

Maria Callas

sings
Bel Canto

Rossini
Donizetti
Bellini
Spontini

alto

Mention the words *bel canto* (literally ‘beautiful singing’) to most opera lovers and they will think of the works of Rossini (1792–1868), Donizetti (1797–1848) and Bellini (1801–35). These composers conceived their operas with certain singers in mind, artists who had spent many years perfecting their *legato* technique in lengthy sustained phrases and who were capable of launching into an elaborate vocal pyrotechnical display (*fiortura*). In the previous century singing superstars tended to be *castrati*; exceptions included Faustina and Cuzzoni, whose bitter rivalry in the great European opera houses reached its nadir in the celebrated catfight in London (1727). As *castrati* went out of fashion on stage many taught instead, passing on their technique to women singers whose register they shared.

Gradually the soprano moved centre stage as the public fervour for ever greater embellishment grew. Mrs Billington (1768–1818) had a three octave range (nothing unusual at that time) and was described gushingly by Mozart’s friend Michael Kelly as ‘an angel of beauty and the Saint Cecilia of song’ but was elsewhere anonymously castigated, for her reliance on embellishment at the expense of sincerity in her singing: ‘she oft wants the gentle assistance of ease, / And seems more intent to surprise than to please’.

The earliest opera on this CD is Spontini’s *La vestale* (composed in 1805, premiered in Paris 1807). Although he spent the early part of his career in Italy, Spontini composed his finest work for Paris in a style that linked the reform operas of Gluck to the grand operas of Berlioz, Meyerbeer and Wagner, whose noisy orchestration in his early operas is surely inspired by Spontini. *La vestale* (The vestal virgin) is set in ancient Rome; its heroine Julia falls into disgrace for having allowed the sacred flame to go out whilst enjoying a moment of passion with her former lover, the Roman general Licinius. Condemned to die for neglecting her duty and her vow of chastity, Julia is saved by divine intervention. The part of Julia is expressively composed and has attracted strong acting singers over the years such as Ponselle (1920s), Callas (in a famous Visconti production at La Scala 1954), Leyla Gencer (1960s) and Rosalind Plowright. Unlike other roles sung in this collection, the interpreter of Julia needs considerable heft; Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, a great interpreter of Leonore *Fidelio* and the first Senta sang this role in Dresden in the 1840s under Spontini and was so exhausted that she feigned illness to induce him to foreshorten his engagement!

Rossini achieved his first substantial hit with *Tancredi* (La Fenice Venice, 1813). From 1815 – 22 he was based in Naples where he composed for the impresario Barbaja, whose mistress was the soprano Isabella Colbran. A famed interpreter of the operas of Spontini and Mayr, Colbran had been taught by the castrato Crescentini; she and Rossini became lovers and married in 1822. Many of his Neapolitan

operas were composed with her in mind and the required vocal and dramatic range (occasional G below middle C to top C and the ability both to dazzle with coloratura and to act in a forceful manner) in these works has proved something of a headache to subsequent managements and artists alike.

Rossini composed *Armida* (San Carlo, Naples 1817) for Colbran; it is set during the Crusades and is based upon Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, a work that also inspired Handel's *Rinaldo*. Armida is a sorceress who uses her charms to weaken the crusaders. Much of the opera is set in Armida's magic garden (the setting of the central act from which this scene is taken) where she makes love to the crusader general Rinaldo and where her followers tempt his colleagues away from the fight and their mission in recalling Rinaldo. After she is deserted by Rinaldo, Armida destroys her magic land. Performances of this opera were few and far between even in Italy until it was staged at the Maggio Musicale in Florence in 1952 with Callas and Fillippeschi conducted by Serafin.

Rossini left Naples in 1822, composing only one further opera for Italy: *Semiramide* (La Fenice, Venice 1823). By this time Colbran's vocal decline (often cruelly noted by critics of the day) was irreversible. Having a great orchestra at his disposal in Naples, Rossini had given players increasingly complex music to play and he carried this over into *Semiramide*, so that the orchestral colouring underpins the drama in a far greater fashion than before. Its successful premiere led to performances throughout Europe and many leading ladies became associated with both the title role and that of her son Arsace (Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran) whilst other famous early interpreters included Giulia Grisi and Henrietta Sontag. Gradually it became less easy to find sopranos capable of combining coloratura with dramatic credibility and the coloratura soprano became once more a songbird. It was not until the Maria Callas phenomenon in the 1950s, coupled with the scholarship of Richard Bonynges, his wife Joan Sutherland, Marilyn Horne and others that audiences began to appreciate that Italian and French nineteenth century Romantic opera was not purely for 'canary fanciers'. *Bel raggio lusingher* is sung by Queen Semiramide, who having fallen for a young general Arsace, has ordered his return from the battlefield so she can be near him. It later transpires that Arsace is her son.

