



Vincenzo Bellini

# Long Live Bellini!

## The Short Brilliant Life of a Musical Genius

*Heather Helinsky, Production Dramaturg*

It was a dark and stormy September night and a handsome young man, a friend of the bel canto composer Vincenzo Bellini, galloped through the winding, narrow streets of Paris. After knocking furiously on the doors of Bellini's rented quarters, the young gentleman decided to break in through the garden gate, where his fears were confirmed. Alone in a dark room, the young man touched Bellini and found the corpse cold. The celebrated golden child of the opera world, Vincenzo Bellini, had died at the age of 33, a scant nine months after his opera *I Puritani* won him the Legion of Honor from King Louis-Phillipe. The bewildered young man rode wildly through the storm to the home of the famous singer Luigi Lablache. The news spread through Paris; there were rumors of poisoning, so an autopsy was performed. No one could believe this seemingly healthy and handsome composer had written his last masterpiece. The memorials began to pour in. "Weep, unhappy Catania, and the world weeps with you!" declared one popular lyric in tribute to Bellini.

Not only did the world weep, but the funeral preparations for the deceased composer in Paris attracted royals, musicians, and artists from all over Europe--quite a celebrity affair. Gioachino Rossini, patriarch of Italian bel canto opera, took firm charge of all the funeral arrangements. The funeral mass itself, funded mostly by the King of France, would be one of the artistic events of the season. The musical program consisted of a chorus of 350 singers featuring a quartet of Paris' greatest opera singers-- Giovanni Baptista Rubini, Luigi Lablache, Antonio Tamburini, and Nicholas Ivanoff--who sang an

arrangement from the finale of *I Puritani*. Despite the continuous downpour, the hearse and eleven horse-drawn carriages attracted crowds of thousands as every prominent Parisian artist and politician paraded to the gravesite. Fifty-one years later, Bellini's coffin was unearthed and brought back to his homeland of Italy, where bands played, patriotic speeches were given, and masses were held to honor this composer of humble origins who had risen to the greatest heights in the Parisian opera world. Eerily, Bellini's death had been predicted earlier that same year. The German composer Heinrich Heine (who was fond of teasing the effeminate composer) had joked one evening at a Parisian salon, "You are a genius, Bellini, but you will pay for your great gift with a premature death. All the great geniuses died very young, like Raphael and Mozart." What for Heine was a glib party joke seemed to be the unlucky fate of many celebrities that left the world with an impressive legacy of artistic work while their untimely death became a matter of morbid fascination and speculation.

How had Bellini become a musical genius, revered at such a young age? First, his talent was recognized in childhood and nurtured by his grandfather, a church organist and composer. In his teens, Bellini received a scholarship to attend



The grave of Vincenzo Bellini in Catania. Photo by Giovanni Dall'Ort

the music college at Naples. By age 25, with only two student operas to his claim his opera *Il Pirata* premiered at La Scala, opening the doors



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to high society. Bellini had ambition and demanded top dollar for his operas, often negotiating extravagant sums for a new opera at the greatest theatres in Italy. But Bellini's talent would never be truly recognized until one of his new operas achieved success in Paris.

Paris' boast as the artistic capital of the world began with Napoleon, who recognized that if France had a prestigious culture, it would draw foreign intellectuals to his capital city. "Through the union of art and talent," Napoleon declared, "opera provides a useful impetus to the fashion and luxury goods trades, attracts a throng of foreigners to Paris, and adds

to the brilliance of this great city—as befits it—to the genius and taste of the nation." While opera's popularity outlasted Napoleon's empire, Europe's great artists began to migrate to Paris as a second home. "I like what I see in this city," Chopin declared upon his arrival, "the best musicians and the best opera in the world." There were four major opera houses funded in large part by the government. Composers like Rossini, Meyerbeer,

Donizetti, Liszt, and Bellini all found homes in the neighborhood near these theaters and quickly found themselves invited to the salons of the new aristocracy.

