

An Introduction to Italian Opera

(With suggested recording references)

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PART 1- LIVING FOR ART

Rossini is said to have remarked "Give me a laundry list, and I'll set it to music."

He set so many unlikely and humorous subjects to music that no one doubted he could do what he promised. And yet, the idea of taking a mundane subject and turning it into a work of art is very much in tune with modern notions of opera. I can think of a number of contemporary composers who might be interested in making an opera out of a morning at the laundry! But, there really is very little that is new under the sun. The sixteenth century Mantuan composer Alessandro Striggio the elder, wrote a work entitled *The Chatter of Laundry Women*, which contains no action but consists entirely of a lively dialogue between gossips about trivial events in their village life.

Rossini stopped writing operas in 1829 at the ripe age of thirty-seven, and then lived for another thirty-nine years. Laundry lists eluded him, but items of clothing featured in the works of many composers and librettists who came afterwards. In *La bohème* for example, Puccini's librettist gave to the philosopher Colline the following words of farewell to his coat:

"Listen, my venerable coat,
I'm staying behind, you'll
go on to greater heights.
I give you my thanks.
You never bowed your worn back
to the rich or powerful.
You held in your pockets
poets and philosophers
as if in tranquil grottoes...
Now that those happy times
have fled, I bid you farewell
faithful old friend. Farewell."

Puccini then added music.

[*Vecchia zimarra*. *La bohème* (Puccini). Giorgio Tozzi (Colline). RCA Victor Orchestra, Sir Thomas Beecham. EMI 1956.]

Clearly, something remarkable happened during the transformation of spoken word into sung text. Words that seem odd to say the least (how many people do you know who talk to their clothes?) have become noble and rather moving; such is the power of music to convey the emotions which lie behind actions, however banal. And what are the particular emotions in this case? They are the feelings of a penniless young man in a freezing garret, who is willing to sell his coat in order to buy medicine for the dying Mimi.

The idea of *verismo*, the depiction of every-day life at its most basic, dominated Italian opera in the early 20th century. The combination of realism (with which an emerging working class audience could sympathize) and the Italian tradition of ravishing melody, guaranteed the enormous popularity of this genre, and it still does. What could be more down to earth than an opera set in a mining camp during the Californian gold rush of 1850. It could just as easily have been set in Ballarat or Bendigo.

[*Ch'ella mi creda libero*. La fanciulla del West (Puccini). Placido Domingo (Johnson). Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Zubin Mehta. Polydor 1978.]

Powerful, vital, all-consuming emotions are at the heart of Italian opera. This seems so obvious now that it hardly needs to be said, but it was not always the case. Opera as we understand it, did not exist prior to that crucial artistic and cultural revolution in the North Italian city-states which we call the Renaissance. That great adventure of the human spirit was inspired by an intensive study of the artists and thinkers of ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance came to be characterised by a new confidence in the power and dignity of human beings. Man was at the centre of Renaissance values and was, as the Greeks put it, the measure of all things.

By the late 16th century, a general turmoil in the state of music, coupled with the spread of humanism, had led to a desire amongst certain Florentine musicians and poets, the so-called *Camerata* of Giovanni de' Bardi, to recreate the drama of Greek theatre, in which (they believed) music and poetry had been ideally combined. One of their number was Vincenzo Galilei, father of the scientist Galileo Galilei. Bardi's *Camerata* sought to revive the declamatory style of ancient Greek tragedy and to find a natural musical equivalent of the spoken word. Elaborate polyphony was dispensed with in favour of a single, accompanied, melodic line. It has to be said that the resulting performances of classical stories - recitations accompanied by lutes and other instruments - were fairly dry and academic affairs, but their endeavours marked the beginnings of what we know as recitative.

At the same time that the *Camerata* were giving voice to their theories, spectacular musical and dramatic diversions were being presented in the princely and ducal courts of northern Italy and Rome to celebrate dynastic and diplomatic occasions. These productions were known as *intermedi*, because they took place between the acts of classically-inspired dramas. From the joining of these two sources - courtly musical spectacles and the recitative inspired by Greek tragedy - opera was born. The most important figure present at its birth was Claudio Monteverdi of Cremona, Mantua and Venice, who was both a product of his age and a man ahead of his time.

