh at one time, and although the titles of duke or count no longer

apply it has also been in use in movie scripts for generations. This over-familiarity has lent a pallor over such operas as this, but in 1827 it was all very fresh, new, and considered quite dramatic.

Of course much of the music of *Il Pirata* uses the Rossini model, but that is only to be expected. In Italy as well as France, tuneful, bouncy and lightweight music was so strongly preferred to the dramatic school of Gluck and Spontini that almost no operas were staged there which did not conform to that style. Even Louise Bertin (1805-1877), a brilliant musician, was forced to compromise her Gluck-oriented style with Rossinian frou-frou in her recently-discovered 1831 opera *Fausto* in order to have it premiered at the Théâtre-Italien. It was with great regret on my part that I chose not to include *Fausto* in this book; the strong and original music is indeed striking, but the blatantly inconsistent style is off-putting and undermines the good things in the score. And sadly, Bertin's later opera *Esmeralda*, based on *Le Notre-Dame de Paris* and featuring a libretto by Victor Hugo himself, was nearly all in the Rossini style. That's how dominant things were in those days.

Bellini, in many ways a disciple of Rossini, differed from him in certain respects, some subtle and some obvious. The obvious was his propensity for long lines in the music, not only in the course of arias but also in whole scenes, which bound the music together in a way that no other Italian composer was able to equal until mid-period Verdi. This particular aspect of his craft had an enormous impact on the young Richard Wagner, and in fact scholars have traced a direct link between *Il Pirata* and the latter's *Das Liebesverbot*. The subtler aspects of his scores included wedding a simplistic use of harmony with complex rhythms and, in *Pirata*, an extension of the Baroque and Classical period's use of coloratura passages in a dramatic rather than a purely decorative manner. In fact, it was *Pirata* which brought this quality to its fruition in his work; he was never quite able to equal, let alone surpass, what he achieved in the second act of this score. Yet like Rossini himself, Bellini always seemed either incapable or unwilling to give any *gravitas* to fast passages, even those meant to depict storms, shipwrecks or dramatic arguments. He was primarily a melodist and stuck by his guns no matter what.

And yet his librettist from *Il Pirata* onwards, Felice Romani, known for being curt and uncooperative with the composers he worked with, almost immediately responded to Bellini's aesthetic because he, at least, found an artistic soulmate in the Sicilian-born composer. After Bellini's shocking early death from "an acute inflammation of the colon compounded by an abscess in the liver," Romani wrote "no other composers know as well as Bellini the necessity for a close union of music with poetry, dramatic truth, the language of emotions, the proof of expression. I sweated for fifteen years to find a Bellini! A single day took him from me!"

Although the opera goes on for about two and a half hours, the plot, though typically a bit convoluted, boils down to this. Gualtiero, a 13th-century Count of Montalto driven from his landed property by the evil Ernesto, the Duke of Caldora, has been living for a few years as a pirate with his crew of bloodthirsty cohorts, but being of noble birth he is paradoxically their leader as well as the mildest of their lot. Their ship is wrecked in a fierce storm and tossed, broken, onto land. The first person to approach him is his old tutor, Goffredo, who now lives as a hermit ("Solitario" in Italian); the second, offering help, is none other than the woman Gualtiero loves, the lady Imogene. He hides from her at first, only gradually reveals himself, and at first she doesn't recognize him. Eventually he reveals who he is, only to discover that Ernesto forced her to marry him by threatening to kill her father. Slowly but sorely, Ernesto discovers who the mysterious pirate-king is: it turns out that he and his men were responsible for helping to wreck the pirate ship. Eventually he learns from Itulbo, Gualtiero's confidante, that they came from Liguria and starts to add things up. Ernesto confronts Imogene for her being with the pirate king and accuses her of being unfaithful, but she claims that her love for Gualtiero is based only on



their past encounters. Ernesto believes her until he receives a note reporting that Gualtiero is back in his old castle.

The upshot of all this is that both Itulbo and Imogene separately approach Gualtiero and urge him to flee his castle, but he then invites Imogene to join him on the ship they now have waiting to take them away. Trying to remain faithful to her husband, Imogene refuses at first, but in a dramatic duet she vacillates in her feelings for him. Meanwhile, Ernesto has arrived and hidden himself in an alcove where he overhears the end of their duet before confronting him. Imogene tries to break up the confrontation, but both men are determined to end their feud by a duel. Gualtiero kills Ernesto and, to the amazement of all, then gives himself up as his killer, willing to stand trial for his crime. In a scene which foreshadows *Aida*, the Knights convene and condemn Gualtiero to death; as the scaffold is being erected, Imogene loses her reason, ranting over this turn of events as the opera ends.

The one undiluted glory of this opera is the way Romani and Bellini crafted their words and music for Imogene. For the first time in any opera, the female protagonist emerges not as a two-dimensional character to simply be treated badly by fate, but rather as a thinking and caring person who fully understands the ramifications of her words and actions and, throughout, acts honorably, making valid moral decisions in light of her social situation. She would gladly run off with Gualtiero were she not married to Ernesto, yet despite his knowing that her marriage was forced, she is determined to take the moral high ground, even when her husband is absent and her former lover is begging her to flee with him. If nothing else, she reasons, this stance will protect him from harm, but when he explodes in rage and kills her husband she only wishes him to flee for his safety. Because of his noble nature and strong ethics he turns himself in. She probably knows what the verdict will be but still cannot bear to lose both husband and lover all at once. Here, at last, is a justifiable reason for a mad scene.

Moreover, it is not just Romani who has built up her character so carefully and so well. It is also Romani, and between the two of them they have indeed created a strong woman—a real rarity in Italian operas of this time. It was not, then, surprising that a committed reviver of bel canto operas from the gutter of cheap melodrama like Maria Callas was determined to perform the opera, which she did twice, but never recorded it commercially.

This may have been in part due to the lightweight music that dominates Act I, but the real reason is that the roles of Gualtiero and Ernesto are so difficult to cast because they were written for voice types which had all but disappeared by the late 1950s. The former was crafted for Giovanni Battista Rubini, a tenor who sang (using both head voice and a mixture of head and chest voice) into the upper stratosphere, able to go up to the F above high C with some power in addition to being able to sing roulades and trills. This has made Gualtiero virtually inaccessible to modern-day tenors without, at the very least, transposing that ungodly high range down to a manageable *tessitura*. But Ernesto is also a problem, calling for a *baritone* who can sing firmly and dramatically in addition to negotiating coloratura runs. In her La Scala performance, Maria Callas used the baritone Ettore Bastianini who could negotiate at least some of these when he sang Figaro in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. In her New York concert performance, she used Constantino Ego, the Greek baritone who had previously sung the baritone version of Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Neither were particularly fluent in this music, and both performances were cut.

I still don't know why Bellini opened this dramatic work with such extraordinarily bouncy music in the overture, even though he does include some melodic but more serious-sounding themes. Thus the larger section of the overture is surprisingly good, but it opens and closes with rubbishy music inappropriate to the dramatic situation to follow. The pirate ship lands with a crash not too dissimilar from what Verdi later achieved in *Otello*, also with the chorus singing in a minor key (it's quite possible that he took this opening of *Pirata* as a model), but three and a

half minutes into it, it turns to the major and, although the music is quite beautiful, it undermines the dramatic impact. The choral *cabaletta*, I suppose, was meant to depict their gratitude at finally being on terra firma. But why use a mixed chorus? Pirates don't travel with their wives or girlfriends. Even Romani should have known that.

