

## Introduction: rediscovering Bellini

Bellini keeps being rediscovered. For more than a hundred years he has at intervals seemed eclipsed. Then something happens: Rosa Ponselle or Maria Callas sings *Norma*; *La sonnambula* or *I puritani* – each, one might have thought, a quintessential early Victorian work – comes up fresh in a new staging; taste shifts away from the full-blown and towards the linear. Bellini then springs to life as a unique artist.

One rediscovery came in the 1920s, another in the 1950s. One more is probably due now, though modern recording keeps the three operas just named in the public ear as essential to the repertory even when, with Callas dead and other virtuosos in retirement, they are seldom staged. Records also bring forward works long forgotten – *Il pirata*, *La straniera*, the un-Shakespearian *Romeo and Juliet* opera *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, even *Zaira*, the failure Bellini in part recycled as *Capuleti*. The Italian public has never forsaken Bellini, even when – between about 1890 and 1920 – the intelligentsia dismissed him; today his portrait is on the 5,000-lira note. Discriminating music-lovers elsewhere should agree that he is a highly individual composer, major in stature though his output is small and in effect limited to opera.

Bellini is a major composer as Andrew Marvell is a major poet. No one could sensibly call the author of ‘The Garden’, ‘To his Coy Mistress’, and the Horatian Ode a minor poet: his voice is original, his grasp masterly; phrase after phrase has taken root in the minds of

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1 Continuing fame: the head of Bellini on the Italian 5,000-lira note, current in 1995.

the literate. Marvell wrote little because he was a busy parliamentarian and fastidious. Bellini wrote little because he died at thirty-three; once out of music school he wrote operas because opera was the genre open to an ambitious young Italian, and by the standards of the time he too was fastidious, composing on average one opera a year where others composed three or four. 'With my style', he wrote, 'I have to spit blood [to compose]' (14 June 1828). People in his day drew a parallel with his close contemporary Chopin, another elegiac composer unique in his genre. The likeness can still at times seem uncanny, though any influence was marginal (of Bellini on the younger Chopin rather than the other way about) and the 'elegiac' label was always overdone: Bellini, like Chopin, could be forceful.

His work has often been called uneven. This is true: *Norma* itself, his masterpiece, has lapses; only *La sonnambula* keeps up an even quality – in a medium (the idyll) not now fashionable. 'The poet's privilege', Bernard Shaw wrote, is to have 'his chain tested by its strongest link'. The composer's too. Bellini's strongest links are adamant.

To the biographer he sets a problem. He died young, at the height both of his success and of the Romantic movement; he was not only

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good-looking but fair-haired and blue-eyed – a fair-haired, blue-eyed Sicilian at that. For all these reasons he became an instant myth. The wan, baseless legend then promoted ('a sigh in dancing pumps', Heine called him) dragged on through the rest of the century and beyond.

The myth took hold not just of the public at large but of Bellini's intimate friend Francesco Florimo, who tended his memory and, much later (1882), brought out an early biography. In twice-weekly letters to him Bellini had shared his professional concerns, his most private thoughts and feelings, almost his stream of consciousness. Florimo's treatment of those letters through five decades of living with the myth badly complicates our understanding. Other friends, and some later editors, played their part in muddying the evidence. A biographer has to be a detective.

The circumstances of Bellini's death had much to do with starting up the myth. He died on 23 September 1835 at a friend's rented house in the suburban village of Puteaux, just outside Paris. His illness, recurring dysentery caused by amoebic infection, had not been properly diagnosed and was anyhow incurable by the medicine of the time. He had fallen ill in late summer when many of his acquaintances were away from central Paris, as he was himself. Less than eight months had gone by since his great Parisian success with *I puritani*, only a few weeks since he had been in society, apparently healthy. For all these reasons his death came as a shock.

Early obituaries in French journals did not unanimously praise his music; but even their criticisms dwelt on the stereotype of the 'elegiac and tender' composer, author of 'slow and languid phrases'. Berlioz, with many reservations, praised his 'deep sensibility', 'melancholy grace', and 'naive simplicity' as a composer, his 'even temper' and 'pleasant demeanour' as a man. Articles and diaries called him a 'child' in his goodheartedness and his enthusiasms; some understated his age. At the same time they exaggerated his success in Paris society (Bellini had indeed been taken up in the salons, but, for reasons to be examined later, had found them

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2 Marble bust of Bellini by Dantan Jeune, commissioned by the sixth Duke of Devonshire.

baffling and had twice withdrawn to the calm of Puteaux). The worst anybody could say of him was that he had overdone the pursuit of pleasure.

By 1863 the myth was encapsulated in the reminiscences of the publisher Léon Escudier: the young Sicilian ‘blond as the cornfields, sweet as the angels, young as the dawn, melancholy as the sunset. There was in his soul something of both Pergolesi and Mozart’, etc. In the Romantic era numbers of artists died young (Chatterton, Keats, Shelley, and Byron among English poets). They fed a notion of doomed genius; in music doom could be read into the lives of Pergolesi and Mozart – each the subject of a considerable myth – and now into Bellini’s.