Truth to nature was one of Monteverdi's aims, by which he meant the musical expression of the full range of human feelings and reactions. He showed that it was possible to create living, passionate, intensely dramatic music. Monteverdi drew happily on the 'old' music: the polyphony of motet and madrigal, vocal embellishments and free melodic arioso, but his genius lay in the way he transcended and integrated existing styles. The thin instrumental accompaniments of his predecessors were replaced by rich orchestration, and he adapted the new recitative to the dramatic demands of the text. He was harmonically daring; responding to the slightest changes of mood within the drama. He was not afraid to use chromaticism when circumstances demanded, and he imagined opera as a form of art in which all the arts were to converge on a single purpose. Two and a half centuries later, Richard Wagner was to return to these ideas, in response to what he saw as the degeneration of opera in the early nineteenth century. By that time, the music of Monteverdi had been completely forgotten and many of his works, including half a dozen operas, had been lost. Mozart and Beethoven never heard a note of Monteverdi, and were probably quite unaware of his existence. It was only towards the end of last century that he returned to the world's musical consciousness.

It has been said that rarely in the history of music, has any composer in one work shown so many paths to the future as did Monteverdi in *Orfeo*. This seminal work, which he called *Favola in musica*, a 'fable in music', was first performed in Mantua in 1607. It still makes quite an impact, nearly four hundred years later.

Remember our old friend Alessandro Striggio, who wrote *The Chatter of Laundry Women*? Well, his son, also called Alessandro, was Monteverdi's librettist for *Orfeo*, but there are no gossiping laundry women here, no flippant exchanges; and the subject is far from mundane. In fact, *Orfeo* is the first great masterpiece in the history of opera. What does it sound like, this first great opera?

It begins, not with an overture as we understand the term but with a toccata, played by the whole orchestra, as a fanfare. It is arresting, even startling, as if to catch the attention of the chattering audience and leave them in no doubt that the play had begun. I like to think of it as the fanfare which introduced opera to the world.

[*Toccatà*. L'Orfeo (Monteverdi). Camerata Accademica Hamburg, Jürgen Jürgens. Archiv 1973.]

The first voice which we hear is that of the Spirit of Music, describing her formidable powers. Then comes an example of the new recitative, in which a shepherd announces the wedding of Orfeo and Euridice. A chorus follows: Shepherds and Nymphs pray that the newly-weds will enjoy cloudless days, free from sorrow and pain. This beautiful chorus tells us a lot about Monteverdi's particular genius. Its message is essentially a happy one but, ever so subtly, he lays a veil of melancholy over the music, as if to warn that too much happiness is bound to end in sorrow - as indeed it does. Here is the Shepherd's recitative, followed by the chorus.

[*In questo lieto e fortunato giorno*. L'Orfeo. Ian Partridge (Shepherd). *Vieni, Imeneo*. Monteverdi-Chor Hamburg.]

In Act II, a messenger brings the tragic news of Euridice's death. She has been bitten by a snake while collecting flowers for her hair. Then the opera's most elaborate music is given to Orfeo in his quest for the impossible: to reclaim from death his beloved Euridice. He stands before Charon, the boatman who ferries the dead across the river Styx, and tries to persuade him, with the most beguiling singing and playing of his lyre, to allow him to cross the river of death. He succeeds, and the god of the underworld agrees to let Euridice return to her husband. But there is one condition: when Orfeo is leading his wife out of the underworld, he must not look back to see if she is following. Inevitably, Orfeo's doubts get the better of him and he does look back, and so loses Euridice for ever. But the story does not finish there. Unlike the original myth, Monteverdi provides a happy ending by having Apollo grant divine immortality to his son, and the promise of seeing Euridice again, amongst the stars.

When Orfeo is trying to persuade Charon to take him across the Styx, he sings some of the most extraordinary music in all opera. It is elaborately ornamented but, in this case at least, the ornamentation does not exist for its own sake or to show off the singer's powers; it reflects the superhuman task which Orfeo has given himself in the echoing caverns of the underworld. Here is a sample of this music, which must charm the dead as well as the living.

[*Possente spirito*. L'Orfeo. Nigel Rogers (Orfeo).]

With *Orfeo*, opera took root, and soon moved out of the rarefied atmosphere of the ducal courts. In Venice in 1637, the first public opera house in the world opened its doors, and within a decade the city had six opera houses. The price of a seat was two lire, the equivalent of several times a labourer's daily wage. Monteverdi went on to have more notable successes, survived the plague, and finally wrote his most celebrated work *The Coronation of Popea*, when he was in his seventy-fourth year. Before he died in Venice in 1643, opera was also flourishing in Rome, in lavish spectacles patronised by the Barberini pope, Urban VIII. However, as time passed, the taste and style and way of looking at things which characterised Monteverdi's music, went out of fashion. Opera was becoming popular, and a paying public was beginning to impose its own priorities.

