

VINCENZO BELLINI: *Critical Edition of the Complete Works* (Editorial Board: Fabrizio Della Seta, Alessandro Roccatagliati, and Luca Zoppelli; Managing Editor: Marco Uvietta). Ricordi, Milano [dist. University of Chicago Press]

Vol. XV: Instrumental Works (ed. Andrea Chegai). [one volume plus critical commentary]

Vol. VI: *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* (ed. Claudio Toscani). [two volumes plus critical commentary]

Vol. VII: *La sonnambula* (ed. Alessandro Roccatagliati & Luca Zoppelli). [one volume plus critical commentary]

One of the more convenient if sad facts about Bellini (1801-35) is that his early death just shy of his thirty-fourth birthday means that his complete works are of manageable size: ten operas (a couple in more than a single version), and a handful of miscellaneous instrumental and vocal pieces. Ricordi's projected Complete Edition, including sketches and fragments, should run to a mere sixteen volumes, which means that at least some of us should still be around to see its completion: an exciting prospect. Bellini was also, famously, a careful worker, which is not to say that he was notably slow at his job—no one at the time could afford to be that—but he chose his projects with discernment and (like Rossini) notated his scores with both accuracy and finesse. Establishing a basic text faithful to his expressed intentions is thus a matter of some importance.

There's a very common prejudice against 19th century Italian music, and that of the Bel Canto school in particular, which holds that progress in the art of composition occurred mostly in the field of instrumental music, and primarily in Germany, at least until Wagner brought the "music of the future" into the theater as well. This view appears quite strange when we consider that most authorities readily acknowledge the impact of the Italian tradition of comic opera on the evolution of the Classical style only a few decades previously. In fact, the significance of Italian music didn't evaporate suddenly just because Beethoven wrote magnificent instrumental pieces and told Rossini to stick to comedy, or because Wagner coined the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* to describe his music dramas--*gesamt* or not.

Noted pedagogue Pierre Baillot, in his famous treatise *The Art of the Violin* (1835), summarized the situation "on the ground" particularly well when he wrote:

"This change in notation [from the Baroque period] has been affected by the progress in dramatic music; it has caused the replacement in instrumental music of melodies which are for the most part full of charm but whose expression is not clearly indicated, by a more positive type of melody, adapted to the lyric stage and to the accents of passion."

For Baillot to make this observation at exactly the time that Bellini was writing the masterpieces on which his reputation rests is significant, as is the fact that he defines musical progress not merely in terms of the elaboration of abstract forms or advanced harmonic processes, but rather as the creation of a new type of melody. Few artists fulfill Baillot's vision of modern music as "a more positive type of melody, adapted to the lyric stage and to the accents of passion" better than does Bellini. Not only was he a tunesmith of profound genius, a fact that everyone, even Wagner, readily acknowledged, but his use of the orchestra naturally reflected this fact. Progress in one area leads to boldness and innovation in others.

Thus, in *La sonnambula* (1831), for Elvino's Act Two scene and aria Bellini included an expressive duet for two keyed trumpets, thought to be the same instrument for which Haydn had composed his Trumpet Concerto in 1795. The example below (p. 308 of the new edition), in the last bar just before the fermata, shows particularly clearly the soulful chromatic tones that these now obsolete members of the brass family could produce.

The image shows a musical score for the introduction to Elvino's aria in *La sonnambula*. The score is for the last bar before the fermata. It includes parts for Trb. Re (Trumpet in E-flat), Vni I and II (Violins), Vle (Viola), and Vc. e Cb. (Violoncello and Contrabass). The Trb. Re part features a melodic line with chromatic tones, marked 'a piacere'.

Bellini evidently was of two minds about retaining this introduction to Elvino's aria, knowing full well that most opera houses of the day would not have access to the required instruments (nowadays the music is easily playable on valve trumpets). The most readily accessible modern score (available from Kalmus) simply leaves it out, though some recordings, such as the Sutherland/Pavarotti version on Decca, happily reinstate it--though not the aria's original concluding bars for horns instead of Kalmus's clarinets and bassoons. The beauty of a critical edition, of course, is that performers can look, listen, and decide for themselves, even if it's beyond imagining that anyone could omit this gorgeously scored melody on the grounds that Bellini ultimately sacrificed it to theatrical expediency.