In Naples, where Bellini had studied, ladies on the night of his requiem mass attended a performance of *Norma* in mourning. In his native Catania a flora of legends grew up about his precocious childhood and his alleged youthful love affairs; the earliest biographer with some pretensions picked up in 1855 stories of the eighteen-month-old Bellini ‘gracefully’ singing and transposing an aria. In Florence a collector of musicians’ autographs had already (1849) cut a letter of Bellini’s in pieces and sold them as relics. But the trigger to the most extravagant myth-making was the removal of Bellini’s body from the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris to Catania Cathedral.

This happened in 1876. As the coffin made its way down the Italian peninsula it was met at station after station by bands, speeches, laurel crowns. In Catania, several days’ processions, masses, illuminations, public meetings and concerts preceded the reburial; of the many speeches one, by a scientist, urged that the next star to be discovered should be named Bellini. Experts meanwhile re-embalmed the mummified corpse as it lay in a side-chapel of the cathedral. An American soprano, Mary Louise Swift, engaged to sing in a memorial cantata, talked her way into the chapel and begged to be allowed to kiss Bellini. As she did so she plucked two hairs from his chest. Nor was she alone in this. Through the good offices of the embalmers various people got hold of hairs, some from the head,

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some again from the chest; one hair became a string in a lyre embroidered by another woman admirer, while others found their way into a red velvet-covered box alongside a fragment of the original coffin, 'residual organic substances', and a trepan used in the re-embalming.

In this atmosphere it is hardly surprising that Bellini's great friend Francesco Florimo should have ignored scholarly methods in dealing with the composer's many letters to him. When Bellini left for Milan (1827) and then Paris (1833) Florimo stayed behind in Naples, wedded as librarian to the college they had both attended. He made it his life's work – through a long life – to propagate the cult both of Bellini and of the Neapolitan musical tradition his friend had adorned. Publications from 1869 culminated in *Bellini. Memorie e lettere* (1882), a biography followed by over 200 pages of letters. Florimo died six years later, bequeathing many autograph letters to the college library.

Bellini's letters to Florimo are still our chief evidence for his life, working methods, and personality. This evidence, however, is skewed. Those letters of which the originals can be consulted are an extraordinarily frank and detailed source – few artists have written down their every passing mood as Bellini did – but they cover only the periods from January 1828 to March 1829 and from July 1834 to September 1835, with a scattering of letters in between. Letters to other correspondents go some way to fill the gap of more than five years, but they are nowhere near so free.

What happened? Florimo burned many letters, clearly because they dated from the years when Bellini was having an affair with a married woman, Giuditta Turina; the affair ended in 1834, just after it had led to her separation from her husband, and a full knowledge of the circumstances might have shown the composer in an unflattering light. Florimo, however, went further. As he tells us, he gave away some letters to admirers who begged for a memento, and he did not keep copies; since there was a market in the letters, and at least one addressed to him turned up in the hands of an autograph

dealer, we may ask whether he did not at times eke out his librarian's income by selling them. In his publications he also faked a number of letters or parts of letters.

'Fake' is a strong word. Writers on Bellini have so far avoided it; though aware that these letters are not in Bellini's style and are on other grounds dubious, they have concluded that Florimo (like some other nineteenth-century editors of dubious Bellini letters) must have worked them up from originals now lost, or from something Bellini had said in conversation. Passages from them have therefore remained central to interpretation.

In using the word I mean not just that Florimo behaved like the run of nineteenth-century editors, who corrected letters for grammar and style, tacitly bowdlerized them, and on occasion ran two letters together or split one letter into two. He did all these things, but he went further: he invented new matter that substantially changed the view of Bellini's feelings presented by his letters. He also recalled conversations some of which could not have taken place.

Of all the dubious published letters only two have an autograph original fully known to us. One of these autographs may be read in full, together with the letter as published by Florimo.<sup>1</sup> A comparison tells us much about his methods.

As a student in Naples Bellini was for a time in love with Maddalena Fumaroli, a judge's daughter, and she, for rather longer, with him. The story is known almost wholly from Florimo's narrative; it launched fanciful accounts by others, such as a play of 1878 that showed Giuditta Turina as villainess, and Bellini at Maddalena's deathbed. In reality, Bellini lost interest in Maddalena as soon as he left for Milan if not sooner; he found her letters irksome. She died in June 1834; it is not clear from Bellini's autograph letter of a year later whether he had only then heard of her death, or was recalling his feelings in answer to a question put by Florimo.

In the autograph Maddalena takes up fifteen lines partway through a letter of seventy-four. This is one topic among others: a rumoured duel, commissions and accounts, dealings with publishers and with a

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Naples opera management, an importunate acquaintance. The letter has two points in common with Florimo's published version:

- 1 Bellini 'wept bitterly' at the news, and realized that his heart was still 'capable of feeling sorrow' (though part of the point – unmentioned in Florimo's version – was to contrast this with his behaviour at parting from Giuditta Turina);
- 2 he asked for a poem to set to music as a memorial (requested by someone in Naples) and that it should have him addressing Maddalena's 'beautiful spirit'.