Thirty years after Monteverdi's death, Antonio Vivaldi was born in Venice. An earthquake shook the lagoon city on the day he was born and certainly, his contribution to music was worthy of his dramatic entry into the world. His life was an interesting one. He took holy orders but was exempted from saying mass because of a medical condition. The Red Priest, as he was known because of his red hair, taught violin at the Conservatory of a charitable institution for orphaned girls, and he took two girls into his household. One sang in his operas and her sister was his nurse. There was much wagging of tongues and the church was scandalised. Vivaldi, who is a household name today through the immense popularity of his *Four Seasons*, died in penury in Vienna in 1741. No trace of his grave remains. Six choir boys from St Stephen's Cathedral sang

his Requiem Mass, one of them being the young Joseph Haydn. Vivaldi claimed to have written 100 operas, of which 46 can be traced but only 21 survive. Amongst the surviving scores is that of *Orlando Furioso*, which contains this wonderfully dramatic music.

[*Nel Profondo*. Orlando Furioso (Vivaldi). Marilyn Horne (Orlando). I Solisti Veneti, Claudio Scimone. Erato 1977.]

The classical style of Italian opera, which came to be known as *opera seria*, was essentially a collection of florid arias, loosely joined by passages of recitative. These linking passages, which explained the story's development, were treated by audiences as opportunities for relaxation and chatter. One French visitor to Rome suggested that a game of draughts was the ideal diversion to while away the tedium of a recitative!

Ironically, one of the most influential works of this period was originally intended as an *Intermezzo*, a filler, between the acts of an *opera seria*, as was the custom of the time. The main work is long forgotten, but the comical *Intermezzo*, Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, is a work of genius which sparkles as brightly today as it did at its first performance in Naples in 1733. When Pergolesi died three years later, he was just twenty-six years old. In its entirety, the opera lasts barely fifty minutes, and it has only two singing characters. It is scored for soprano and bass with a tiny string orchestra. In a nutshell, the story goes like this: Serpina has been engaged as a housemaid by a crotchety gentleman, Uberto, but manipulates him into marrying her. Thus, the maidservant becomes the mistress of the house - *La serva padrona*. End of story. Here is a sample of a work that is as light as it is delightful.

[*Lo conosco*. *La serva padrona* (Pergolesi).]

By the early 18th century, audiences had become more interested in singers than in composers, and they were especially fascinated by castrati such as Farinelli and Caffarelli, who enjoyed a status akin to Hollywood movie stars. The phrase 'living for art' can have had few more poignant examples than the boys who were operated on before puberty to preserve the soprano pitch of their voices. How did this bizarre practice come about? Initially so that choirs could avoid the problem of broken voices and the perpetual hunt for replacement singers. The practice was reinforced by a Pontifical ban on women becoming actresses. Pope Clement XI, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, expressed it thus: "For a woman to keep her virtue in a stage career, is like making her jump into the Tiber without getting wet." Things reached the height of absurdity when women took to the stage masquerading as castrati dressed as women.

Some castrati, like Farinelli and Caffarelli (for whom Handel wrote *Ombra mai fu*, the famous Largo from his opera *Xerxes*) achieved spectacular feats of virtuosity, combining the range and purity of a boy's voice with the lung capacity and control of a man's. One description written in 1718, captures the unworldly nature of the voice: "It had all the warblings and turns of a nightingale", said the writer, with only this difference, that it was much finer and, if a man did not know the contrary, he would believe it impossible that such a tone could proceed from the throat of anything that was human." The range, over three-and-a-half octaves, and the sound quality have no equivalents today.

Farinelli was probably the most famous castrato. His real name was Carlo Broschi, and he was born in Andria in 1705. He was popular in Rome, and Vienna, and in London where the ladies swooned after him and cried out "One God, one Farinelli!" Then he was summoned to Spain to help cure King Philip V of bouts of depression by singing to him each evening. It was said that the King was only interested in hearing the same four arias, which Farinelli had to sing every night between midnight and 5 am, interspersed with soothing conversation. So successful was he at curing the King's depression that he was offered 50,000 francs a year to remain in Madrid. He stayed for over twenty years. When Philip died, he stayed on under Ferdinand VI, gathering power and influence, and supervising the royal church music and opera. Eventually, he retired to a luxurious villa near Bologna, and died in 1782, at the age of seventy-seven, lamenting his lost influence but exceedingly wealthy and heaped with honours.