Bellini's compositional habits were particularly interesting, and have been well documented. In addition to the themes that he crafted for specific works, he kept handy a book of tunes that he wrote down on the spot as they came to him, and like most composers of the day he helped himself liberally to his own previous work. A good bit of *I Capuleti* (1830) came from his failed opera *Zaira* (1829). The volume featuring the instrumental works is particularly interesting because a lot of the music contained in the eight early overtures, composed roughly from 1818-25, wound up in the operas *Adelson e Salvini* (1825), *Il pirata* (1826), and *Bianca e Fernando* (1827). Andrea Chegai's very thorough preface (Italian only, alas)

provides a chart that details exactly what bits wound up where—a fascinating guide for fans of the works in question.

In these eight overtures, you can actually see Bellini learning his craft; the first is scored for pairs of horns, clarinets, first and second violins, and *basso* (cellos and basses), with no violas. The second is a *Sinfonia per studio* in C minor but already features the standard full orchestra of the day, with double winds plus three trombones. The third overture adds a piccolo, the sixth an ophicleide. Of Bellini's remaining orchestral pieces, only his charming Oboe Concerto has come down to us complete; fragments of concertos for flute and bassoon, as well as another overture, are included in the volume's appendices. These, plus a small handful of keyboard pieces, comprise the remainder of Bellini's non-vocal output.

In discussing Bärenreiter's new edition of Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, I noted that it's sometimes more complicated to produce a critical edition of a beloved popular work, if only because there often will be a much greater variety of source material to work through. In the case of *I Capuleti* (a.k.a. *Romeo and Juliet*, though not based on Shakespeare but rather on a contemporary play by Luigi Scevola, which was in turn derived from the same original 16th century source), Bellini adjusted the part of Juliet for the Milan premiere, and arranged Lorenzo for both a bass and a tenor. The new edition very conveniently prints both versions clearly in the main text, as in the example below from Juliet's Act One *scena*, while including in the appendices sections that Bellini recomposed beyond the vocal lines.

The image displays a page of a musical score for Juliet's Act One *scena*. The score is written in G minor (three flats) and 4/4 time. It features a vocal line for Juliet (Giu.) and an orchestral accompaniment for Violins I and II (Vni, Vni II), Viola (Vle), Violoncello (Vc), and Contrabasso (Cb). The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Oh! al-men po-tes-si qual vit-ti-ma ca-". A *ritenuto* marking is placed above the first measure of the vocal line. Below the vocal line, a smaller version of the same musical notation is shown, labeled "[Versione Milano 1830-31]", with the lyrics "qual vit-ti-ma ca-". The orchestral accompaniment includes dynamics such as *pp* and *ppp*, and a triplet of eighth notes in the first violin part. The score is numbered 27 in the top left corner.

The question of transpositions, a particular issue in the case of Elvino's music in *La sonnambula*, is explained quite thoroughly as well. His arias require a range extending up to a high D, and have traditionally been taken down a full tone. The new edition restores the original tessitura, hardly a problem for tenors like Juan

Diego Florez, who has recorded the work for L'oiseau lyre with an extremely breathy and mannered Cecilia Bartoli. Besides, at the “authentic” pitch of that recording, A=430, a D isn't really a D, despite which Florez surprisingly uses the traditional transpositions.

Nevertheless, the Bartoli/Florez performance employs the Critical Edition—the parts were available back in 2004 to be “tried out” prior to publication of the full score. Aside from Bartoli's over-miked crooning, it proves remarkably successful in conveying the music's gracefulness and pastoral charm. Some of this undoubtedly stems from the use of period instruments, with their lighter and brighter sonorities, but a lot of the production's success must be credited to the musical text itself, so it's worth looking at a few more examples of the difference between the traditional score and Ricordi's new edition.