In the 1820s, the popularity of Rossini's bel canto operas turned him into an instant celebrity. Journalists nicknamed him the "citizen monarch" and it wasn't unusual for both the rich and poor of Paris to shout out "Long live Rossini!" as he passed through the streets. Rossini influenced Parisian tastes as the director of the popular Theatre-Italien, deciding what operas would be played each season. By the time Bellini reached Paris in 1833, Rossini had written 20 operas, culminating in 1829 with *William Tell*. After the July Revolution of 1830, Rossini turned to the younger generation of Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti for new operas. Bellini and Donizetti competed as the new Parisian idols for Rossini's artistic blessing.

A rivalry between opera composers may seem like just another tabloid story, but not for Paris in the 1830s. Opera mattered. It had gone beyond Napoleon's mandate to draw the world to Paris through great art.

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- Heinrich Heine

Considering the circumstances in which Parisians lived, opera provided theatergoers with something more than simple entertainment--- it fed the souls of

the Romantics.

The democratic ideals of the French Revolution of 1789 to follow America's footsteps were no longer within reach of most Parisians. Life was ugly and violent. A severe economic depression beginning in 1828 and lasting until 1832 kept most people poor and unemployed. Industries such as textiles, coal, and iron shut down, forcing the middle class into poverty. Workers blamed the government

for rising prices for food and declining wages. The July Revolution of 1830 which disposed one regime for another failed to solve problems for the common man.

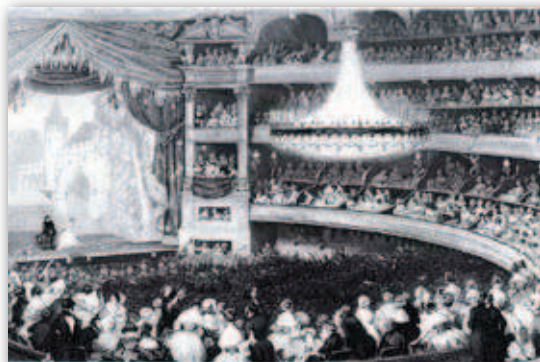
With France ruled by an incompetent King Louis-Phillipe, and most citizens living at subsistence-levels, one of the few places people could take pride in was the opera house. The Theatre-Italien was a place of refinement and beauty, from luxurious carpets to grand staircases and corridors. In this magnificent building, both high society and lower classes could attend a tasteful and elegant event. Audiences sat in religious silence for the curtain to rise. The dilettantes who were wealthy enough to have leisure time became an enthusiastic fan base for bel canto opera, attending multiple performances and worshipping performers, throwing bouquets at the stage with loud cheers of "Bravo" and "Brava."

To attend a premiere of a new Bellini opera, therefore, was to escape the cruel realities of the streets of Paris for a beautiful world where celebrated performers sang about the triumph of love. Bellini gave audiences emotive melodies of soul-bearing frankness and elegant, languid vocal lines with rose-tinted melancholy. At the end of the evening, audiences raced to the salons to dance the evening away and discuss his new music. It was no wonder that the dilettanti declared bel canto opera as "the music of tomorrow: vibrant, sensitive music that reached the heart through sublime voices with faultless tone and

technique." Life in the present left much to be desired, so the romantic music of the Italians was a dream for a better tomorrow.

Bellini's attractive youthful features made him the perfect embodiment of his music. When *I Puritani* premiered on January 24, 1835, his celebrity status as a great composer was achieved as "an immense number of carriages, the most elegant and distinguished ladies of the aristocracy and most eminent persons rushed to offer him coronets of flowers." So for this delicate flower of the opera world to die just nine months after he had won the hearts of Paris was a cruel reality. As some of the world's greatest composers stood in the pouring rain to throw handfuls of mud on his coffin, they mourned the loss of an optimistic life-force that celebrated beauty and love in spite of life's hardships.

Playwright Terrence McNally has resurrected Bellini through his new play *Golden Age*. While offstage we hear the strains of Bellini's final opera, McNally imagines what emotions Bellini and his fellow artists must have experienced on the opening night of a new opera. Inspired by the music of *I Puritani*, the play explores the mind and heart of a composer who lived during a time when art really mattered. In returning to January 24, 1835, *Golden Age* puts a living, breathing Bellini before the audience to rediscover music that was created to ease and inspire the souls of Parisians who lived through hard times.



The Theatre-Italien in Paris, France around 1840. Drawing by Egne Lami, engraving by C. Mottram