

## VICENZO BELLINI'S OPERA CREATION, A MEANS OF CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### Abstract

At the crossroads “of a still aristocratic art and the genuine issue of romanticism, Bellini achieved by his creation the perfect union between classical beauty and the exaltation theme of hero or rather more frequently of the heroine, condemned by fate” ( *Dictionar de mari muzicieni*, 2006). **La Sonnambula** is one of the most important works that promoted Bellini's popularity, particularly through the gentle and sweet vaudeville flavour, linked to the pathetic chant combined with high colourful voice of great interpretative value. The last Bellinian opera creation was born after the disintegration of the fruitful partnership with the librettist Felice Romani. After leaving Italy to settle in Paris, Bellini has signed a commitment with the Théâtre Italien (in 1834) for a new opera, **I Puritani**. We will highlight how through the libretto, the action, the characters, the music, the opera represents a way to educate and to enlighten the yesterday, today and tomorrow public.

**Keywords:** opera, Vincenzo Bellini, libretto, characters, soprano.

### 1. OPERA LA SONNAMBULA - OVERVIEW

The opera *Ernani* that ought to have been composed by Bellini, was replaced by *La Sonnambula* due to the rigors imposed by the Austrian censorship towards the uncomfortable political issues. The censorship of that time had a great influence upon the traits of the characters, which determined the librettist Felice Romani to ask the change of the subject. Romani proposed Bellini a simple subject, according to the circumstances of the time, inspired by Eugène Scribe's vaudeville *La Somnambule or L'Arriyée d'un nouveau seigneur* (which had already been the subject of an adaptation of Jean-Pierre Aumer as ballet-pantomime). Bellini got out of the libretto the genealogy according to which Amina would have been the daughter of Rodolfo and

thus the plot and characters' feelings became extremely simple the heroes wearing peasant clothes instead of tragedy coturna; the drama takes place between the story and the fairy tale and disturbing the hearts and causing much pain. The title of the opera will be *La Sonnambula* or *I due fidanzati svizzeri*, one of the best known and highly appreciated Bellinien operas, whose premiere took place on March 6th, 1831 at the *Teatro Carcano* in Milan, resulting in a great triumph. The cast of the world- wide premiere included: Giuditta Pasta and Giovanni Battista Rubini. The production capacity and the managing of the dramatic tune is specific to the Italian composers, but Bellini proves to be the best inspired, reaching its peak quality. The days spent on Lake Como, in Moltrasio, represented the research work of the composer and the female workers songs were the source of inspiration to compose the opera. Many of the choral tunes and the opera arias have an essentially pastoral character and bear the typical Sicilian imprint. Bellini wanted to cover his grave with the most uplifting notes and beloved arias: *Ah! Non credea mirarti sì presto estinto, o fiore* from the masterpiece *La Sonnambula* .

### 2. THE SUBJECT OF THE OPERA

The action of the opera deals with a lost world, or even ever nonexistent contemplated with a bitter nostalgia, in which the intellectual figure of Count Rodolfo rationally and with simplicity explains the concept of sleepwalking. **Act One, the first picture:** The action takes place in a mountain village in Switzerland, during the feast

celebrating the marriage of Amina and Elvino (an orphan raised by Teresa Morar). The only unhappy person with this event is the hostess Lisa, who loves Elvino. Amina receives as a gift from the future husband, his mother's ring and a bunch of violets as a symbol of his love. The party is interrupted by the appearance of a mysterious stranger nobleman - Count Rodolfo, who seems to know very well those places, but who is not recognized by anyone in the village. The stranger says that he was raised by old senior of the castle, who loved him as his own child. After being warned that the village was haunted by the presence of ghosts and it was risky to continue his journey at night Rodolfo remains at the inn, as he considers this story just a superstition. The count compliments the young bride and compares her to a lady whom he met many years ago, stirring Elvino's jealousy and the quarrel with Amina.