With *Anna Bolena* (Milan 26 December 1830) Donizetti entered the premier rank of composers. It was presented not at La Scala (where Bellini's *I Capuletti ed I Montecchi* was playing that evening) but at the Teatro Carcano, an opera house hired for a season by a conglomerate of noblemen and businessmen. Two of the opera world's greatest stars of the day, Giuditta Pasta and Giambattista Rubini, were engaged as was the noted bass Filippo Galli, who sang Henry VIII. Some of the music had been imported from earlier works but Donizetti was able to compose the work in relative peace

and quiet in little more than a month (he only received Romani's libretto on 10 November) as a guest at Pasta's villa on Lake Como. After the first night Donizetti wrote to his wife 'Success, triumph, delirium: the public has gone mad. Everyone has said they cannot remember being present at such a triumph'.

As Pasta's guest, Donizetti had an excellent opportunity to tailor the part to her strengths (and one can be certain that she made sure that he did!) and the role of Anna was one of her greatest achievements; within a year she had repeated the role in London and Paris (the first Donizetti opera to be performed in those two cities) and at La Scala, where the rising star Giulia Grisi sang Jane Seymour. In 1850 Pasta, having long since retired, made an ill-advised return to the concert platform (as did Callas in the 1970s) where she sang this final scene and according to Chorley, regained some of her greatness despite singing with a wrecked voice. Although a big success initially *Anna Bolena* dropped out of the repertory after about 50 years and it was not until 1956 that a major production was mounted in Donizetti's home town Bergamo. Visconti directed the opera in a noted production at La Scala in 1957 with Callas, Gianni Raimondi, Rossi-Lemeni and Simionato. The success of this production led the way to further stagings and *Anna* is now an accepted part of the Donizetti canon.

In this scene Anne Boleyn's maids are distressed to see their mistress's mind wandering. Anne has been condemned to death with her lover Percy, her brother and the young minstrel Smeaton who implicated Anne under torture; Henry is about to marry Jane Seymour but Anne believes this is her own wedding day and cannot understand the prevailing sadness *Piangete voi?* Wishing Percy to know nothing of her marriage to the king she recalls happier days with Percy *Al dolce guidami*. As the condemned men enter Anne's mind continues to wander. She prays for her sanity to be restored *Cielo a'miei lunghi spasimi* whilst the others wish the opposite so that she might be spared knowledge of the king's impending marriage to Jane. As she recovers her wits instead of cursing Henry and Jane, she forgives them *Coppia iniqua* and then dies, as the others are led to their execution.

Unlike other works here *Lucia di Lammermoor* (San Carlo Naples 1835) has never dropped out of the repertoire but once again it took memorable productions with Callas for audiences to appreciate the work's dramatic strength. Donizetti knew better than to make the famous Mad Scene simply a brilliant coloratura display: to illustrate her confused state, various previously heard themes are altered to indicate a mind that hardly knows what it is doing. Lucia, caught in a family feud, loves a man hated by her brother but is tricked into marrying another to save her family's honour. Lucia's lover Edgardo enters unexpectedly during her wedding and curses her for her faithlessness. This Mad Scene

occurs after she has murdered her new husband. She enters, covered in blood and carrying her dagger, believing she is about to marry Edgardo.

Bellini, though short-lived and less prolific than Rossini and Donizetti, composed three operas in particular that represent the finest of Italian Romantic opera: *La sonnambula* and *Norma* (both premiered in 1831) and *I puritani* (1835). Bellini's glorious soaring melodies and Romani's text for *Norma* were later highly praised by Wagner but strangely the opening performance was coolly received, the blame for this placed squarely upon a claque hostile to the composer. It is said that Pasta, the first Norma, was less than impressed by her opening aria *Casta Diva* and asked Bellini to change it. However as she became familiar with the aria, she grew to love it and so thankfully no rewrite was necessary! Set in Roman occupied Gaul, the priestess Norma has had a secret affair with the Roman general Pollione, who has now deserted her in favour of another younger priestess. As mistletoe is gathered, Norma sings an invocation to the chaste moon goddess. In the second half of the aria *Ah! bello a me ritorna* she secretly prays for Pollione interest in her to reawaken.

Bellini spent the final two years of his life in Paris but only composed one opera there: *I puritani* was written for the Théâtre-Italien, for many years associated with the now retired Rossini whom Bellini consulted about its composition. Set in Civil War Plymouth, *I puritani* concerns the love of Elvira, daughter of the Puritan city-governor, for a Cavalier Lord Arthur Talbot. In the story, Talbot rescues the disguised Queen Henrietta Maria, leading to a tragic misunderstanding between Arthur and Elvira. Elvira's belief that Arthur is faithless drives her mad. The aria *Qui la voce* tells of how Arturo first wooed her and then abandoned her.