Editors Alessandro Roccatagliati and Luca Zoppelli obviously have taken great pains over the correction of dynamics and accents. In the standard edition, Bellini's frequent use of *ppp* is often upgraded to *pp*, and his personal forte/piano accent, which he sensibly notates [*>p*], becomes a complicated collection of hairpins and decrescendo signs. Additionally, most modern performances omit the cymbal part entirely, while retaining the bass drum. This robs the music of some of its sparkle, making it sound unduly thick and heavy in *tuttis*. In fact, Bellini asks for “small cymbals” (“*piattini*”) at certain points. Exactly what he had in mind we may never know, but at least the new edition rectifies the basic problem, and there is certainly no excuse whatsoever for omitting the cymbals entirely.

One of the more valuable and gratifying aspects of working with Italian scores stems from the fact that because Italian is the language of musical notation generally, native composers employ a larger, more highly varied, and often colorful descriptive vocabulary. This can reveal interesting facts about musical expression, performance practice, theatrical dramaturgy, and the relationship between the composer and his players. Among the several misreadings or omissions that the new edition corrects, two cases stand out as particularly noteworthy.

The image shows a musical score for strings and cymbals. The staves are labeled Vni (Violin I), Vle (Violin II), Vc. (Viola), and Cb. (Cello/Double Bass). The score includes performance instructions such as *ARCO*, *pp leggero e con brio*, and *pp stacc.*. The music is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing rests for certain instruments.

Above is the melody that accompanies the first entrance of the chorus in the Act I finale, as presented in the Kalmus edition. The “*con brio*” (vigorously) designation has always seemed a bit strange given the context—the villagers are creeping up on the Count and (as they soon find out) the sleeping Amina, cautiously, in the middle of the night. Well, it turns out that what Bellini wrote was this:

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I
Vni
II
Vle
Vc.
Cb.

arco con brillo
pp e leggero
arco con brillo
pp e leggero
arco
pp staccato
arco
pp staccato
arco
pp staccato

Not “*con brio*” at all, but “*con brillo*,” which means tipsy, unsteady, literally “with a shine on,” certainly a more apt companion to the pianissimo dynamic and *leggero* articulation, not to mention a fitting illustration of the villagers’ state of mind.

Then there is this delightful example of Bellini speaking directly to his players, in this case the solo cellist, from the Act Two finale:

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Ami

abbandonandosi
lente

a. pas - sa - sti al par, al par d'a - mor, che un gior - no sol du - rò, che un gior - no sol du - rò, pas - sa - sti al

colla parte

I
Vni
II
Vle
Vc. 1 solo
Vc. e Cb.

d'intelligenza col canto
lente

“With the voice, intelligently,” Bellini admonishes, asking the musician to pay attention to what the singer is doing, to blend with her, and to refrain from ornamenting his part or otherwise attempting to upstage Amina during her biggest moment in the entire opera. Her “with abandon” designation, by the way, is another typically Bellinian expressive fingerprint. The advice to the cellist, though, is missing from the Kalmus edition, and would be far less necessary in circumstances where both singer and instrumentalist are following the strict beat of a modern conductor. But is that solution necessarily better than what Bellini’s little note suggests?

In Italian orchestras of the day, led by a concertmaster and a “maestro at the piano,” with the musicians facing the stage in an un-darkened theater, seated on the same level as the audience, there must have been a great deal of direct interplay between the instrumentalists and the singers. Indeed, it would be a very interesting study in historical authenticity to see what effect this arrangement has on performance practice—with the players free to use *tempo rubato*, inflect dynamics, ornament their lines, apply vibrato, and balance the ensemble in keeping with the ebb and flow of the drama absent a guiding hand from the conductor’s podium.

The only way that questions like these can be answered is if performers have before them a clean, reliable text. Bellini’s orchestration, indeed that of 19th century Italian opera generally, often is characterized as primitive and lacking in imagination. As these examples show, the situation is more complicated, and far more interesting, than this simplistic generalization leads us to believe. Knowing what he actually wrote for the orchestra alerts us to the broad range of expressive possibilities within the tradition he both exploited and extended, just as studying the numerous vocal variants included in the appendices of these volumes (or in the case of *I Capuleti*, within the main text), permits modern singers to personalize their own interpretations in a stylistically appropriate way. Good scholarship such as we find here, like a good performance, brings the music to life.

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