**Second picture:** An attempt to woo the hostess by the Count is interrupted by a confusing noise. Lisa runs away and hides scared, not before identifying Amina entering the Count's room through the window; in haste the hostess loses her handkerchief. Sleepwalker Amina affectionately addresses the Count using the name of Elvino, talking about the wedding ceremony. Rodolfo immediately understands the situation, but does not want to seize it and decides to leave the room without waking up the girl. Upon learning about the identity of the stranger from Lisa, the villagers arrive at the inn to greet him; They are led by the landlady to Rodolfo's room, where to their great surprise find Amina. Lisa notifies Elvino who, jealous and confused, breaks the engagement, casts Amina, while she, awoken to reality, can not explain her presence in the Count's room. Meanwhile Teresa picks up discreetly Lisa's handkerchief.

**In the second act, first picture** the action takes place in the valley between the village and the castle. A group of villagers are heading to the castle to ask the Count to come to the defence of Amina, if she is indeed innocent. Amina receives consolation and affection from her mother (who is convinced that Rodolfo will intervene to defend his daughter) and relives the wonderful moments spent with Elvino in those places. The unexpected

encounter with Elvino, alone and troubled, is very exciting, the young man stating that his heart has died and that he is now one of the most unhappy people. Amina is trying in vain to make excuses, Elvino's decision is final. The villagers joyfully announce the news of Amina's innocence, which causes a tantrum on behalf of Elvino, who throws the ring from the girl's finger.

**The second picture** is carried out near Teresa's mill, near a ravine. Alessio can not convince Lisa that Elvino will never marry her, but a group of villagers comes with the news that the hostess is chosen by Elvino, and the wedding will take place immediately. Count Rodolfo tries to explain Rodolfo and the villagers that Amina suffers from sleepwalking, thus justifying her presence in his room at the inn, but all his explanations are futile. Everyone is preparing for the wedding again. When Lisa and Elvino pass in front of the mill, Teresa accuses landlady of the same guilt as that of Amina, bringing as evidence a handkerchief found in the Count's room. In the general amazement Amina makes her appearance, sleepwalking on the curb of the roof of the mill, which is the proof that Rodolfo was right. Aware that the slightest noise might be fatal if he wakes up Amina, the Count asks for silence (Popov, 1964). Only now all understand that the dreaded ghost that haunted the village was none other than Amina in the state of sleepwalking. Dreaming of the lost love, Amina hopes to see once more Elvino; when she wakes up she is in the arms of her lover and finally the long-awaited wedding will take place.

### **3. THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CHARACTERS**

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Bellini in his works realistically reflects the human condition: all the characters want something that they fail to achieve. The heroes of the masterpiece *La Sonnambula* are treated under the double aspect: the ingenuity and excessive jealousy of Elvino; the Count's good faith but mischievous; the envy and the jealousy that justify Lisa's behaviour; Alessio's goodness who forgives the hostess, although he has all the evidence that she made a mistake; Amina -the

innocent sleepwalking protagonist, sweet and tender who leaves room for some doubts that she might not be that candid and sick person as people think she is. Amina plays the cheerful and sparkling role of a beautiful, innocent, but unhappy girl because she suffers from sleepwalking. She walks and talks in his sleep, as if she were in a trance, without realizing what happens around her, which causes her endless trouble. These problems are not foreseeable at the beginning of the first act, when Amina and Elvino make their vows of love and faith in an atmosphere of joyful celebration. The action of the opera takes place in an unreal world, the same as Amina's world, joy emanating from her monologues and then pain, revealing a clean, delicate soul, full of love for everyone who listens to her and wish her good. Amina is not a person, but a symbol of the dream of hope, goodness and happiness, it is the soul of a person with spectral aura.

Neither the other characters of the opera lack unrest: the young Elvino is tormented by jealousy, Lisa the hostess cries for love of him, the Count relives his happy childhood, but the naive simplicity of the conflict, in reality, he hides a subtle bitterness. Elvino has the role with the highest degree of difficulty, whose melodic lines represent some of the most beautiful and best-known pieces dedicated to the voice of a tenor, evoking both love and distrust of the woman he loves (as the hero crosses different states of affectivity of major intensity). From the psychological point of view, his vengeance can be regarded as an act of desperation or a tragic one. Count Rodolfo exhibits paternal care towards poor Amina; out of his character we can distinguish two different attitudes: on the one hand he takes on the superiority of the city folk visiting the village, but at the same time he looks with admiration at the rural world. In Amina's presence in a state of sleepwalking he rejects the desire to take advantage of her, saving her honour and purity.