Amongst the arias which Farinelli sang for King Philip hundreds of times was one written by his elder brother Riccardo Broschi. The following recording of this aria was specially made for the film *Farinelli* by digitally blending the voices of a female soprano and a counter tenor. Thus we can get some idea of a type of voice which is no longer heard in our opera houses but which stirred eighteenth century audiences into a frenzy.

[*Son qual nave ch'agitata* (Riccardo Broschi). Ewa Mallas-Godlewska (Soprano)/ Derek Lee Ragin (counter-tenor). Les Talens Lyriques, Christophe Rousset. Auvidis 1993.]

Such was the potency of Italian opera that it spread throughout Europe as few other artistic movements have done before or since, from London in the west to St Petersburg in the east. Consequently, much Italian opera in the eighteenth century was written neither by Italians nor in Italy. Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery, so Italians shouldn't be upset about that. It flourished in France (after some resistance) and at the German courts. Handel, who came originally from Saxony, wrote it in England and elsewhere with great success. One of his earliest Italian operas, *Rinaldo*, was written in fifteen days. During a visit to Venice, he wrote *Agrippina* in three weeks. Of course, apart from an exceptional ability, he was able to accomplish these feats because he borrowed heavily from his own works. Everyone did it, and some even borrowed from their colleagues' works. Singers were not above inserting their favourite arias into productions of entirely different operas. It was all perfectly acceptable to audiences of the eighteenth century. Handel's last fully successful Italian opera, *Alcina*, appeared on the London stage in 1735. This opera is set on an island ruled by the enchantress, Alcina (originally sung by the castrato Carestini), who transforms the knights who come wooing into strange beasts. The story is basically one of confused identities, but everything is sorted out in time for the final curtain. Unlikely as the story sounds, *Alcina* provides a vehicle for some of Handel's most ravishing music.

[*Tornami a vagheggiar*. Alcina (Handel). Joan Sutherland (Alcina). London Symphony Orchestra, Richard Bonyngé. Decca 1962]

It has to be remembered that the underlying concept of what we call *bel canto* refers to the type of music written for singers who were trained by the castrati. Rossini maintained that the decline in standards of singing which had been one of the factors influencing his decision to stop composing operas, had been caused by the disappearance of the castrati. "One can form no notion of the charm of voice and consummate virtuosity..." he said. "They were also incomparable teachers".

The practice enjoyed immense vogue during the 17th and, especially, the 18th centuries, and there were even some instances as late as the early 20th century. I have heard an antique recording made in 1902, of the last castrato in the Sistine Choir in Rome, Alessandro Moreschi. It was toward the end of his career and I can tell you he did not sound like Joan Sutherland.

Reform of the increasingly florid and artificial style of opera came eventually at the hands of a German of Bohemian extraction, Christoph Willibald Gluck, who stripped away the meaningless (if spectacular) vocal fireworks and insisted on the primacy of the dramatic plot. The music, he said, should interpret the emotions of the poetry. Monteverdi would probably have agreed with him; Wagner certainly did. In Gluck's revolution, said Wagner, the composer had revolted against the wilfulness of the singer.

Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, like Monteverdi's *Orfeo* before it, occupies a key place in the history of opera. It was first produced in 1762 and it is still performed regularly. Some have called it the great-great-grandfather of modern opera. There could have been no greater contrast between the touching air in which Orfeo laments the loss of his beloved Euridice, and the elaborate confections that had gone before. Or, as one humourist put it:

"All is gentle and not screechy
In *Orfeo ed Euridice*."

[*Che faro senza Euridice*. Orfeo ed Euridice (Gluck). Marilyn Horne (Orfeo). Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Sir Georg Solti. Decca 1969.]

In a letter of February 1778, Mozart told his father that his greatest desire was to write operas, and he begged to be taken to Italy. In his all-too-short life, he wrote superb examples of the Italian opera seria, including *Idomeneo* and *La clemenza di Tito*, although, by then, the form was already old fashioned. Of course, Mozart absorbed influences from many directions and transformed them through his particular genius. Many other non-Italian composers also took Italian opera and put their own stamp upon it. Nothing worthwhile in art can stand still for long.

By the beginning of the 19th century, opera had become show business and considerable money was to be made from it. Theatre managers could do very well, and one of the most successful was Domenico Barbaia, a waiter and circus manager who became director of four opera houses simultaneously: two in Vienna, the San Carlo in Naples and the Scala in Milan. The other immensely successful man of the theatre was of course, Rossini himself, whom some called the 'Swan of Pesaro', after his birth place, and others called 'Signor Crescendo'!