In Florimo's published version, however – entirely taken up with Maddalena, – Bellini was also made to declare that

- 1 the news had 'broken his heart', produced a 'rending sensation' in his spirit, called up memories, promises, and hopes, and brought out the transitoriness of 'this world of vain shows';
- 2 he had tried to sing Florimo's memorial song 'between sobs', and his heart was 'wounded';
- 3 his pen, as he wrote, was falling from his hand and tears prevented him from going on;
- 4 Maddalena's death, a 'thunderbolt' that appeared to signal divine wrath, made him foresee his own.

This last, a substantial postscript two-thirds the length of the letter, had no basis whatever in Bellini's autograph, but it came pat in a letter supposedly written three and half months before his death.

What are we to conclude? The first third of the letter in Florimo's version is invented, the last sentence and the postscript are invented, and the rest, though based on the autograph, has been worked up to deepen the feeling and purge it of all mention of Bellini's physical relationship with Turina. By the standards of everyday historical criticism, the whole is a fake, not just because Florimo has inserted so much new matter but because he has isolated and blown up the topic of Bellini's (genuine) sorrow at the young woman's death to give it an importance the original letter does not convey.



That was a special case. The other fully documented example shows Florimo's everyday method. Bellini on 14 February 1834 answered a request from the management of the Teatro San Carlo, Naples, for a new opera. His autograph letter is sober and businesslike. Florimo's version (for which there exists a draft as well as the published text) does not change the basic meaning but seeks to make the letter more stylish and patriotic. Bellini's reference to 'the means' nature had granted him becomes 'those few means'; 'persons for whom I am to write' becomes 'persons to whom I was to entrust my [musical] notes'; operatic failures are additionally described as 'an illness that has now become an epidemic'. Bellini is made to express satisfaction at writing 'for the country that saw my birth and that trained me in my difficult art' and, later, at the chance of 'gathering glory on the soil of my beloved fatherland'. The letter is not altogether a fake, but it is distorted: the new version suggests a fatuous wish to impress that is nowhere to be seen in the original.<sup>2</sup>

Several other letters or fragments of letters published by Florimo are dubious. The original of one was sold at Sotheby's in 1990. In this letter (of 7 October 1834) Bellini urged his librettist Felice Romani, with whom he had been reconciled after a breach, to write 'for me only'; though Sotheby's catalogue quotes no more than extracts, we do now know that Florimo worked this up to 'for me only: only for me, for your Bellini' – a phrase quoted by every biographer – and, where the original was friendly but sober, added whole sentences extravagantly buttering up Romani: 'I will never be able to forget your aid and the glory that I owe to you', 'Now that we are reconciled, O my great Romani, my eminent collaborator and protector, I feel at peace and am content', 'I can't wait to embrace you.' Again Bellini's tone and attitude are falsified.

Another dubious letter has Bellini attending the first night of *La sonnambula* in London with the great Maria Malibran: he calls out 'brava!', is recognized, acclaimed, and dragged on to the stage to take a bow; Malibran flings her arms round him, singing the phrase he had applauded ('Ah! Embrace me!'). The text runs to fanciful

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journalese ('the blond sons of Albion') unlike Bellini's plain, at times clumsy epistolary style. If we look up reviews in the *London Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Herald* we find that they differ about the success of the performance – the less favourable one reports 'none of the music was encored', a statement of fact – but neither mentions Bellini's presence. Nor did Bellini, in an authentic letter to another friend, report any of the alleged incidents. Florimo's worked-up version seems aimed at confirming the story that Bellini had fallen in love with Malibran – a story popular almost since the death of both artists within a year of each other, but unlikely on several grounds; another 'fragment of a letter' published by Florimo jokes about a possible duel between Bellini and Malibran's lover (later her husband), but an authentic letter from Bellini to Malibran shows them on terms of mutual regard, at most exchanging a theatrical 'darling'.

Another celebrated letter, about the initial failure of *Norma* ('fiasco!!! fiasco!!! utter fiasco!!!') has generally been seen as not in Bellini's style, contradicted by authentic letters, and embellished at the least. Florimo declared that he had given the original to Sir William Temple, the British Minister at Naples (Lord Palmerston's brother), keeping, this time, a copy for himself. In her standard edition of the letters, Luisa Cambi argued that Florimo could not have made up the letter from start to finish for fear of contradiction by such important people as Temple and Palmerston. She was unaware that by 1868, when the letter first appeared, both were dead and the family was extinct.

Finally, Bellini's relations with his near-contemporary Donizetti called up a sustained endeavour by Florimo to show what we now know to be untrue – that the two composers had always lived in friendly harmony and mutual admiration. This was based on 'remembered conversations' and letters or letter 'fragments' for none of which are the originals known; both the memories and the letters throw up a number of internal contradictions.<sup>3</sup> Much if not all of this 'evidence' – we have to conclude – is faked.

Why did Florimo do it? We need not think him a conscious forger.