#### **4. MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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The theme of love and conflict between Amina and Elvino, gives Bellini the opportunity to express his poetic genius. The composer knows

how to combine perfectly, naturally the melodic arch length with the subject through languorous movements, while the orchestra accompanies the voice with admirable simplicity (Sâmpetrean, 2007). The glow of pure love of poetry and music is reflected in the choral moments in duets or in areas and the high-intensity vibrations of dramatic action which find their emotional culmination in the famous aria of the heroine in the final scene: *Ah! non creda mirarti*. The melodic mastery meant to send the message of the poetic text is the primary means of expression of Bellini's creation. The choirs and the music drawn from his music certify the melodic and creative force that the interpreters have the duty to understand and convey to the public. *La Sonnambula* is a challenging milestone for the sopranos who want to approach it, both in terms of acting and of voice. The actress in Amina's role has the task to convey the complexity of the feelings of the heroine through a soft voice, without asperity, with the perfect control on breathing, of colourfulness and high register, an equal and bright vocal timbre in all registers, capable to fairly render the phrasing and expressiveness specific to *bel canto* style.

From the perspective of voice we are going to pursue the merging of the crystal voice colours of high-pitched and super high-pitched register with the clarity and the precision of the colourful passages stemming from the fabric of the central register maintained and well nuanced. The dynamic differences between the two acts should not be detrimental to voice consistency or to lose roundness and size. The agilities and the super high-pitched notes will be articulated with precision, but *legato*, animating the sustained melodic moments on breath, loose ribs maintaining that long sentence that constitutes the specific character of the Bellinian creation that give depth to the dramaturgy of the work. The voice should always sound free, never forced, but shiny, smooth, continuously offering richly nuanced sounds properly led and supported on the air column. We will constantly follow to obtain the supreme elegance on the *legato* sentences, using beautiful, expressive variations and the homogeneity of medium and high-pitched registers (which we could interpret without the public to notice supplementary efforts).

In order to be able to interpret and act out as real as possible the character of Amina, we need to get away from sizes of the infantile manners, typical for lax voices and to complete them with lyricism and melancholy, completely abstract, with a high quality *legato* song (especially in the medium register). In the variety of situations from the action development of the opera, the deep-toned of and expressiveness of singing will much contribute to perfect interpretation of the passages with vocal acrobatics and the typical Bellinian mourning (Câmpeanu, 1975). In order to express the interpretative intentions required by the text on the central fabric of the role, the melancholic singing and the suffering with a silky smooth voice is absolutely necessary to express with the support of breathing. The musical sentences of the aria *Ah! Non credea mirarti* should be loose and the sounds to have consistency and roundness specific of *bel canto* singing; in the *rondo* that follows the sounds will be beautiful, round and supple to facilitate the implementation of expressive colourfulness. Permanent control of respiration is essential not to be felt the fatigue and the wear of voice to achieve the *legato* singing voice and to achieve the brilliance of voice, especially in the high-pitched register. A good voice guided, nurtured, crystalline, sound, consistent across all registers, which achieves supple and articulated agilities will easily and naturally describe the character and the emotional states that the heroine goes through (Pinghirc, 2003).

The interpreters of the role of Amina must show their interpretation valences of the virtuosity and the difficulties of the Bellinian *bel canto* style through a voice rich in harmonics especially in the central register, perfect intonation, neat flow of sentences and of singing line, depending on the emotional states of the character. The execution of colourfulness and of trills will be done with precision and articulation, and the sounds from high-pitched of and super high-pitched will be expressed softly but firmly, assisted by breathing. The soprano who knows how to express beautifully toned sounds, brilliant on the central notes and homogeneous on all registers, who knows the stylistic properties and can lead the sentences beautifully, with

intelligence and musicality will surely manage to convey the intense feelings and the characteristic expressiveness of the character Amina.