Probably because Rubini was a tenor known for simply singing a role and not interpreting it, Gualtiero's music sounds manly and forthright but has little or no subtlety of character written into it. His duet with Goffredo (Solitario) is often set to a brisk bolero rhythm, effective without being particularly strong in drama. Imogene's entrance is served up by brisk, ceremonial-type music in the orchestra, but her entrance, on a high G at full volume, immediately signals a significant dramatic shift. Here is no poor young thing who's too weak or simple-minded to handle herself, but a firm-minded woman who knows what she is about. Nothing else in the entire history of opera, up to this point, had been so galvanizing as this entrance of Imogene. She is clearly the model for Abigail in Verdi's later *Nabucco*. Interestingly, Bellini somehow made Gualtiero's ardent but less powerful responses complement her vocal outbursts in the ensuing sung recitative with orchestra, which leads into a fascinating minor-key duet with chorus, one of the finest things he ever wrote—yet only a few moments in this duet remind one that we are listening to Bellini, with his long lines and falling cadences, particularly Imogene's long solo spot which sounds eerily like a precursor of *Norma*.

Unfortunately, Bellini ruins this moment by writing the ensuing chorus (with Itulbo) in a bouncy 6/8 rhythm that sounds like a carnival party (complete with flowing liquor). Fun to listen to, but so what? The short scene for Imogene and her attendant Adele, however is quite well tied to the meaning of the text, as is the ensuing Imogene-Gualtiero duet. Things continue this way to the end of the act. the finale of which starts with Ernesto's entrance and includes a semi-parlando duet with Imogene. This then works its way into a scene with Gualtiero, then a trio, all of which Bellini builds up masterfully—he never quite achieved anything this subtle and musically interesting ever again. The last five minutes of Act I is really quite terrific, formula though it may be, with nice low string tremolos behind the singers, a driving rhythm, and numerous small key changes.

Yet as good as this is, in the words of Al Jolson, “You ain't heard nothin' yet” until we get to the long Ernesto-Imogene duet. This is where Bellini pulled out all the stops, creating a surging whirlwind of dramatic music to match the dark mood of the former and the alternating conciliatory and resolute stance of the latter. Biting string tremolos underline the edgy recitative, and even when the tempo gets going at a fast clip, it sounds more dramatic than frivolous. Ernesto's dark threats contain some of the most intricate baritone coloratura passages I've ever heard in my life, and none of them are meant to sound frivolous; the jagged edges of his lines fully underline his rage and jealousy. When the scene is finally over, you feel as if you've been released from an emotional straitjacket. All of your emotions are drained, and all you can do is explode with applause, even if you're just listening at home, if for no other reason than to let all the tension out. Then, when Gualtiero enters, another surprise as the confrontation scene with Ernesto morphs into a waltz in which he tries to explain his feelings to the startled Imogene as Ernesto fumes in coloratura runs underneath them. Bellini not only never topped this music, he never came close to its genius ever again, not even in “Mira, o Norma.” At the end, when the tempo slows way down, he gives us music that makes the three voices blend and shimmer. It's an effect I've never heard from any composer in any opera from any period or genre. And if all this weren't enough, there is Imogene's final scene in which she becomes unhinged when Gualtiero is being killed, by far the best bel canto-era “mad scene” ever written.

I've gone over *Il Pirata* in such detail because it's not an opera that even most bel canto fans know unless they're into Callas, and her very defective artifact tells us next to nothing of the

many glories cited above. And, of course, even the score can just suggest what I've described. Unless you hear an actual performance that brings all of these things out, it's just my word against the Callas performance and the semi-awful recordings by Caballé and Aliberti.

So where did I hear all these glorious things? In one live performance given in Amsterdam in 2003 with soprano Nelly Miricioiu (Imogene), tenor Stefano Secco (Gualtiero), baritone Albert Schagidullin (Ernesto), with able assistance from Giacchino Lauro LiVigni (Itulbo) and Carole Wilson (Adele), conducted as nearly perfectly as one could wish by Giuliano Carella with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. As of this writing, it's available for free streaming on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrHDzk69j8c>, but if it's not there you can order it very inexpensively from House of Opera. You won't be disappointed, I promise you.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming success of *Pirata* went to Bellini's head as frivolous opera followed frivolous opera in his musical canon: a revised version of an earlier opera, *Bianca e Gernando*, plus such new works as *La straniera*, *Zaira* and *I Capuleti ed i Montechi*, cited on Wikipedia as a "major achievement" (but not in my book).

With *La Sonnambula*, however, the string of rubbish was momentarily halted. Although *Sonnambula* is just a light lyric opera with just a whiff of the tragic about it, and not a really dramatic work, here Bellini hit his stride in creating almost a whole opera out of those long-lined melodies for which he is so beloved. Taken on its own merits, outside the purview of this study, a good performance of *La Sonnambula* casts a hypnotic spell on listeners, captivating them with its delicate, almost fragile music. In terms of setting and sustaining a mood outside the realm of drama, then, *La Sonnambula* was a trend-setting work.

### ***Bellini: Norma* (1831)**

Interestingly, Bellini's next project was to have been an operatic version of Victor Hugo's swashbuckling play *Hernani*. This, of course, was to become one of the young Giuseppe Verdi's earliest successes, but Bellini abandoned it not because he wasn't interested but because the plot, like that of *Guillaume Tell*, was a protest opera against the occupation of Italy by the Austrians, and Bellini was being harassed by the police at every step in its development. What he would have made of it is anyone's guess, but what transpired was that he then wrote his finest opera, *Norma*.

I found it interesting to discover that *Norma* wasn't his idea at all, but rather a commission from the management group Crivelli and Company for a December 1831 premiere at La Scala featuring the debut of the sensational Italian soprano of the day, Giuditta Pasta. Bellini already admired Pasta; in fact, although the role was lyrical rather than dramatic, she had created Adina in *La Sonnambula* for him. Pasta's sister, the mezzo-soprano Giulia Grisi, was to create Adalgisa, and Domenico Donzelli, a "baritenor" who sang his high notes (but only up to a B-flat) in chest voice, was to create Pollione. Interestingly, the plot is a combination of *Medée* and *La Vestale*, the differences being that Norma, unlike Medea, cannot bring herself to kill the two children she had by Pollione, and the latter, unlike Jason, was gallant enough to volunteer to die on the funeral pyre with her.

The music Bellini wrote for *Norma*, like that of Rossini's *Mosè*, alternates in a frustrating manner between shallow entertainment and real, striking drama, yet both ends of the musical spectrum were brought to extremes. The entertaining music in *Norma* is, at times, even worse than the entertaining music in *Mosè* while the dramatic passages are even better. Still, the frustrating juxtaposition of drama and pure entertainment has made *Norma* a work sought out by great singing actresses (and sometimes, for Pollione, great singing actors) despite the pop-music bias of the rest of it.

The overture is surprisingly good, contrasting clipped orchestral chords with quick, racing violin figures in the minor. Oroveso's "Ite sul colle, o Druidi" is a nice aria, stately but not too cheap-sounding, and the following chorus is also good. Then comes Pollione's entrance, with a fine recitative ("Svanir la voce!") with Flavio, which leads into a somewhat formulaic aria, "Me-co l'altar di Venere," although its military-style rhythm allows him to establish his macho identity as a soldier. Then comes the chorus of Druids, followed by Norma's entrance. After an exchange of words with Oroveso, she sings her famous aria, "Casta diva, che inargenti," one of Bellini's most acclaimed long-lined melodies. This is purely a show-off piece for the soprano; if she can sing those long lines in one breath, or at least give the illusion of doing so, she will win over her audience and get lots of applause...but of actual drama, there is none. It's just a very pretty show piece. Her cabaletta "O bello a me ritorna," on the other hand, is music that *can* be but isn't often interpreted dramatically; as a piece of music, it's effective if rather predictable.

This is followed by a pretty "nothing" orchestral interlude, which leads into a recitative by Adalgisa which also goes pretty much nowhere, followed by an arietta (if you can call it that) that simply fills time. At this point, depending on how fast the conductor's tempos are, we're between 47 to 49 minutes into the opera, and except for Pollione's aria, we haven't gone far into the story or established much in the way of drama. Yet there are people who complain that *La Vestale* is slow paced. Go figure.

