

## Female characters in Bellini's opera creation

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**Abstract:** *Vincenzo Bellini is considered an innovator and a reformer of the lyrical genre, who knew how to combine the belcanto tradition with the new mode of expressivity. The composer gives a special importance to the poetical text, and his music determines the characters' position. The Bellinian female characters succeed in standing out by their palette of vocal colours, feelings and emotional states, by the special sensitivity of the musical score destined to them. The conclusions of the conducted study confirm the particularities of the Bellinian belcanto style and, at the same time, we emphasize the composer's contribution to the development of Romanticism, with a unique, original note. The popularity of Bellini's works has made them stay, even of our days, in the repertoire of the world theatres, due to the inventiveness of the melodies and to the beauty of the arias.*

Key-words: *Bellinian, Romanticism, sensitivity, expressivity, feminine*

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, love was at the core of melodrama, with psychological and affective insertions. At the Italians, we encounter romantic exaltation against reason, love being life's unique truth. The romantic opera from this period is deemed a bridge between the pomposity and glitter of the heroic opera, and the sentimentality of the romantic melodrama.

Vincenzo Bellini is representative for the Italian Romanticism from the first half of the nineteenth century, and his most important opera creations are: *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* (1830), *Norma* (1831), *Beatrice di Tenda* (1833) e *I Puritani* (1835). The composer completely identifies himself with his characters' intrigue and passion; he involves himself emotionally, by melody, harmony and timbre, by the succession and interdependence between scenes.

The scene has a complex-organic structure: the orchestral prelude makes its way in the atmosphere and in the characters' inner contrasts; in the recitative, the declamation builds itself on expression; and the aria, the duet, the assembly are at the lyrical core of the scene.

The Bellinian special lyricism, which is famous by the beauty of its line, is, above all, expression and atmosphere. The chorus becomes a character and it interacts with the lyrical performer. The orchestra does not limit itself only to the

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accompaniment, but it also intensifies the expression and participates in the character's emotion. The Bellinian vocality is typically Italian, close to the exigencies of belcanto. His dramaturgical perspective, of a Romantic type, has created new typologies of characters who experience intense dramas. Vincenzo Bellini was considered a reforming innovator of the lyrical genre, who succeeded in combining belcanto traditions with the new modes of expressivity. The composer gives an extreme importance to the poetic text, asking the librettist to be capable of psychological exaltation.

Bellini's music is the one which determines the characters' position. The composer's delicacy makes all his created characters' feelings be vested in a light and supple vocality.

Bellini composed passionate scenes with the same carefulness with which he composed tender, elegiac scenes; he is a great poet of music and an accomplished playwright. The Bellinian operas nurture the torment of the unhappy heart, of the misunderstood, betrayed love; which is a prevailing theme in his compositions. The main characters' melodies transmit this message of the suffering of love.

The Bellinian female characters succeed in standing out by their palette of vocal colours, feelings, emotional states, and by the particular sensitivity of the score destined to them.

We will give a few examples of female voices in Bellini's operas.

<b>Opera</b>	<b>Character</b>	<b>Vocal colour</b>
"Adelson e Salvini"	– <i>Nelly</i> (an orphan, Adelson's fiancée) – <i>Fanny</i> (Adelson's beloved one) – <i>Madame Rivers</i> (governess in Adelson house)	lyrical soprano  mezzo-soprano  mezzo-soprano
"Bianca e Fernando"	– <i>Bianca</i> (widow of the duke of Messina) – <i>Viscardo</i> (male role in travesti)	lyrical soprano  mezzo-soprano
"Il Pirata"	– <i>Imogene</i> (duchess, wife of the duke of Caldora) – <i>Adela</i> (maid of honour)	soprano  mezzo-soprano