Nellie Melba sang Rossini heroines on many occasions and, in her autobiography, she has the following to say: "If you are acquainted with *The Barber of Seville*, you will of course remember that in the Second Act occurs a scene in which Rosina, the heroine, is being given a singing lesson. Rossini, the composer, with his well-known laziness, left this scene a blank, leaving it to the discretion of the prima donna to sing whatever song she chose during the lesson. It was rather a charming innovation in opera, and in the part I often left the song I was going to sing until the last minute, choosing *Mattinata*, *Still wie die Nacht*, or even the Mad Scene from *Lucia*, as the mood suited me."

Melba was wrong. Rossini did write an aria for the lesson scene, which seems to have been entirely unknown to her; and, what's more, the aria in question is an integral part of the story line. Melba's practice reflected the operatic standards of her day, which frequently saw arias and even whole acts omitted at the whim of a singer, conductor or manager. The use of extraneous music in the lesson scene continued on a regular basis until the 1930's. Can you imagine slipping, say, Maria from *Westside Story* or Memories from *Cats* into a production of *The Barber* today? That Rossini didn't want to see his works compromised in this way is clear from an account of a performance by Adelina Patti in the part of Rosina in 1863. In those days, *prime donne* would count the bars in their arias to ensure that no rival had more, and they would alter the music to advantage themselves. Rossini called this the use of the 'aria-meter' and tried to prevent it by writing out the embellishments in detail. But this still didn't prevent Patti from decorating her part to such an extent that he could hardly recognise the original. He is said to have told others that he didn't mind some changes, "But to leave not a note of what I composed, even in the recitatives - well, that is unendurable."

Because another composer, Paisiello, had written a *Barber of Seville*, Rossini originally called his work *Almaviva, or the Useless Precaution*, and only later changed it to the more familiar title. The first performance was a spectacular fiasco, much of it being drowned by whistles and catcalls from a hostile audience. However, in the end, Rossini became something of a victim of his success, his charm and his sense of humour, and the apparent ease with which he dashed off one opera after another. The story goes that Donizetti, when asked if he believed Rossini's claim that *The Barber* was composed in thirteen days, replied "Why not? He's so lazy." He cannibalised his own works in order to meet deadlines and to make the most of tunes that had been well-received. For example, the aria sung by the Spanish nobleman, Almaviva, under Rosina's balcony in Act One of *The Barber*, appears in a cantata *Cyrus in Babylon*, where it is sung by the King of Persia, and it also appears in *Aurelian in Palmyra* - an opera set in the Syrian desert - this time sung by the Roman Emperor. An overture that started life in *Aurelian*, and was then used in an entirely different opera called *Elizabeth, Queen of England*, found its ultimate resting place in (you've guessed it) *The Barber of Seville*!

Rossini was a brilliant musician from childhood, although his career really took off after his arrival in Venice in 1810. He was summoned from Bologna as an eighteen-year-old, to fill a gap left by a composer who had failed to deliver a one-act opera entitled *Il cambiale di matrimonio* (The Marriage Contract). Rossini set it to music in just a few days, and it was his very first opera to be performed. It was full of fun and high spirits and took Venice by storm. Believe it or not, the opera is set in Canada, and the marriage contract of the title is between someone called Tobia Mill and a Mr Slook, who had been promised the hand of Mill's daughter, Fanny, in marriage. Not surprisingly, Fanny Mill is reluctant to become Fanny Slook and is, in any case, in love with one Edoardo Milfort. In the end, Slook changes the contract to allow her to marry the man she loves. Here is Fanny's aria from this first Rossini opera.

[*Vorrei spiegarvi*. *La cambiale di matrimonio* (Rossini). Joan Sutherland (Fanny). London Symphony Orchestra, Richard Bonyngé. Decca 1962.]

Another creation by the young Rossini soon followed, called *The Fortunate Deception*. It was so popular that, on its last night, in order to show their appreciation, some enthusiasts let loose in the theatre flocks of doves, canaries and guinea fowl. Then came *The Silken Ladder*, *Tancredi* (with its celebrated 'rice aria', so called because Rossini, who was a great gourmet, composed it while cooking his rice), and *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, the latter being written in less than a month. By then, Rossini was just 21 years old.