But audiences, then and now, don't care about the things I've just mentioned, because they don't go to the opera to see a sung drama. They go to hear pretty tunes sung by glorious voices with High Notes, and the more glorious the voice and the more ringing the high notes, they're just thrilled.

Back to our regularly scheduled dissertation, the recitative by Adalgisa eventually leads into a sung recitative-duet with Pollione, which in turn leads to a pretty good duet. After this, the music picks up in both feeling and connection to the drama. Norma, visibly upset, tells her maid Clotilde to take the two children which she had with Pollione away from her. Adalgisa approaches, telling Norma that she has fallen in love with a Roman, but does not give his name. Adalgisa begs Norma to forgive her falling in love, which Norma agrees to do as well as to free her from her vows as a priestess so she is free to marry...until she learns that the man Adalgisa has fallen in love with is none other than Pollione. An interesting feature of this duet is that Bellini used the same four-note bass line in the background as he had used earlier in "Casta diva." After the duet, Norma sings a solo that turns into a duet with Pollione, then a trio with Adalgisa chiming in. Again, nice music but no drama.

Fortunately, things pick up thereafter as we move into "Oh! Dio qual sei tu vittima," "Perfido!...O basti!" and the grand finale of the first act, "Vanne, si: mi lascia, indegno." Suddenly, we realize what Bellini has done, which is to create a long arc of music lasting over a half an hour, hopefully unbroken by applause, as a way of using lyricism and subtle shifting rhythms to create an hypnotic effect. This was something entirely new in opera; although Mozart could concoct long finales to the first acts of *Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, he never really attempted anything of this kind. In Act II, he wrote a variation on this, opening a scene with a fairly dramatic exchange between Clotilde and Norma before moving into a very long yet mesmerizing duet with Adalgisa, going through the orchestrally-accompanied recitative "Me chiami, o Norma!" into "Deh! con te, il prendi" and finally the more famous (and more lyrical) "Mira, o Norma" followed by the cabaletta, "Cedi! Deh! Cedi!" In this way, Bellini was able to build up his drama slowly, gradually...one might almost say, in real time rather than in "operatic" time. One of the few moments of, one might say, unexpected excitement comes in the second act when, angry at Pollione and wishing to see him killed in battle, Norma rings the temple gong and urges the citizens off to war against the Romans as Norma shrieks, "Blood! Blood! Revenge!"

Considering its iconic status in the Bellini canon, it is instructive to realize that *Norma* was a fiasco on its opening night and remained so for the rest of the run. It wasn't until it was revived at Bergamo, nearly a year after its premiere in Milan, that it slowly but surely came to be appreciated for its unusual construction and the way Bellini subtly built the drama.

There are no really good commercial recordings of *Norma*. Not one. But there are three commercially-issued live performances that are excellent, starting with the 1952 London performance with Maria Callas (Norma), Ebe Stignani (Adalgisa) and Mirto Picchi (Pollione), conducted by Vittorio Gui. Only Picchi is slightly disappointing, not vocally—he sounds terrific—but from the standpoint of interpretation. Then there's the 1976 San Francisco performance with Cristina Deutekom, Tatiana Troyanos and Robleto Merolla (who was sort of a junior Mario del Monaco) conducted by Carlo Felice Cillario, but the best one of all is a 1975 Orange Festival performance (a huge outdoor arena, so the sound quality isn't the best) with Montserrat Caballé, who actually coached the role with Callas (after she heard the performance, Callas sent Caballé the pair of diamond earrings given to her in the 1950s by one stage director), Jon Vickers as Pollione, and Josephine Veasey as Adalgisa.

### ***Gaetano Donizetti* (1797-1848)**

For most of my life, until a couple of years ago, I was of the opinion that Donizetti was the most poorly-trained musician of the big three Bel Canto composers. My opinion was based on virtually every serious opera I had heard by him, including—perhaps especially—his “Queen” trilogy of operas. Then I heard the string quartets that he wrote as a teenager, and my opinion shifted quite a bit; after that, I heard the Requiem Mass that he wrote in memory of Bellini's tragic early death, which is a really outstanding piece of music. That's when it came to me that, moreso than his competitors, Donizetti wrote “down” to the lowest common denominator in his operas.

His most famous and justly popular opera is a comedy, *L'Elisir d'Amore*, and it is indeed a masterpiece on a par with Rossini's *Il barbiere*. I also get a kick, once in a while, out his whimsical comic farce *La fille du Regiment*, but even I could tell that in that opera Donizetti was really just clowning around. Of his serious operas, the most famous and most widely performed is *Lucia di Lammermoor*, premiered not too long after Bellini's death. One of the reasons why the opera was so popular and drew so much attention was that, at the time, there was a surprisingly widespread interest in Scotch history and culture. Their violent wars and feuds as well as its folklore and mythology intrigued many people according to Wikipedia.<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* inspired several musical works, including Donizetti's opera.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835)**

As in the case of so many of these “bel canto” operas—only so named in the 20th century (back then they were just contemporary operas, no designation), there are some very dramatic moments surrounded by trashy tunes that have no musical relationship to the actual words being sung, exhilarating but superfluous high notes, and lots of full stops in the score to allow the au-

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucia\\_di\\_Lammermoor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucia_di_Lammermoor)

<sup>3</sup> The plot of Sir Walter Scott's original novel is based on an actual incident that took place in 1669 in the Lammermuir Hills area of Lowland Scotland. The real family involved were the Dalrymples. While the libretto retains much of Scott's basic intrigue, it also contains very substantial changes in terms of characters and events. In Scott's novel, it is her mother, Lady Ashton, not Enrico, who is the villain and evil perpetrator of the whole intrigue. Also, Bucklaw was only wounded by Lucy after their unfortunate wedding, and he later recovered, went abroad, and survived them all.

dience to applaud, thus stopping the flow of whatever drama the music had built up. Yet *Lucia* was the one serious Donizetti opera that seemed impervious to time and fashion. It was only in the early 1950s, when the title role was sung by Maria Callas, that people began to sit up and take notice that her role, at least, had some actual dramatic potential. Since then, we have had a few, but not many, similarly outstanding interpreters such as Leyla Gencer, Edita Gruberova and Natalie Dessay, but for the most part it is a case of a first-rate singing actress trying to overcome the banality of the music.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. First we need to run through the opera scene by scene and judge whether or not the music written for each scene was dramatically appropriate or not and, even more so than in the two Rossini operas and Bellini's *Norma* already analyzed, I personally found *Lucia* much more problematic because it caters far more to the popular taste in tunes. The plot is familiar to most opera lovers, depicting the long-standing feud between the Ashtons and the Ravenswoods. The love engendered between Lucy Ashton and Edgar Ravenswood is a Romeo and Juliet affair, doomed to fail simply because hate is stronger than love and blood thicker than water; in addition, Lucy's brother Henry is dead-set on her marrying Arthur Bucklaw because it would exonerate him from being on the wrong political side in a recent uprising. Raymond Bidebent, the go-between who at least tries to talk sense into Lucy's brother Henry (but inevitably fails), is the one big difference between the two stories.

The orchestral prelude, starting with soft, rumbling tympani and horns in the minor, is one of Donizetti's better creations, setting a dark mood which, as we shall see, is often spoiled by bouncy, cheerful music in the major, which happens immediately after the prelude is over. Yippy-i-o-ki-yay, we're Scotch and full of peppy Italian song-and-dance music. Why? Just to be entertaining, of course. Let's not take our hateful blood feuds too seriously, shall we? But then the music shifts to the minor again as Henry is introduced, and both this initial exchange with Norman and his ensuing aria, "Cruda, funesta smania" ("Dark, cruel anger you have stirred in me"), is actually excellent, suiting both the character and his mood very well, starting in G major but frequently moving in and out of the minor. Unfortunately, the Italian song-and-dance music returns immediately thereafter, fast at first, then settling into a comfy 6/8 barcarolle rhythm. *Why, Gaetano, WHY??* You were finally on the right track, but you derailed yourself, and this is immediately followed by a cabaletta (fast-paced concluding music) sung by Henry that spoils the effect of "Cruda, funesta."