<b>Opera</b>	<b>Character</b>	<b>Vocal colour</b>
"Zaira"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Zaira</i> (Orosmane's favourite)</li> <li>– <i>Verestano</i> (Zaira's brother, role in travesty)</li> <li>– <i>Fatima</i> (slave)</li> </ul>	<p>lyrical soprano</p> <p>mezzo-soprano</p> <p>contralto</p>
"I Capuleti e I Montecchi"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Giulietta</i> (Capuleti's daughter)</li> <li>– <i>Romeo</i> (Montecchi's son, role in travesty)</li> </ul>	<p>lyrical soprano</p> <p>lyrical mezzo-soprano</p>
"La Sonnambula"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Fereza</i> (Amina's adoptive mother)</li> <li>– <i>Amina</i> (Elvino's fiancée)</li> <li>– <i>Lisa</i> (owner of the inn)</li> </ul>	<p>mezzo-soprano</p> <p>coloratura soprano</p> <p>coloratura soprano</p>
"Beatrice di Tenda"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Beatrice</i> (widow of Facino Cane)</li> <li>– <i>Agnese de Maino</i> (Filippo's beloved one)</li> </ul>	<p>lyrical soprano</p> <p>mezzo-soprano</p>
"Norma"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Norma</i> (great priestess of the temple)</li> <li>– <i>Adalgisa</i> (a maiden in the temple)</li> <li>– <i>Clotilda</i> (Norma's confidante)</li> </ul>	<p>dramatic coloratura soprano</p> <p>mezzo-soprano</p> <p>soprano</p>
"I Puritani"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Queen Henriette</i> (widower of king Charles I of England)</li> <li>– <i>Elvira</i> (daughter of Lord Walton)</li> </ul>	<p>soprano</p> <p>light lyrical soprano</p>

Adelson e Salvini – is Bellini's first opera, a semi-serious opera with dialogues in prose; with brief, isolated arias. The female character Nelly stands out, with a special portraying, which transpires from her romanza in the first act:

“Dopo l'oscuro nembo”

Bianca e Fernando - is a melodrama in two acts. The main role, Bianca, is well outlined in the cavatina with recitative:

“La mia scella a voi sia grata”

Opera Il Pirata – is a melodrama in two acts. Starting with this opera, the number of arias will standardize to a total of five. Imogene is the female character who dominates by the cavatina, duets, overall scenes.

Cavatina “Le sogneai ferito, e sangue”

Opera Zaira – is written after a famous novel of Voltaire, and it marks the continuation of the successful collaboration with the librettist Felice Romani. The female character Zaira has two main moments:

Cavatina “Amo ed amata io sono”

Aria “Che non tentai per vincere”

where musical phrases of a special lyricism stand out.

La Sonnambula – is a semi-serious opera, where the female character is taken from a novel by Eugene Scribe. Amina's cavatina is written for Giuditta Pasta, the most famous lyrical performer of those times, who had a perfect vocal technique.

The cabaletta “Sovra il sen la man mi prosa” has a range unprecedented so far in Bellinian operas. The score expresses contrasting emotional states, which were highlighted by Giuditta Pasta's vocal colours and expressivity.

Norma, lyrical tragedy in two acts, with a libretto by Felice Romani, was presented at Teatro alla Scala di Milano. It has two female characters with ample, wide-range scores, around which the entire dramaturgy is woven.

Norma, the great Druid priestess, and

Adalgisa, the young priestess of Irmis.

In Norma's score, we find less fiorituri, less prowess; yet we have a very compelling grave texture, as well as acutes passing from piano to forte notes. Norma is a woman hurt in love, who sees her friend repeating her mistakes. The character's complexity is an occasion for the composer to create unique scenes, such as, for instance, Norma's cavatina:

“Casta diva, che inargenti”

In order to perform Norma's role, a dramatic-coloratura soprano is needed. The famous “Casta diva” is a lesson of belcanto, with legato long phrases, with sounds that must be twisted, with prowess coloratura.

I Puritani – is the last opera presented at the Théâtre Italien de Paris, with a huge success. By this creation, Bellini opens a path to be later followed by Verdi. The musical numbers dedicated to female voices are, in the first part, the following:

Scene and duet between Elvira and Giorgio:

“Sai com'arde in petto mio”, the quartette “A te, o cara” and the end of the first act “Il rito augusto si compia senza me”.