Maria Callas was born in New York in 1923 to Greek parents and later moved to Greece with her mother, where she entered the Athens Conservatory. As a student she sang Santuzza *Cavalleria Rusticana* before being trained by Elvira de Hidalgo in coloratura roles. But she sang Tosca for the first time in 1942 and, following her return to America, was cast by a Chicago company as Turandot. Although the company folded prior to these performances it led to her being chosen by Giovanni Zenatello to sing *La Gioconda* under Tullio Serafin in Verona in 1947. Later that year Serafin had Callas singing Isolde, and this in turn led to her performing Turandot several times during 1948. In 1949 she sang Brünnhilde *Walküre* but had also in the meantime performed Norma! Finally when Callas was asked by Serafin to replace the indisposed Carosio as Elvira *Puritani* her career achieved some stability as it led to a period of coaching in *bel canto* roles, (although she sang the heavier role of Aida for her La Scala debut in 1950), and she made house debuts as Norma in London (1952), Chicago

(1954), New York Met (1956) and in concert in Paris (1958). For her debuts in Berlin (1955) and Vienna (1956) Callas performed Lucia.

Although Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi continued to form the mainstay of her repertoire there were anomalies: she inclined towards works of an earlier era (Haydn's Euridice, Iphigénie and Alceste (Gluck), Cherubini's Medea and Giulia in Spontini's *Vestale*); whilst the other was an interest in *verismo* heroines such as Tosca and Maddalena *Andrea Chénier*.

Alongside Serafin, the principal guide of Callas' career was her husband, the industrialist Giovanni Battista Meneghini, whom she had met in 1946 and married in 1949 when he became her manager. Their relationship lasted until 1959 (the marriage was annulled in 1966), by which time she had become the lover of Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, who she had met in Venice. She had been the centre of media interest before but when she quarrelled in turn with the directors of the Rome Opera, La Scala and the Met in 1958 she became the focus of a media frenzy. By 1960 her career had ground to a halt: her interest in performing seemed minimal, and she focussed on Onassis. In 1964 Callas was tempted back to the stage by Franco Zeffirelli with offers to star in new productions of *Tosca* in London, Paris and the Met and a new *Norma* in Paris. However illness prevented her from completing all these engagements and her final stage appearance was at a Royal Gala performance of *Tosca* in London (5 July 1965).

Callas was devastated when Onassis married Jacqueline Kennedy in 1968. She made a highly publicised but unsuccessful film of *Medea* directed by Pasolini (1969) but was rarely seen until her series of master classes at the New York Juilliard School in 1971/2. Giuseppe di Stefano persuaded her to undertake a world-wide concert tour (1973/4) to raise funds for his daughter's medical treatment. Neither artist had retained the vocal powers necessary for such a tour but they were received ecstatically at each venue. Following the tour Callas returned to her lonely life in Paris where she died on 16 September 1977.

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MARIA CALLAS SINGS BEL CANTO

- [1] **O rendetemi la speme..Qui la voce..Vien, diletto** 7.07
(I Puritani: Bellini:Pepoli)
Orchestra of RAI, Turin / Arturo Basile Rec.1949
- [2] **Casta Diva...Ah! Bello a me ritorna** 8.57
(Norma: Bellini: Romani)
Orchestra of RAI, Turin / Arturo Basile Rec.1949
- [3] **Mad Scene: Il dolce suono...Ardon gli incensi** 12.29
(Lucia di Lammermoor: Donizetti: Cammarano)
Orchestra of RAI, Rome / Oliviero De Fabritiis Rec.1952
- [4] **Bel raggio lusinghier** (Semiramide: Rossini: Rossi) Rec.1956 6.14
Chorus and Orchestra of RAI, Milan / Alfredo Simonetto
- [5] **D'amore al dolce impero** (Armida: Rossini: Schmidt) 6.43
Orchestra of RAI, Milan / Alfredo Simonetto Rec.1954
- [6] **Tu che invoco** (La Vestale: Spontini: Jouy) 11.12
Orchestra of RAI, Milan / Alfredo Simonetto Rec.1956
- [7] **Finale: Piangete voi?...Al dolce guidami...Coppia iniqua** 20.50
(Anna Bolena: Donizetti: Romani) with Gabriella Carturan,
Gianni Raimondi, Plinio Clabassi and the Chorus &
Orchestra of La Scala, Milan / Gianandrea Gavazzeni (1957)

Total playing time: 74.00

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