Next scene, Lucy and her handmaiden Alisa at a fountain on the grounds of Lammermoor. Peppy orchestral chords and a long, over-florid harp solo introduce them. The sung recitative is somewhat mood-setting, not great but it could have been worse; there's a nice high A-flat in the middle of it for Lucia that makes a good point, and here the music moves into the minor. Her aria, "Regnava nel silenzio," is one of the better pieces in the opera, tautly written and fully matching the mood of the lyrics, but then we get the cabaletta "Quando rapito in estasi," replete with trills that make no dramatic sense but sure sound good. Then Edgar comes in heralded by strings and brass, sings his own little strophic recitative, then the duet "Sulla tomba" which seems to combine a few dramatic moments (from Edgardo) with some lyric interludes (from Lucia), but sooner rather than later, memorable tunes overtake any semblance of drama.

Time out here. After a half-century of listening to this stuff, and other Romantic-era instrumental music of a similar nature, I've come to a conclusion. These composers were so hung up on producing hit tunes to catch the ear of the public that they sometimes *couldn't* write more concisely...and this is a major difference between the better Baroque music and the Bel Canto Boys. At least the Baroque composers were able to create shorter, less involved tunes that could be developed musically, and often were, and within this musical development were strong cells of dramatic development., but when your goal is to have the audience whistle or hum your tunes

as they're leaving the theater, this is the kind of stuff that results. Here, one of the few truly dramatic moments in their long duet comes near the end of "Verrano a te," where Donizetti calls for the soprano to hit a high C and the tenor a high E-flat (yes, it's in the score, but almost never sung that way in performance because it's so difficult...sometimes it's reversed).

Act II, Scene 1 opens with nice music, again using horns and tympani as in the prelude, but now in a major key which signifies little or no drama. The confrontation scene between Lucy and Henry, in B minor, does create a mood of sadness and impending tragedy, however, and the former's rising, dramatic opening line bodes well—but then we go into a nice, peppy Italian tune in the major, and the effect is immediately ruined although the later part of the duet does move back to the minor. The offstage trumpets that come in near the end, however, provide an interesting musical and dramatic contrast—but again, the effect is spoiled by the bouncy cabaletta sung by brother and sister. It almost sounds like carnival music. But then, again, we hear some interesting music in the minor featuring Lucy and Raymond, who no longer supports her but lies to her about Henry's unfaithfulness. Despite a few bouncy moments, most of this duet works well dramatically, as it catches Lucy's mood perfectly, but of course Donizetti had to muck it up again with a swaggering tune for Ray to sing.

Next scene, the marriage celebrations suddenly interrupted by Edgar's return. For once the peppy music is appropriate; this is, after all, a celebration. Eventually, we reach the famous sextet, "Chi mi frena in tal momento?," a good piece of music but one in which only Lucy's lines expressing her confusion are really dramatic. Much better is the sextet-after-the-sextet, "T'allontana, sciagurata" in which the feuding members clash; this is one of the finest pieces in the entire opera, an absolute gem that both fits the drama and moves it forward. The end of the act, though a bit too bouncy for my taste, is also pretty good though not great.

Act III is pretty much divided between Lucy going bad (Scene 1) and Henry lamenting her death alone in the family tomb (Scene 2), and we all know how utterly feeble Lucy's mad scene is. Donizetti originally scored the accompaniment for glass harmonica instead of flute, but since there never were that many accomplished glass harmonica players and the instrument can barely be heard in the theater without a separate microphone, flute is what you normally get. It doesn't much matter; the music is so simple as to almost sound not insane but inane. I don't know anyone who *really* likes the mad scene from *Lucia*; even the sopranos who sing it normally find it boring. Although the more dramatically-inclined ones try to evoke a real feeling of madness in the character, the bottom line is that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. If Donizetti had only written something half as good as Electra's mad scene in *Idomeneo* or Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, you might have had something, but as it stands it's pretty idiotic music. The tomb scene can be effective when performed by a decent singing actor, which it normally isn't, and it goes on too long.

But if you think the original *Lucia* a defective piece of music drama, you haven't heard the French version that Donizetti wrote in 1839 for Paris. This was a thorough revision of the opera, almost an entirely different work set to a different libretto. Here, he eliminated "Lucie's" handmaid and confidante, Alisa, which isolates Lucie and thus increases the emotional impact of her madness. In this version, too, Lucie loses most of Raimondo's support; his role is reduced greatly while Arturo's is increased. There's also a new character, Gilbert, loosely based on the huntsman in the Italian version. Gilbert serves both Edgardo and Enrico, divulging each one's secrets to the other for money. And the music for Lucie is even less dramatic, with lots of coloratura folderol for soprano with flute and orchestrally-accompanied recitative where the more musically developed arias and scenes in the first part of the opera were formerly heard. All in all, it's like listening to "Lucia Lite."

As noted earlier, it's little strange to realize that the best interpretations of *Lucia* were sung by sopranos with odd, not-very-beautiful voices. Maria Callas, the groundbreaker, left us several performances and recordings of it, of which my personal favorite is still the original 1953 studio recording (I used to like the 1955 Berlin performance with Karajan, but have backed away from it). If you really feel that you need a note-complete recording, the one to get is the one with Edita Gruberová, Alfredo Kraus, Renato Bruson and Robert Lloyd, all excellent singing actors who at least try to get into the characters, conducted by Nicola Rescigno, but my absolute favorite performance, though missing some music that really isn't very good, is the live one with Leyla Gencer as Lucia and Giacinto Prandelli as Edgardo, despite the rather rough sound.

### *La Favorite* (1840)

We might stop right there with Donizetti, but oddly enough, he was able to create a fairly effective piece of musical drama in 1840. This was *La Favorite*, more commonly known (and performed) under its Italian title *La Favorita*. Originally, Donizetti had been writing *L'Ange de Nisida* as his second work for Paris, not at the Opéra but for the Théâtre de la Renaissance, but its director, Anténor Joly, suddenly declared bankruptcy in May 1840. In a letter, Donizetti complained that since *L'Ange de Nisida* was only good for that theater, he had been shafted by this "lamebrain" director ("ciuccio assaje") who spent money like water. Donizetti then began work on *Le Duc d'Albe*, but the Paris Opéra stepped in and commissioned a new opera to be written pronto; the catch was that director Léon Pillet insisted that it have a prominent role for his mistress, mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz. Donizetti thus abandoned *Le Duc d'Albe* and borrowed heavily from *L'Ange de Nisida* to create *La favorite*, but also included music from an old, unfinished opera buffa, *Adelaide*, including Inés's Act I aria "Doux zephyr," Alfonso's Act II cabaletta "Léonor, mon amour brave" and the final *concertante* scene of Act III, "Ô ciel!...De son âme." He wrote the entire final act in three to four hours, excepting the cavatina and part of a duet, which were added at the rehearsal stage!

Because of these factors, *La Favorite* was sometimes dismissed as a "pastiche" opera unworthy to be taken seriously. This was a major mistake, however, for somehow or other Donizetti created a lyric masterpiece in which scene followed scene with unerring musical and (often) dramatic sense. Arturo Toscanini, for one, considered it such, particularly the last act which he said contained not one false note.

Another reason why the opera is often dismissed is that the plot is considered to be too confusing. It is not confusing, it is complex, and there is a difference. In fact, I find it rather ironic—perhaps a subtle shot at Pillet—that the main character, the "favorite" of King Alphonso XI, is herself a mistress, thus Rosine Stoltz was singing to type.