He wrote an opera based on Shakespeare's *Othello*, seventy years before Verdi wrote his version. Of course, they are utterly different works. The curious practice developed with Rossini's *Otello*, of female singers taking the role of Otello himself, opposite another female singing Desdemona. The objections to having women on the stage had obviously gone full circle. Chopin witnessed this novelty in Paris, when Maria Malibran played Otello and Wilhelmine Schroeder-Devrient played Desdemona. "Malibran is small" wrote Chopin, "and the German woman is huge. It looked as if [in a reversal of the plot] Desdemona would smother Otello."

The infectious gaiety of Rossini's music began to influence other composers, some of whom didn't particularly want to be influenced. The German composer, Carl Maria von Weber, for instance, once fled from a performance of *Cenerentola* muttering, "I'm going; I'm beginning to like the stuff!" Perhaps this is what he heard.

[*Non più mesta*. *La cenerentola* (Rossini). Cecilia Bartoli (Cenerentola). Orchestra e coro del Teatro Comunale di Bologna, Riccardo Chailly. Decca 1993.]

Rossini went out of his way to please his audiences, about which Wagner wrote: "if he heard that such and such a town particularly liked to hear the roudades of singers, and that another, on the contrary, preferred languorous songs; then for the first he provided nothing but roudades, for the second, languorous songs. Where he knew an audience liked percussion in the orchestra, he immediately started the overture of a pastoral opera with a roll on the drums". Undoubtedly, this responsiveness to the tastes and preferences of audiences did much to make opera in the mid-nineteenth century a lively form of popular entertainment. For an equivalent phenomenon in our own time we must look to the world of musical comedy rather than to the opera stage.

A number of Rossini's more brutal assessments of particular singers have survived. They are amusing today, although the targets of his witticisms would not have been too pleased at the time. For example, he had been persuaded to listen to the son of his barber, a young tenor who possessed a thunderous voice with a particularly rough tone, which Rossini likened to a steel file. "Under these circumstances", he said, "this is an irremediable drawback. But don't take it too hard. Your son has many resources for becoming a commander of infantry, a barricade chief, an animal tamer - or, above all, the times being what they are, a first-prize winner at the Conservatoire."

On his return to Italy after the first performances of *William Tell* in Paris, Rossini stopped in Milan to meet the young Vincenzo Bellini, and recognised in that young man a new musical spirit and a more romantic sensibility. Bellini's particular innovations lay in his close matching of sensuous

melodies to the text, in his handling of long melodic spans, and in the blurred distinction between recitative and aria, which gave his scenes a natural flow and strong emotional appeal. He was the son and grandson of composers, and his international fame came quickly with *Il Pirata* (The Pirate) at the age of 24, and then *La Sonnambula* and his masterpiece, *Norma*, both written when he was thirty. When Rossini returned to Paris, he lured Bellini there, and it was in the French capital in 1835 that his last work, *I Puritani*, was written.

The full title of *I Puritani* translates as 'The Puritans of Scotland', although the action is set in Plymouth in England. Geography was never a strong point amongst opera librettists.

In *Norma*, Bellini succeeded in combining great lyrical beauty with considerable dramatic tension. Consider, for example, this duet for Pollione, the Roman Pro-consul of Gaul, and Adalgisa, a Virgin of the Druid temple.

[*Vieni in Roma*. *Norma* (Bellini). Luciano Pavarotti (Pollione), Montserrat Caballé (Adalgisa). Orchestra of the Welsh National Opera, Richard Bonyngé. Decca 1984.]

Bellini was famous for his elegant good looks, and was much pursued by adoring females. In Milan, he followed the common practice of the time and took a mistress, who happened to be the wife of one wealthy silk merchant and the daughter of another. The relationship lasted for five years and was very useful, he said, in protecting him from marriage.

In the same year that *I Puritani* received its first performance, Bellini died, a few weeks short of his 34th birthday. Rossini was one of the pallbearers, and all of the most notable singers in Paris sang at his funeral.

Bellini's influence was extraordinary, considering his short life. It can be detected in many of the piano works of Chopin and in the early operas of both Verdi and Wagner. The signs are there in Verdi's first opera, *Oberto* and in his third, *Nabucco*. In 1837, Wagner wrote an essay on Bellini which was an enthusiastic endorsement of the Italianate *bel canto* line, and his second opera *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love) was heavily influenced by Bellini. He conducted Bellini's operas on many occasions and, as a young man in Paris, he wrote a bass aria in the style of Bellini to be used in *Norma*. Some people have even detected traces of Bellini's melodic technique in Isolde's *Liebestod*.