## **5. THE OPERA I PURITANI - OVERVIEW**

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Written on a libretto by Carlo Pepoli - *I puritani e i cavalieri* (the title was later simplified in *I Puritani*) took as its starting point the historical drama *Têtes Rondes et Cavaliers* by Jacques François Ancelot and Joseph Xavier Boniface (Saintine) after the short story by Walter Scott: *Old Mortality*. *I Puritani* is for an educated public because it contains innovative elements in several directions, revealing orchestral complexity, a colourful palette and rhythmic variety not seen in the previous works. The plot develops two parallel stories: a love story against the background of historical and political of the time, that is the war between Cromwell and Stewart, and the love of Elvira and Arturo. The cast of the world premiere included four famous singers of the time: Giulia Gris (Elvira), Giovanni Battista Rubini (Arturo), Antonio Tamburini (Riccardo), Luigi Lablache (Giorgio), whose interpretation has remained legendary in particular for the quartet: *A Te, O Cara*. The first performance took place at the *Théâtre Italien* in Paris on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1835, the opera enjoying a great triumph, constituting at the same time a good opportunity for critics to resume talks on Bellini's monumentality.

The composer wrote at the same time a second variant of the opera (for Maria Malibran and the *Teatro San Carlo* in Naples), but the scores arrived very late, the Neapolitan version being rediscovered and interpreted only in 1986, at the *Teatro Petruzzelli* of Bari. Although it was originally structured in two acts, shortly before the premiere the work was divided into three acts. On the recommendation of Rossini, Bellini introduced the duet Giorgio - Riccardo at the end of the second act, with the famous *stretta*: *Suoni la tromba, e intrepido* which is frequently resumed being requested by the public. Due to the size of the opera, on the eve of the premiere there were removed three big musical numbers (which today are reintroduced) the first act the trio of

Arturo-Riccardo-Enrichetta: *Se il destino a te m'invola*, the duet Arturo-Elvira: *Da quel di ch'io ti mirai* (act III) and the final *stretta* (act III): *Ah! sento o mio bell'angelo*.

## 6. THE SUBJECT OF THE OPERA

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The action is set at the time of Oliver Cromwell during the Civil War in England, near Plymouth, when a love story between two political enemies begets: a defender of the Royal Crown and of the Stewarts family (after the beheading of Charles I), and daughter of a supporter of Oliver Cromwell's Puritans. The first act takes place in Plymouth fortress while the preparations for the marriage of Elvira (daughter of the governor Lord Gualtiero Valton) with the knight Lord Arturo Talbo. Although the Governor had promised Elvira's hand to the Puritan colonel Sir Riccardo Forth, finally he gave in his brother's insistence (Sir Giorgio Valton) by agreeing to the marriage with his political foe, Sir Arturo. Being forced to accompany a political prisoner in London, the Governor is unable to attend the wedding ceremony. Arturo recognizes the prisoner as being the dethroned queen Maria di Francia Enrichetta (Henrietta Maria de Bourbon), to whom he promises that he will help her to escape. Despite the entreaties of the Queen not to sacrifice his life, Arturo covers her with Elvira's wedding veil and flee the castle together. For Arturo the opportunity to save his Queen is a great honour. The two fugitives are intercepted by Riccardo, but in the end he allows them gladly to flee, hoping that he will definitely get rid of his rival. Convinced that Arturo betrayed her love and left her for another woman, Elvira goes insane.

**In the second act** we learn that Arturo was sentenced in absentia to death for high treason. While Giorgio tells his believers of the sad fate of his niece who has lost her mind, she makes her shocking appearance, walking without any target, delirious, laughing, calling her fiancé and crying for her lost love. Riccardo is constrained by Giorgio not to dispel his rival in court, because otherwise Elvira will die of grief; he agrees to give up his love for Elvira to meet the obligations of loyalty and honour, dedicating himself to the victory and glory of the country against his will.

To complete his heinous plan, Riccardo will confront his rival during the next the battle, which will also be the last clash between Cromwell's Puritans and Stuart's knights.

**The third act** takes place three months later. Near Elvira's house the Puritan army soldiers patrol constantly looking for the traitor. When the guards have moved away, Arturo leaves his hideout cautiously, hoping to see his beloved; he is extremely disturbed by the personal drama that he lives (the inner struggle between the sincere love for Elvira, and the love and duty for the Queen and country). From the house it is heard poor Elvira's sad voice singing a love song learned from her lover. Arturo answers with the same song. Elvira comes out and the meeting has a spectacular effect: the girl regains reason. But the joy of reunion is short-lived because they are surrounded by the Puritan army, announcing his sentence to death for high treason. When the word "death" is uttered "Elvira is well aware of what is going to happen and decides to follow her lover. Arturo can only recall the moments of lost happiness and explains her the reason of his disappearance, making her understand that he has not betrayed their love. While Riccardo is trying to separate them, when all seemed lost, the final defeat of the Stewarts is announced and the pardon of all prisoners is granted by Cromwell in honour of peace and victory. Thus, Elvira and Arturo can crown their dreams of love.