In fact, one of the most fascinating aspects of the plot is that it actually de-sanctifies the Catholic Church in a way that was quite embarrassing in its time. Balthazar (bass) is the chief monk in a monastery as well as—get this—the father of the Queen of Castille. So already we have a question of ethics involved. A young monk, Fernand, confesses that he has fallen in love with a beautiful but unknown woman who he spotted. He remains faithful to his God but wants to leave the monastery to seek her out; Balthazar, the pot calling the kettle black, angrily sends him on his way, warning him of the dangers of the outside world.

Fernand finally finds his lady, learns that her name is Léonor and confesses his love for her, but doesn't really know who she is. Léonor's lady-in-waiting Inés leads him to her; Léonor says that they can never marry, but hands him a document to help him in the future. She leaves as the King arrives and Fernand discovers that the document is a commission in the army. As a soldier in Alphonse's army, Fernand proves his bravery and helps him win control of Alcazar. The King wants to divorce the Queen in order to marry Léonor, but knows that will incur the



wrath of his father-in-law, Balthazar, who may turn the Church against him. At a ceremony presenting a medal and honors to Fernand, Alphonse asks him to name his reward for his bravery. Fernand asks to be allowed to marry the woman who inspired his bravery; as he points to Léonor, the King is aghast, but sees this as a way out of his dilemma. He orders Fernand to marry Léonor within an hour; Léonor hastily sends Inés to give Fernand a note explaining who she really is, but Inés is arrested before she can do so. Learning only after the wedding ceremony that she is the King's mistress, Fernand breaks his sword, leaves Léonor and returns to Balthazar and the monastery.

But there is a twist to this story. The Queen eventually dies of heartbreak and grief, her body sent to the monastery for her father/head monk to give the funeral service. Léonor also arrives, in a state of exhaustion, and faints in front of the cross. Fernand initially rejects her but, moved by her love and sincerity, decides to love her again, but too late. Spent from hunger and exhaustion, Léonor dies in his arms.

On this richly textured plot full of conflicted characters, Donizetti lavished his greatest and most complete music. *La Favorite* and its Italian relative, *La Favorita* (not entirely the same music, but close enough), are essentially symphonies for voices. The sung recitatives are few, but no matter. The whole story is told in ariettas, duets, scenes and arias of such subtle complexity that no less an auditor than Richard Wagner transcribed the entire score in three instrumental arrangements, one for piano, the second for flute, and the third for a violin duo. Thirty-nine years later, Italian composer Antonio Pasculli wrote a double concerto for oboe and piano based on themes from the opera. Yet the work fell out of favor in theaters, mostly because there was less actual stage action than in *Lucia*. *La favorite* was much more of a psychological-musical drama, and that didn't sell well to action-oriented audiences.

The orchestral prelude to Act I is brooding and very well written, using a brief two-voiced fugue at the beginning and taken very slowly although with occasional outbursts by the strings and brass. The second half is fast-paced, but still in the minor with rapid, unexpected key changes both up and down. It's a brilliant start to a brilliant opera.

The ring of a church bell introduces the first scene in the monastery. Here the music is in the major, but quite stately; there is none of the "whoop-de-doo" quality that affected the opening scene of *Lucia*. The monks sing a stately and moving melody before Balthazar and Fernand enter, exchanging sung recitatives to orchestra, but with tempo changes and sudden surges in tempo here and there. Rameau and Gluck would have been proud of him for writing like this, and even the sudden appearance of Fernand's aria "Une ange, une femme inconnue" does not disrupt the mood because it is a *serious* aria with sincere words set to surprisingly dignified music...and it is not entirely an aria, because Balthazar sings the first line and interjects another in the middle. Following this, Donizetti does resort to some fast Italianate rhythms for a bit, but then slows down as Balthazar expressed his displeasure and tells Fernand to just go and leave.

One could give a moment-by-moment description like this of the whole opera, but listening to and absorbing what Donizetti did here is a greater experience than just reading about it. This is music that is not just "pretty," but truly beautiful because it contains dramatic truth. Aside from the ballet music—not his fault or choice—there is nothing that sounds a false note or seems out of place in *La Favorite*. Even the charming, pretty music which introduces Inés, just prior to Fernand meeting Léonor for the first time, makes sense because this is supposed to be a picnic for the wealthy.

With that being said, I feel the need to point out how clever Donizetti was in writing the King's music as warm, loving, and compassionate, even though he is cheating on his wife and trying to figure out a way to banish her so he can marry Léonor. This makes him an ambiguous character; for all his sexual machinations, he appears to be, at base, a good man, clearly not a Ne-

ro, and this in itself is an interesting moral dilemma presented by the *music*. It is also very difficult to sing Alfonso properly; the baritone must have a good dramatic sense for the big scenes, but also a melting legato and a well-supported half voice for all the long, lyric lines he is called upon to produce. And, of course, there is Léonor herself, who at heart is a good person who feels betrayed by Alfonso. At one point she sings to him:

*Do you think that I'm happy? Good heaven!  
When I left my father's castle, poor deceived girl,  
Alas! I thought that I was following a husband!*

**Alphonse** (*tenderly*): *Ah, be quiet!*

**Léonor**: *In these solitary woods which can hardly conceal the King's mistress,  
I am fully aware of your court's contempt for you...  
In your palace, my poor soul sighs,  
hiding its grief under gold and flowers;  
God alone sees it, under my cheerless smile,  
my withered heart swallows many tears.*

It is to Donizetti's great credit that these lines, and many others, are set here to music that accurately reflects their meaning and not some happy tune with bouncy rhythms.

Interestingly, we never see or hear the Queen; for all we know, *she* may have been a shrew, and the King married to her due to politics rather than love.

Within this mellifluous lyric setting, we may indeed wonder at the tenor's propensity to sing as many *forte* high notes as he does. I'm getting ahead of myself a little here, but this was because Fernand was created by Louis-Gilbert Duprez, the first tenor in operatic history to sing all of his high notes from the chest, even up to the high C, thus creating a mania for tenor high notes that, unfortunately, has never left us. Granted, there's a great visceral thrill to hearing such things, but visceral is all it is; and, as I've tried to explain over and over to a certain opera buff I know, belting out high notes may be dramatic from the standpoint of momentary excitement but it's not *drama*. What is dramatic is a scene that is usually cut right after Alfonso and Léonor sing their meltingly beautiful duet, "Dans ce palais." This is the superb dramatic scene "Bientôt j'aurai brisé," in which Alfonso suddenly explodes with rage against the Queen who keeps him from marrying her. Léonor is worried about the Church's reaction, but Alfonso doesn't care; when he promises to make Léonor his queen, she recoils in horror: "Oh never! No, never!" But Alfonso goes even further, threatening to make his courtiers who mock her "tremble before you." By omitting this important scene, the listener fails to understand the power-mad man beneath the suave vocal lines of his previous music.

As for the last act, set in the monastery, it opens with an organ solo which leads into the orchestral prelude, one of the few times an additional prelude to an act was used in those days. Balthazar sings, then the chorus; Donizetti's one error here was in making it a mixed chorus. The monastery would only have a male chorus, but at least the music is dignified and not pop-oriented. Fernand's famous aria, "Ange si pur" ("Spirto gentil" in the Italian version) fits into the fabric of the score like a hand in a glove; so, too, does Léonor's entrance, which is quiet and dignified, not announced with a load of coloratura fireworks. The orchestration behind her, with low notes from the cellos against soft, pizzicato violins, is also highly effective. The organ returns, now ushering in a fully male chorus singing softly, although the sopranos return once again. Perhaps this was a coed monastery. The music becomes more agitated, but stays in the minor—and

again, it is dignified music befitting the sad, tragic feeling of this final meeting with Fernand. Even when the tempo increases to match the dramatic situation, there is a unity in both mood and musical construction. Even when, later on in their duet, the music suddenly jumps into a faster rhythm, the minor key is maintained and the rhythm is not a cheap dance piece. Maintaining dignity in their music was not something the Bel Canto Boys were very good at, but for whatever reason, Donizetti pulled it all together in this shining jewel amidst the scrap heap of works from this period.