Just slightly older than Bellini was Donizetti, that other dominant figure of the *bel canto* operatic tradition. One writer has described Donizetti as the "fast food" man of music, a composer who wrote more than seventy operas over a thirty-year career, composed one of his finest in eleven days and a second in six weeks, and produced eight in one three-year stretch. Mendelssohn said, rather unkindly, of him: "Donizetti finishes an opera in ten days. It may be hissed, to be sure, but that doesn't matter, as it is paid for all the same, and then he can go about having a good time." Certainly, he was another spontaneous melodist who worked swiftly and often superficially, but with an instinctive talent.

The behaviour of audiences in Donizetti's time was quite appalling by any standards. Faced with indifference or chatter, night after night, no wonder composers happily recycled or copied the bits which managed to catch an audience's attention. Hector Berlioz attended a performance at *La Scala* in Milan of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, which he subsequently described in the following terms: "People were talking in normal voices with their backs to the stage. The singers, undeterred, gesticulated and yelled their lungs out in the strictest spirit of rivalry. At least I presumed they did from their wide open mouths, but the noise of the audience was such that no sound penetrated except the bass drum. People were gambling, eating supper in their boxes etc., etc. Consequently, perceiving it was useless to expect to hear anything of the score, which was then new to me, I left."

Don Pasquale was Donizetti's comic masterpiece of 1843. It has a companion piece, composed at the same time; the tragedy of *Dom Sebastien*, although few opera-lovers today have even heard

of the latter. *Dom Sebastien*, Donizetti's last triumph before he was committed to an asylum, was once described as a 'funeral procession in five acts'. It was first performed in great splendour at the Paris Opera, with 600 people on stage and many horses. After a difficult birth, it was revised in Vienna and became a hit for decades. It still gets the occasional performance.

In the days of Bellini and Donizetti, chorus members were not expected to read music. They learned everything by ear and were miserably paid. They were little more than 'extras' and were, nearly always, male. Women were not excluded altogether, but the amount they had to sing was small compared to that of the male choruses. It has been suggested, somewhat unkindly perhaps, that the chorus at this time had little else to do than to stand in a row and bawl music that sounded like the middle parts of a brass band.

Other functionaries, who nowadays have grand and respected roles in the opera house, performed a variety of tasks as circumstances demanded. The librettist might be, simultaneously, a provider of words and the director of stage action. In the eighteenth century, Carlo Goldoni, who had worked for Vivaldi as word supplier and stage director, described his tasks thus: "I instruct the singers in action, direct the scene, run to the boxes to look after the ladies, attend to the supernumeraries, and whistle when the scenery is to be changed."

Donizetti's librettist at the San Carlo in Naples, provided all sorts of guidance in connection with the staging of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, such as indicating the stage sides for entrances and exits, the placing of furniture and props, bits of business and sword-play, and positions for the supernumeraries and chorus. On the other hand, there was no way that a so-called 'director' of this kind would have told a highly-paid *prima donna* how to perform her role. The relativities of pay in 1848 were such that, in Naples, a '*prima donna* of special distinction' commanded 1,200 ducats, while a QUOTE 'poet responsible for putting operas on the stage' UNQUOTE, was paid just 50.

In those pre-recording days, the novelty of a singer's voice was part of the attraction, and a singer might be taken to court by the management for letting himself or herself be heard ahead of the season. On the other hand, some singers came to rule the operatic roost, dictating the terms in no uncertain a manner. Angelica Catalani, born in 1780, once went on strike in London when the management fell into arrears with her payments. This provoked a riot - chandeliers and musical instruments were smashed - and the theatre had to be closed for a week. A Catalani contract of 1826, which had her billed as 'Principal Singer of the World', contained the following clause: 'Madame Catalani shall choose and direct the operas in which she is to sing; she shall likewise have the choice of the performers in them; she will have no orders to receive from anyone; she will find all her own dresses.' She also expected to receive half the total takings, and her husband insisted on being given a large number of free tickets, presumably for their hired supporters. It was Catalani who started the custom of responding to applause by singing encores during the opera.