## 7. THE CHARACTERIZATION CHARACTERS

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Despite the extremely complex vocal and acting commitment, *Elvira* appears as a pure, fragile and evanescent character, with a great and gentle soul who lives her emotional intimacy that in an exclusively romantic world. Being a true romantic heroine inside her, who is permanently on the boundary between reality and imagination, between the inner and outer worlds, she is ready to point out in the real existence the images of her hallucinatory fantasies stimulated by the genius of the Bllinien music. The composer's entire attention is directed towards her, who places her at the heart of the

action as the main character of the opera and from an emotional point of view. Elvira's madness amid the war between the Puritans and Stewarts, is the core of the whole opera and even if the libretto is not too valuable, it contains parts that deserve a closer attention from the dramatic perspective, especially with regard to the fragility of the heroine and her mental disorders.

Elvira reveals us consciously the happiness produced by the important event of marriage with Arturo until he leaves her running away with the Queen. From this moment Elvira loses her reason, falls into a kind of depression caused by a sudden trauma that causes an image of Enrichetta that she sees in all women who appear before his eyes. Elvira is a character with a particular sensitivity, is passionate and from the vocal point of view offers from the very beginning the exam of pure *bel canto* vocal virtuosity requiring breathing, sentencing, certain high-pitched and super high-pitched notes *filato* and many cadences and variations within the aria.

Arturo's musical score is very beautiful, but the character does not have the opportunity to develop in terms of drama because it is absent in the crucial moments of the opera. In the first act, the inner struggle between his love for Elvira and the duty towards the Queen is expressed and resolved very quickly, that he can not be fully appreciated, and in the last act, his three months exile, although it is described in an emotional way, it is not dramatically exploited. This is Elvira's opera, as *Norma* is Norma's and *La Sonnambula* is Amina's. Almost every time when Elvira appears on stage, the audience hears before they see her, which creates an extraordinary effect. In the scene of her madness the last lines of the aria are heard from the backstage: *O rendetemi la speme*, then she makes her appearance on stage, the composer trying in this way to create an atmosphere of mystery around this character who tours the rooms of the fortress, repeating incessantly her dissatisfaction and her suffering.

## **8. MUSIC CONSIDERATION**

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Chief representative of Italian musical Romanticism, Bellini while using the closed

forms of the melodrama of the eighteenth century, knows very well how to fold on the demands of expressive representation, being especially concerned by emphasizing the emotional and sentimental aspects of the drama more than the psychology of the characters. *I Puritani* belongs to the first romantic operas from the early nineteenth century, which by the force and imposed dramatic character prepare Giuseppe Verdi's compositions, and by merging several musical numbers (within endings) those of Richard Wagner (Câmpeanu, 1975). The multitude of emotional states crossing the opera action is reproduced faithfully by the expressiveness and originality of the song, whose absolute master remains Bellini alone without any rival.

The Bellinian vocal writing represents the transition moment when the *fiorituri* give an expressive purpose to the dramatic meaning, revealing the feelings or state of the dramatic development of the characters, the singers encountering greater difficulties in interpretation. The paper reveals the interplay between the Italian and the French music. Bellini opens new paths by using the French musical, dramatic and thematic method, joined to the immense wealth of melodic expansive, typically Italian ideas. He experiments various harmonies, approaching the musical French language and answering thus the Parisian public expectations, while revealing the complexity of orchestral thought by using rich and precise effects of instruments timbre. It is recognized that the specific Puritan instrumentation was the composer's major concern throughout the elaboration of the opera and we must recognize that his efforts were rewarded with remarkable successes.