The best performance of the original French version is the live performance from August 22, 2014 with Elīna Garanča as Léonor, Juan Diego Flórez as Fernand—both surprisingly good because neither ever impressed me prior to this performance with their interpretive abilities (as opposed to having fine voices)—and the great baritone Ludovic Tezier, a bit too loud at times in the soft music but otherwise superb, as Alfonso XI, conducted by Roberto Abbado. This is on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7unMMYFS4n4>. Yet since Tezier is overloud in the opening scenes of Act II, I recommend splicing in the superb baritone Mattia Olivieri from the Dynamic recording; he is by far the best singer in this performance. And unfortunately, the outstanding missing scene “Bientôt j’aurai brisé” must be spliced in from the mostly awfully-sung recording on Naxos with baritone Florian Sempey and mezzo Annalisa Stroppa.

### **Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864)**

Although Giacomo Meyerbeer, born Jacob Liebmann Beer (he changed his last name to Meyerbeer in 1810 when he was still writing piano pieces), is rightfully credited with inventing (or, at the very least, perfecting) the genre which became known as Grand Opéra, he was in his own way a Bel Canto composer, but unlike Rossini and Donizetti, who despite a few good operas (discussed above), Meyerbeer was taken much more seriously as a composer by professional musicians and even fellow-composers. Schumann thought very well of him until the premiere of *Les Huguenots*, which deeply offended him for having the Lutheran hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, played during the stage spectacle of battle, but the non-religious Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner also admired him greatly, the latter until a letter of recommendation for the younger composer got lost in the mail and Wagner accused him of going back on his word to help promote him; yet neither Berlioz’ *Les Troyens* nor Wagner’s *Rienzi* and *Tannhäuser* could have existed without Meyerbeer as a model.

But since this is not a book about musical models and influences, but about opera as drama, one might well question Meyerbeer’s operas from that perspective. Anyone listening to them, particularly in their complete form, can escape the fact that Meyerbeer was an expert composer who used a variety of orchestral and vocal techniques to produce music of incomparable color and visceral impact, and each of his most famous operas contain at least some very dramatic scenes that were to influence future operas throughout the 19th century. Indeed, aside from their spectacular stage productions, Meyerbeer’s works are scarcely “operas” in the conventional sense of the word. They are tightly-knit and very long secular cantatas for soloists, chorus and orchestra, and in that respect they continued to have an influence into the 20th century. A great many composers, without crediting him, obviously learned a great deal from his work.

Meyerbeer originally began his professional life as a pianist, but quickly decided to give it up in order to dedicate himself to writing operas. In all, he wrote 19 works for the stage, two of which are lost and may never have been completed (*Der Admiral* in 1811 and *L’Amazore* c. 1821), nine of which preceded his first big “hit,” *Il crociato in Egitto* in 1824. His first three completed operas premiered in Germany, but with 1817’s *Romilda e Costanza* he turned several of them out for Italy before hitting the Paris stage with another big hit, *Robert le Diable*, in 1831.

It’s very interesting to start with *Il crociato*, in part because, like Donizetti’s *La Favorite*

and Meyerbeer's own later *Huguenots* and *Le Prophète*, it takes an ambiguous view of a religious battle (fictional in this case) in which neither side really has the moral high ground. It concerns a group of Christians enslaved in Egypt during the 13th century Crusades. Before the opera begins, Armando, missing presumed dead in fighting, has become confidante to the Sultan Aladino, under an assumed name. He has fallen in love with Aladino's daughter Palmiro, who has borne him a son, and has secretly converted her to Christianity. Adriano, Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, arrives at the Sultan's palace to negotiate a truce. There he recognizes Armando, as does Felicia, who has disguised herself as a knight to find her betrothed. Armando and the other Christian prisoners are thereupon sentenced to imprisonment and death. The ambitious Osmino arms the prisoners under Armando with the intention of killing the Sultan, but Armando exposes his treachery to the Sultan and instead kills Osmino. The Sultan relents, peace is agreed with the Knights, and Armando and Palmiro are reunited.

The music to which this is set doesn't really sound like the mature Meyerbeer of *Robert le Diable* onward, but more like Rossini if Rossini had taken post-graduate courses and received a doctorate as a composer under the tutelage of a real master like Cherubini or Spontini. Possibly because he was writing for Italy, Meyerbeer put on his Italian coat and turned out bouncy rhythms galore, particularly in the first half-hour of the opera, but he plays around with these rhythms in a way that Rossini never really did (or could), his scenes are continuous, and as always, his orchestration is off the charts in terms of color and his ingenuity at combining instruments in blends that never occurred to *any* of the Italian Bel Canto Boys (except Donizetti, but not in his operas but rather in his Requiem Mass for Bellini). Nearly all his more famous operas would contain more drama than *Il crociato*, yet this early outpouring of lyrical music ingeniously written and made to sound like a continuous thought from the opening overture to the end clearly shows a master composer at work. Just to point out one small section for example, listen to the orchestration behind "Urridi vezzose," the "Chorus of Favorites" in Act I, and marvel at Meyerbeer's use of a solo oboe with lower strings, triangle with French horns or, more ingenious yet, the use of a wind quintet in the manner of a Mozart *divertimento* as the rest of the orchestra drops out.

Yet the overriding impression one gets from this music, as also in the later works, is a sense of *pageantry*. Granted, this is high-class musical pageantry but pageantry all the same. And there is something else not read in the analysis of any other critic. That is his use of voices almost as if they were ballet dancers. Whenever his singers indulge in roulades, coloratura runs and trills, it almost sounds like French ballet music of the first order. This is the principal reason why Meyerbeer is so seldom performed nowadays and, when he is, finding the right cast is so difficult. His singers must be able to sing "on pointe," so to speak, and that is extremely difficult.

### ***Meyerbeer: Robert le Diable* (1831)**

Three years after the premiere of *Il crociato*, Meyerbeer began work on the opera that would make him the most famous and sought-after opera composer in France, *Robert le Diable*. Premiering in 1831 after four years of intense labor, *Robert* was an immediate hit with the public, critics and other professional musicians. Frydryk Chopin, no less, was moved to say, "If ever magnificence was seen in the theatre, I doubt that it reached the level of splendor shown in *Robert*...It is a masterpiece...Meyerbeer has made himself immortal."<sup>4</sup> Part of the reason for the opera's wild success was not just the music but the spectacular stage effects, among them a ballet of nuns in the third act. According to Wikipedia, the ballet was conceived by and for the great ballerina Marie Taglioni; her father helped her elaborate the choreography.

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, *Robert le diable*, p. 572

In addition, the libretto for *Robert*, written by Eugène Scribe, helped rocket him to fame as well. Again, from Wikipedia, here is the plot synopsis:<sup>5</sup>

### **Act 1**

#### *On the shore at Palermo*

Robert and his mysterious friend Bertram are among a group of knights who are preparing to compete in a tournament for the hand of Princess Isabelle. They all praise wine, women and gambling (*Versez à tasses pleines*). Robert's attendant Raimbaut sings a ballad about a beautiful princess from Normandy who married a devil; the princess had a son, Robert, known as 'le diable'. Robert indignantly reveals that he is the son in question and condemns Raimbaut to death. Raimbaut begs for pardon and tells Robert that he is engaged to marry. Robert relents and relishes the thought of the *droit du seigneur*. Raimbaut's fiancé arrives; Robert recognizes her as his foster-sister Alice and pardons Raimbaut. Alice tells Robert that his mother has died and that her last words were a warning about a threatening dark force (*Va! Va! dit-elle*). She offers Robert his mother's will. Robert is too overcome to read it and asks Alice to keep it for the present. Robert expresses his longing for his beloved Isabelle and Alice offers to take a letter to her. Alice warns Robert to beware of Bertram but he ignores her. With Bertram's encouragement, Robert gambles with the knights and loses all of his money, as well as his armor.