The second part has Elvira's scene and aria:  
“Qui la voce sua soave”

The third part includes the duet between Elvira and Arturo:  
“Ne mirarti un solo instante”,

and the end “Ancora s'ascolta questo suon molesto”

Although established in Paris, Bellini remains closely connected to the Italian tradition: the main idea is formulated by the voice and not by the orchestra; by the melody and not by the harmony. The Bellinian melos is melancholic, the novelty consisting in the brilliance of some fragments describing the character Elvira.

I Capuleti e I Montecchi – is an opera in two acts and four scenes and it is based on a libretto by Felice Romani, whose source of inspiration is the Shakespearean play Romeo and Juliet. The two female characters are: Giulietta – lyrical soprano, and Romeo – mezzo-soprano (a character in travesti).

Preparing and thoroughly understanding a role involves a study carefully unfolded across several planes: dramaturgical, of character, poetical, musical and technical – all of these being covered before the actual construction of the role.

Giulietta's presentation is made, this time, by a romanza:  
“Eccomi ...” (Here I am in such a deplorable condition!)

Normally, a character's moment of presentation, in a romantic opera, would be made by a cavatina.

The acute note of this romanza is C3, which is reached by using an Auftakt of eights. The cadences must be executed with calmness, elegance and clarity, not being supported by the orchestra.

Giulietta's vocal discourse is accompanied by harp, an instrument which seems to best convey the young lover's emotional states. At the end, the cadence corresponding to the expression “mi sembra un tuo sospir” (it seems to be a sigh of yours) expresses her love, hope and desire to see her lover.

The manner in which Giulietta is musically depicted shows her to be an ingenuous character, possessed by feelings of sincere love, spirit of sacrifice, honour and much dignity. Giulietta's superb musical interventions are of a special technical difficulty; in the performance, the heroine's richness of feelings having to be conveyed. All cadences are a cappella, emphasizing both the melody and the text.

Beatrice di Tenda – is a tragedy in two acts, with a libretto by Felice Romani, after a historical tragedy, Beatrice Tenda. Throughout the opera, the protagonist, Beatrice, dominates the action. Beatrice's vocal texture is conceived for voices with

a clear belcanto technique, endowed with deep sensitivity, and capable of multiple vocal colours.

Standing in the ducal garden, the protagonist expresses her frustration caused by Filippo, in the aria:

“Ma la sola, ohimé!, son io” (Am I the only one to whom he has brought grief?).

This aria is preceded by an eight-measure instrumental fragment, which induces its character. It is an aria of virtuousness, with very many ornaments, which raises great performing and technical difficulties.

In general, the cadences performed by the sopranos cast in this role may differ from those written by the composer, due to the same Italian tradition.

Melodist by excellence, Vincenzo Bellini does not contradict himself and uses a melodic line that may easily remain in the music lovers' soul. One of Bellini's major objectives was to achieve the unity and coherence of the dramatic discourse.

The Bellinian female characters succeed in standing out in the formal assembly of the operas, by their palette of vocal colours, their acting and their expressivity.

The conclusions of the conducted study confirm the particularities of the Bellinian belcanto study and, at the same time, we emphasize the composer's contribution to the development of Romanticism with a unique, original note.

If, in its vast majority, Romanticism manifested itself in Europe by means of instrumental music; in Italy, opera occupied the first place. The popularity and value of the operas of Bellini, Rossini, Donizetti, made these creations remain even nowadays in the repertoire of the opera theatres throughout the world, due to the melodic inventiveness and to the beauty of the arias.

Considered by critics to be an innovator and a reformer of the lyrical genre, Bellini was the Italian composer who knew best how to combine the belcanto traditions with the new modes of expressivity. With Bellini, the aria becomes more dramatic, in the sense of the sentimental expression, vested in pure vocal lyricism.

## 6. References

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