Bellini knew very well how to use the fireworks specific to the *grand-opera* genre: the collective historical paintings or the use of offstage musical fragments, particularly valuable in creating spatial effects (we remind in this regard the introduction of complex opera, the warrior choir, the morning prayer, or the typical romantic scene of the Hurricane). Nothing can undermine the particular qualities of the memorable Bellinien melodies, created of ample expressive arches, of wide breathing, extremely clean and neat. (Bornac, 1998). We must not forget that the *bel*

*canto* period has made a major contribution to the development of technical valences of singers, finding ways of solving the high-pitched sounds (without differences in changing registers), creating heroic voice effects and eliminating the falsetto.

The interpretation of the role of Elvira must control very well the lead of voice in order to be able to execute colourful passages with flexibility, accuracy and articulation, having the ability to convey the character's intense emotional experiences that enhance and support the partners on stage. To successfully play the role, the soprano will find softness of timbre and the fragility specific for the character while maintaining the expressive tension at a high level, even in moments of silence. It is very important for the voice to remain equal in all registers, broad, with elegant and supple *legato* (especially in the central area) in order to facilitate the achievement of enrichment effects and colour variation.

The protagonist must embody the role with consummate charm, using a rich palette of shades and colour timbres, and to demonstrate the perfection of voice resulting in a extraordinary mature Bellinian style. A line of singing perfectly supported by breathing, the colour passages accuracy with intense emotional participation will certainly lead to an exceptional interpretation. The colour passages will be executed with safety, perfectly supported on the air column, following the homogenisation of registers in order to obtain various, amazing vocal effects. We will see that voice remains supple, energetic and full of enthusiasm to get bright, expressive cadences, *filato* sounds, expressive and sustained sentencing or bright super high-pitched sounds that have extraordinary effects on the public.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

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The opera *La Sonnambula* contains pages of an extraordinary purity, but that require an exceptional voice robustness. Through this divine music the maestro knew how to express emotional and mental states the characters masterfully go through. One of the strangest and

most fascinating Bellinian creations is, indisputably, the opera *La Sonnambula*. Fascinating - because it is impossible not to be impressed by the subtlety of poetry emanating from music and strange - because nowadays the subject is childish and inconclusive.

*I Puritani* reveals an extraordinarily mature Bellini in the thinking and the conduct of the development of his charming music. Elvira's fragility dictates the melodic evolution of the action on stage and the embroidery and voice virtuosic passages reveal his soul overwhelmed by the controversies and conflicts between her duty as daughter and her love, between the Puritans' honour and her happiness alongside a traitor. All these consume her so much that they produce her a mental imbalance resolved by the final happy denouement. In the final scene of the first act and madness scene we will follow the sentencing and the sustained *legato* singing, the expressive meanings and the vocal requirements especially in terms of high-pitched and super high-pitched notes to be bright, penetrating, round and free. The same principles will apply for the execution of the vigorous agilities of the *cabaletta* from the madness aria, when the voice must remain warm, soft, smooth and robust at the same time, but with ample and supple colourfulness and homogeneous in all registers.

*La Sonnambula*, *Norma*, *I Puritani*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Lucrezia Borgia* or *Roberto Devereaux* are operas that merge the idea of singer endowed with vocal qualities with his technical and theatrical valences. The cast of these operas has enjoyed famous interpretations from great names of the lyrical stage, such as Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Natalie Dessay, Angela Gheorghiu and Anna Netrebko. Consuelo Rubio de Uscatescu writes in his book *The Art of Chant*: "A specialist in the history of music reminds us how, depending on the vocal technique, we are witnessing a genuine change of writing. It is a writing in the service of voice, of singers and stars and at the same time in the service of the audience's enthusiasm for these singers, all these, in a psychological and sociological way, completely different from the one Mozart had when he was writing 'Italian' operas for certain singers" (Rubio de Uscătescu, 1989). Like all

great composers Bellini has his original and unmistakable style. The Bellinian *bel canto* style is born after a careful study of the character, the passions and the feelings that dominate or which the characters express. An important feature of the Bellinian *bel canto* style is the unusual length of the wonderful melodic lines, elaborate and simple at the same time, which offers the music an intrinsic grandeur, which remains unaltered regardless of the complexity of orchestration. Bellini was able to give birth to the most adequate "sound" to express his world, even if the orchestration is sometimes extremely simple.

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