### **Act 2**

#### *A room in the palace at Palermo*

Isabelle is sad at Robert's absence and expresses her unease that their marriage will never take place (*En vain j'espère*). She is delighted when she receives Robert's letter. Robert arrives and the pair express their pleasure at being together again. Isabelle provides him with new armor for the tournament. Robert is preparing for the tournament when Bertram suddenly appears and persuades Robert to go to a nearby forest, claiming that the Prince of Granada, his rival for Isabelle's love, wants to fight with him. When Robert has left, the court gathers to celebrate the marriage of six couples with dancing. The Prince of Granada enters and asks Isabelle to present him with arms for the tournament. Isabelle expresses her sorrow at Robert's disappearance but prepares to open the tournament, singing in praise of chivalry (*La trompette guerrière*).

### **Act 3**

#### *The countryside near Palermo*

Bertram meets Raimbaut, who has arrived for an assignation with Alice. He gives him a bag of gold and advises him not to marry Alice as his new wealth will attract plenty of women (*Ah! l'honnête homme*). Raimbaut leaves and Bertram gloats at having corrupted him. Bertram reveals that Robert, to whom he is truly devoted, is his son; he then enters an adjoining cave to commune with the spirits of hell. Alice enters and expresses her love for Raimbaut (*Quand je quittai la Normandie*). She overhears strange chanting coming from the cave and decides to listen; she learns that Bertram will lose Robert forever if he cannot persuade him to sign away his soul to the Devil by midnight. On emerging from the cave, Bertram realizes that Alice has heard everything (*Mais Alice, qu'as-tu donc?*). He threatens her and she promises to keep silent. Robert arrives, mourning the loss of Isabelle, and Bertram tells him that to win her he should seize a magic branch from the tomb of Saint Rosalia in a nearby deserted cloister. Although to take it is sacrilege, the branch will give Robert magical powers. Robert declares that he will be bold and do as Bertram instructs. Bertram leads Robert to the cloister. The ghosts of nuns rise from their

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_le\\_diable](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_le_diable)

tombs, beckoned by Bertram, and dance, praising the pleasures of drinking, gambling and lust. Robert seizes the branch and fends off the demons who surround him.

#### **Act 4**

##### *A room in the palace*

Isabelle is preparing for her marriage with the Prince of Granada. Alice rushes in to inform her of what she has learnt about Robert, but she is interrupted by envoys of the Prince who enter bearing gifts. Robert arrives and, using the power of the branch, freezes everyone except himself and Isabelle.

Unsettled by the power he's wielding, he confesses to Isabelle that he is using witchcraft, but begs her not to reject him. She expresses her love for him and implores him to repent (*Robert, toi que j'aime*). Robert breaks the branch and the spell it has created, and is taken into custody by Isabelle's attendants.

#### **Act 5**

##### *Outside Palermo Cathedral*

A group of monks extol the power of the Church. Bertram has freed Robert from the guards and the two arrive to prevent the marriage of Isabelle to the Prince of Granada. Bertram attempts to get Robert to sign a document in which he promises to serve Bertram for all eternity. He reveals to Robert that he is his true father and Robert decides to sign the oath from filial devotion. Before he can do so, Alice appears with the news that the Prince has been prevented from marrying Isabelle. Alice prays for divine help (*Dieu puissant, ciel propice*) and hands Robert his mother's will. Robert reads his mother's message, in which she warns him to beware the man who seduced and ruined her. Robert is wracked by indecision. Midnight strikes and the time for Bertram's coup is past. He is drawn down to hell. Robert is reunited with Isabelle in the cathedral, to great rejoicing.

As in the case of *Guillaume Tell*, the star tenor of this opera was Adolphe Nourrit, whose famously beautiful voice was preserved by his singing all of his high notes in head voice or *voix mixte*. This is not really the time or place to go into a technical description of this, but what it means is that Nourrit's high notes had a beautiful, shimmering quality but not the kind of power we are used to even from such small-voiced tenors as Luciano Pavarotti or Juan Diego Flórez. In time, however, the roles of Robert and Arnaldo, not to mention Raoul in *Les Huguenots*, were taken over by Louis-Gilbert Duprez, who *did* sing all of his high notes from the chest (up to a high C), thus these parts can be sung by either type of tenor.

This, again, illustrates how the concept of "drama" in opera was changing. A decade after Duprez's arrival, and beyond, high notes from the chest were the rage all over Europe.

But to get back to the opera, here Meyerbeer used all of his skill to create a swashbuckling work, in the mold of Spontini's *Fernand Cortez* but even more tightly written—as well as less grounded in real drama as we conceive it. Here, the moments of pageantry still exist, but the overriding impact of *Robert* is of a swashbuckling work (the plot resembles a combination of Romberg's *The Rogue Song* with Weber's *Der Frieschütz*) even when the music is conventionally melodic. In Robert's first aria, for instance, the accompaniment changes dramatically between the first and second verses, the latter containing menacing figures by the basses underlying the chipper 6/8 rhythm, and Meyerbeer cleverly goes in and out of the minor as well as connecting

this aria, without a break, to a sung recitative with chorus. And, of course, the more the tenor sings this in a “swashbuckling” manner, the better the effect.

As in a great Mozart opera, scene follows scene in a continuous musical flow. It may not be as inherently dramatic as *La Vestale* or *Medée*, but in its own way it IS dramatic because of the principal character’s strangeness and moral ambiguity, the mystery surrounding his friend Bertram (a devil but not necessarily Satan himself), and the tension involved in his love for Isabelle. The scene where Alice tells Robert that his mother has died is handled beautifully from both a musical and a dramatic perspective. Climaxes to scenes come up on you quickly. Robert’s famous “Sicilienne” aria is lyrical, swashbuckling and highly musical all at the same time. At the beginning of Act II, Isabelle’s doleful aria morphs into celebratory music when she receives Robert’s letter, and the ending of this act eerily resembles the Act I finale of Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell*, just better composed. Later on in the opera, Bertram’s sepulchral aria, which dips into his low range (echoed by a horn) still has the power to startle an audience that has never heard it. Still, there is much music in *Robert le Diable* that is wholly entertaining and nothing but. In the end, it’s not much more dramatic than *Lucia di Lammermoor*, just better-written.

Yet *Robert* was a game-changer in terms of defining operatic “drama,” and not even so much in its plot as in its presentation. Massive crowd scenes, the figures moving about the stage almost in perpetual motion as they sang, and of course the ballet of prurient nuns now made busy, complex stage productions an important part of operatic “drama.” The music alone was no longer sufficient to convey such a thing, and I would go so far as to say that the stripping nuns was the very first example of what eventually morphed, 150 years later, into what we now call Regietheater. The fact that it went away for a while and was, in fact, wholly absent from some operas does not dismiss its impact. The bacchanal at the beginning of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* was yet another such moment in operatic history. “Skin” was “in.”

The best recording of *Robert le Diable* is the one made by American tenor Bryan Hymel during his brief prime (Robert), Alastair Miles (Bertram), Carmen Giannattasio (Alice) and Patrizia Ciofi (Isabelle), conducted by Daniel Oren.