Many famous singers led colourful lives, and none was more colourful than that of the volatile eighteenth century *prima donna*, Caterina Gabrielli, the first soprano to be described as *coloratura*. She appeared in Vienna, where the Emperor became fond of her and gave her expensive gifts. One contemporary writer described her as 'the greatest singer in the world... certainly the most dangerous syren of modern times, (having made) more conquests ... than any woman breathing'. Such was her effect on men that once, in a fit of jealousy, the French Ambassador tried to shoot her, and she was saved only by the whalebone in her stays. If she were in a bad temper, which was often, she would only hum her arias. In Palermo, the Viceroy of Sicily invited her to a banquet attended by all the nobility, but she failed to arrive. He ordered the meal to be held back while a messenger was dispatched to find the cause of her absence. The messenger found her reading in bed. She might have been forgiven this slight had she not, later that evening, sung *sotto voce* when the Viceroy took his guests to hear her at the Opera. He sent her a message threatening punishment if she didn't raise her voice, but she replied that he might make her cry but would never make her sing. So he sent her to prison, where she gave free concerts every day, paid the debts of the poor prisoners and distributed large sums to charity. Eventually, public agitation secured her release and she was accompanied to her home by cheering crowds. When she went to Russia, Catherine the Great wanted to engage her services, and Gabrielli demanded 5,000

ducats. "Why, I don't give as much as that a year to any of my field marshals!" protested the Empress. "Very well," replied the artiste, "then let one sing for you." The Empress paid.

Just as the idea of public opera houses had quickly spread from Venice to other parts of Italy and throughout Europe, so the design of the Italian theatres dominated the shape of theatres elsewhere. Important people sat in boxes stacked up to six tiers high, arranged in a horseshoe shape. Thus, many of the occupants of these boxes faced each other as well as the stage. Families might own their boxes, which could be sold, let, lent or mortgaged. Mirrors in the back of boxes enabled occupants to follow the action while playing cards with their backs to the stage. People filled their boxes with their own items of furniture and hangings; and dressing rooms across the passage enabled servants to prepare drinks and meals. In winter, the usual season for operatic performances, the luxurious boxes were considerably warmer and more comfortable than a draughty, marbled palazzo. An English visitor to *La Scala* in 1814 reported that sometimes the curtains of the boxes were drawn during performances, "and you may imagine what you please".

Access to the theatre for all but those who had boxes, involved payments at various junctures, depending on whether patrons wanted to watch the performance or merely avail themselves of the gaming and other facilities, enter the stalls, have seats with or without arms, and so on. The gaming rooms were an important source of revenue for theatres in those days, and the Milan theatres were the only places in that city at which gambling was legally permitted. When the gambling facilities were closed by the Austrians in 1815, there was genuine concern that the theatres would close with them. Fortunately, this didn't happen, but it is a reminder that opera has always relied on sources of financial support beyond the box office.

Despite the shocked accounts of northern travellers about the behaviour of Italian audiences in the nineteenth century, it would be a mistake to overlook the Italians' genuine love of music and singing. This is something that visitors remarked upon in earlier times, and modern tourists still do. People sang in the streets of Genoa, on the canals of Venice and in the *campagna*. Young Neapolitans composed songs with the ease that Englishmen wrote letters and Frenchmen penned verses. Music was in their blood.

One such instinctively musical young man was born in 1813, the son of an innkeeper in the little hamlet of Roncole, situated not far from Cremona where Monteverdi had been born, and Mantua where *Orfeo* was first performed. The fertile triangle of the Po Valley was about to witness another chapter in operatic history and its author this time would be Giuseppe Verdi. "I am a peasant", Verdi told King Victor Emmanuel when the latter wished to ennoble him. He was proud of his humble origins, and he wanted to speak to the masses, not to an intellectual elite.

Opera had begun in the palaces of dukes and cardinals, and had then moved into the opulent playgrounds of the wealthy and leisured classes. At last it would become an art form which truly spoke to the people, and the name 'Verdi' would be synonymous with a free and unified Italy. It is said that on one occasion, when he was asked by an American conductor for his full postal address, Verdi replied without a trace of conceit: "Just Maestro Verdi, Italy." His countrymen would have agreed.

The young man from Roncole became the voice of his age, but in the great works of his middle period - *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* and *La traviata* - it is still possible to detect the richness of his inheritance. There are echoes of Orpheus at the gates of Hades, the nightingale runs and turns of the castrati, Rossini's brilliance, Bellini's elegance and Donizetti's passion. Verdi spent his life perfecting his art, and created some of his most remarkable music in old age, exactly as Monteverdi had done two centuries before. Who could have foreseen in those early years in Florence and Venice that Italians would one day say of a composer of operas: "He was our great unifier when the wave of his passionate music - something that the enemy could not seize - embodied the idea of a nation which swept freely from the Alps to the sea, setting our hearts on fire."

[*Di quella pira*. Il trovatore (Verdi). Placido Domingo (Manrico), Rosalind Plowright (Leonora). Orchestra of the Academia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Carlo Maria Giulini. Polydor 1984.]