Aside from the sex-starved nuns, however, the spectacle content of *Robert le Diable* was surpassed five years later with *Les Huguenots*. Here, his subject-matter was the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572 in which thousands of French Protestants (Huguenots) gathered in Paris for the royal wedding of Marguerite de Valois to Henry of Navarre were slaughtered by Catholics opposed to the Reformation during a period of heightened tensions—clearly a call for tense, dramatic music—but all in all, Meyerbeer barely met his challenge halfway. There are some rousing choruses, a halfway dramatic duet between Raoul de Nangis and Marguerite de Valois, another halfway dramatic duet between Raoul’s beloved, Valentine, and his sidekick, the rough Huguenot soldier Marcel, a truly dramatic duet between Valentine and Raoul in Act IV (which, according to some sources, was partially written by the original tenor, Nourrit), and a surprisingly dramatic fifth act in which the massacre takes place.

All of the music is well written; as usual, Meyerbeer took his time and spread out its composition over a few years, and Berlioz was enthusiastic about nearly all of it, but its only real innovation was the use of a specific musical gesture, the rough playing of a viola, every time Marcel comes on stage to sing. Small as this may seem to us today, it inspired Wagner to come up with similar musical gestures or *leitmotifs* for all of his characters in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, thus it has a place in history.

Yet *Les Huguenots* is, for the most part, a very entertaining work to listen to, lying as it does in that no-man’s-land between high-class entertainment and real drama, and if you are open to its many charms (a lot of people aren’t), it is still an interesting work to listen to every so often.

***Mercadante: Il giuramento* (1837)**

Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870), the illegitimate child who grew up to become one of the most prolific composers of this era, is certainly one of the least well-known. Originally a flautist and violinist, he wrote music for those instruments as well as organizing concerts featuring his own and others' music at the Naples Conservatory. Rossini, hearing him conduct and play one of his flute concertos, said to conservatory director Niccolò Zingarelli, "My compliments, Maestro; your young pupil Mercadante begins where we finish."<sup>6</sup> On the strength of this recommendation from one of the most famous composers of his day, Mercadante moved from writing concerti and symphonies to operas. Most of them are forgotten and not performed, but one and one only, *Il giuramento*, has survived to receive a few performances in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Listening to it, the reasons are obvious. This was one of the first operas to move away from the over-use of florid music to the leaner, more dramatic Italian operas to come. Annotator Colleen Fay put it this way:

Its taut dramatic structure and vivid musical scene-painting set it apart from the operas of his day ... Not only do we hear in its music a reliable Italian lyricism, but also the early moves away from ornamentation for its own sake. Mercadante uses the orchestra not as a pale accompaniment to dramatic action, but as a full partner in the drama.<sup>7</sup>

Which is not to say that Mercadante just had "dumb luck" with this superb work: it was, after all, his 41st opera. Yet despite receiving more than 400 performances prior to 1900, more than those of Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco*, *Don Carlo* (in all of its versions) and *Aroldo* combined, *Il giuramento* dropped off the map in the 20th century until the early 1950s, when it was first revived in Italy, then in America and Germany in the 1970s and '80s.

The plot, based on Victor Hugo's play *Angelo, Tyrant of Padua*, is again the kind of Romantic love triangle that was all the rage in operatic drama of the time. Bianca, forced to marry Count Manfredo against her will, is actually in love with an unknown knight. (Falling in "love" with people you just see at something of a distance without knowing a thing about them was a big thing in the 19th century. Apparently, they didn't know the meaning of the word "infatuation.") Elaisa, a young woman seeking the daughter of her benefactor, and the "mysterious" knight Viscardo, suddenly arrive in the city. A disgraced courier, Brunaro, tells Elaisa about Bianca's infatuation to make her jealous, but oddly enough, Bianca is the very woman Elaisa has been looking for. (You just can't make this stuff up!) Count Manfredo, suspecting infidelity, locks Bianca in the family tomb, intending to poison her, but Elaisa, who we discover is loved by the Count, substitutes a sleeping potion for the poison. Having seen Elaisa put the narcotic near Bianca, Viscardo thinks Elaisa has poisoned Bianca and so stabs her to death...just as Bianca is waking up. "Well, hi there, love of my life! Anything happen while I was napping?"

Mercadante created many outstanding moments in this opera that are dramatically valid, yet it set a pattern that would inflict many a Verdi opera, even (one might say especially) his most popular ones: a rapid alternation of excellent, dramatic music that fits the words perfectly and more entertaining tunes designed to please the public. One difference besides the richer, more interesting orchestration is a somewhat more continuous musical flow. Mercadante brought all his skills as a composer of concerti and symphonies to bear on this work. One hears pre-

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Rose, "Mercadante: Flute Concertos", booklet accompanying the 2004 RCA CD recording with James Galway and I Solisti Veneti under Claudio Scimone.

<sup>7</sup> Colleen Fay, "Background to Mercadante's *Il Giuramento*", program note for Washington Concert Opera, Washington, DC's presentation on 31 May 2009, p. 6



echoes of *Il Trovatore* in Viscardo's off-stage singing to Elaisa, followed by a highly dramatic duet that prefigures "Di geloso amor" from the Verdi work. There are also some exquisitely-written ensemble numbers that were beyond early Verdi's pay grade, and Mercadante develops these ensembles musically in a way that Verdi would only achieve late into his middle period. He also links scenes skillfully, something beyond the pay grade of the other Italian bel canto composers (except Donizetti, who had the skills but seldom used them). Even the orchestral ending of Act I is masterfully written, not just wrapped up with a few "ta-daaa!" chords, and the soprano-mezzo duet near the end of this act, later a trio, then quartet, is quite good for its time.

In the second act, however, Viscardo's aria is too long and has nothing much to say, and the ensuing orchestral interlude was clearly a time-filler to allow a change of scenery, but the next scene with chorus is quite good. The Elaisa-Bianca duet is both lovely and well written, and the ensuing scene with Manfredo is highly dramatic. But as was usual with Italian composers of this time and for 60 years thereafter, good, dramatic music was so intermixed with tuneful, entertaining music that it was almost impossible to say, from phrase to phrase, whether the composer would be continuing on the straight path or wander off to smell the daisies. The last act opens with a moving sung recitative and aria by Elaisa, which is then followed by her very dramatic duet with Viscardo in which the latter almost explodes with rage...but not so long that he doesn't find the time to sing an arioso, albeit another fairly good one, before returning to his vocal duel with Elaisa. This is wonderful music, on a par with the Amelia-Riccardo duet from Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*.

Despite a so-called "all star" recording with Placido Domingo and Agnes Baltsa, I was moved far more by a relatively unknown radio broadcast from 1970 featuring singers who were then stars with the now-defunct New York City Opera: soprano Patricia Wells (Elaisa), mezzo-soprano Beverly Wolff (Bianca), tenor Michele Molese (Viscardo) and baritone Gianluigi Colmargro (Manfredo) with the Juilliard School orchestra and chorus conducted by Thomas Schippers.

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And that, folks, is all I have to say about this era. If the reader feels that I said too much about these composers and their works, I must respond that I did so in order to explain, rationally, what it was that was so bad about their music. And I am not alone in my feelings. In his *Nantucket Diary*,<sup>8</sup> American composer Ned Rorem made the following statement:

*Bel canto* is the pap of the past as pop is the pap of the present. Being a mere gymnastic sketch, *bel canto* contains nothing not more commendably contained in Bach or Mozart. By stressing the doing over what's done, the shadow before the substance, *bel canto* utterly embodies the superficial. What intellect can admire, for itself on the page unsung, the hurdy-gurdyisms of Donizetti? Maria Callas, like Billie Holiday, gave sense to senseless airs, but what is the music without the diva? Bad music needs interpretation, good music plays itself.

Not that *bel canto* is wholly bad, just too big for itself. Like Albert Schweitzer or Zen, like Bob Dylan or Scientology, like Toscanini or Structuralism, *bel canto* is obscenely merchandized. If the past season's Philharmonic displayed overrated Liszt for his under-ratedness, the reverse holds for *bel canto*.

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<sup>8</sup> North Point Press, San Francisco, 1987.