

It was a new age: kings had been beheaded, reason had been displaced with a belief in ghosts and vampires, and the intelligentsia discussed breakthroughs in art and music instead of science and philosophy. The Church had lost its power and the veneration of saints became passé. So when great singers of talent and personality stood before aristocratic audiences, singing with hypnotic purity about the power of love, the 19th Century Romantics found their new gods: worshipped both for their talent and their romantic lives that captured the imagination of the audience.

Bravo!: The Muses of Bel Canto Opera

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Bel canto music, which simply means beautiful singing, brought words and music together in closer relationship than had ever been before; a true marriage of music and poetry. Bellini defined his art by stating that his music must “draw tears, inspire terror, and make people die, through singing.” It was a true innovation that the notes had to sound like the emotional quality of the story; a concrete note trying to capture an abstract quality—for what does true happiness or despair actually sound like? Therefore, the bel canto composers Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini became painters of sound.

But a composer cannot stand up front and control all the notes during a performance, so he must place his craft in the hands of another, and that “other” was the singer. The role of the conductor standing in front of an orchestra with a baton had not yet come to the opera house, so the singers themselves were the supernatural forces controlling this majestic event. Composers like Bellini worked closely with the singers and shaped the roles to their individual talents.

Bellini’s music was a monument to the voice and his last opera *I Puritani* became the greatest challenge for the best singers of the Romantic era: the tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini, the basses Luigi Lablache and Antonio Tamburini, and the soprano Giulia Grisi. These four singers then became known as the “Puritani Quartet.” This

became their legacy and many great men and women of the late 19th and early 20th century recalled their performances in reverence—even Queen Victoria spoke with high esteem for receiving singing lessons from Luigi Lablache of *I Puritani* fame.

Bellini’s first breakout opera at La Scala, *Il Pirata* (*the Pirate*), came from a close collaboration with the great tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini—though in 1827 neither Bellini nor Rubini were considered musical geniuses. Rubini had an early career as a solo artist touring European cities like Rome, Naples, Milan, Paris, and Vienna, but lived under the shadow of the great tenor Manuel Garcia. Returning from Paris to Italy, Rubini met Bellini in the Italian countryside and together they worked on the simple, flowery tenor solos that turned Bellini into a composer in his own right.

After *Il Pirata*, Rubini won the heavy-weight title as the “King of Tenors” wherever he performed. A short and stout man with a face disfigured by smallpox, his voice transcended him; no one was considered his equal in his ability to move the hearts of his audience. From London to St. Petersburg they fell in love with him enabling this peasant from Bergamo, Italy to retire a very rich man.

The next singer to rival Rubini in both talent and fame was the bass Luigi Lablache. Born in Naples to a Frenchman and an Irish mother, he was a tall, suave man with a charming personality. As he



A Box at the Italian Theatre. Oil painting by Eva Gonzales. Paris, France.

worked his way through the Italian musical conservatory system, he grew from a mischievous boy who ran away from school to perform in operas to a great lover with a supportive wife that helped shaped his career while birthing him 13 children. As a performer his signature note was a trumpet-like D but he also took great pains to make sure his costumes were realistic and acting natural, which was quite unlike the highly stylized acting of his day. His career lasted well into his sixties when he had become quite obese, yet his large body came to symbolize the singer that had been such a memorable personality in the opera world—a strong presence, a hearty laugh, and an expressive, commanding voice.

At the premiere of *I Puritani*, fellow bel canto composer Rossini wrote to a friend in Italy, "I need not describe to you the duo for the two basses Luigi Lablache and Antonio Tamburini—the sound of it must surely have reached your ears." If there was ever a singer to match the strength of Luigi Lablache, it was Antonio Tamburini. Tamburini's voice, which we would categorize as a baritone today, was able to handle both the expressive tones of the bel canto style and the athletic demands of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. He was also handsome, causing the ladies of Paris and London to swoon as he made love

through song. But one story about Tamburini proves that he was also a great believer in the truism "the show must go on." One night at a carnival in Palermo, the prima donna ran out of the theatre frightened by an overly intoxicated audience. The quick-thinking Tamburini saved the day by dressing in the soprano's costume and, singing in falsetto, played both the soprano and bass parts,

including a climatic scene where he sang a duet with himself.

While these celebrated soloists enthralled the Romantics with their talent, it was the goddesses of bel canto opera that truly sent them into a religious frenzy. A new word was even created: "Diva!" The new cult of the "Diva" worshipped a singer of great beauty, charm, grace, enchantment...and tragic death. The early divas of Giuditta Pasta, Henriette Sontag, Maria Malibran, and Giulia Grisi all sang the music of the bel canto composers to an adoring Parisian audience.

The fourth member of the "Puritani Quartet" was Bellini's songbird, Giulia Grisi. In 1830, Bellini composed the role of Juliet in his opera version of Shakespeare's story for her unique talents. Her voice of pure gold was a technically proficient voice, admired for keeping such beauty under control. This goddess of the Romantic age was also the dutiful wife to her husband—a tenor known as "Mario"—and they toured together, impressing audiences wherever they went. While Mario continued his career as a romantic matinee idol, Grisi lived happily raising three daughters during their idyllic 30 year marriage.

While Grisi was Bellini's first choice for the role of Elvira in *I Puritani*, Bellini felt another diva of his age could also play Elvira

– Maria Malibran. If the soprano Grisi was the picture of idyllic marital love, Malibran was a stormy tempest, embodying the darker side of the Romantic era.

At an early age, Maria Malibran symbolized the new woman, defying both her father and husband in pursuit of her singing career and love. Her father, the tenor Manuel Garcia, was a stern taskmaster and possibly an abuser, but they both

earned fame as Maria played Desdemona to her father's Othello. When his company became the first to perform Italian opera in

America, he married the 18-year-old Maria to a worldly 45-year-old American business man. When her father's opera company left New York for Mexico City, her husband fell into debt, and soon the newlyweds were relying on Maria's career as a prima donna for income. Commanding the highest fees at \$600 per night, Maria's performances in New York and Philadelphia soon earned her applause and praise. At 19, she sailed for Paris, without her husband.

"I was all the rage" Maria declared upon her singing debut at the salon of the Duchess de Berry in Paris. When she made her opera debut in Rossini's *Semiramide*, it was said that she began the night as the daughter of tenor Manuel Garcia and ended the night as "La Malibran." Rossini said of her later that "although there may have been many great singers in my day, there has been only three real geniuses---Rubini, Lablache, and that spoiled child of nature, Maria Felicia Malibran." If Grisi was pure technique, La Malibran was all heart.

Nothing could stop the diva Maria Malibran—until she suffered a bad fall off a galloping horse. Suffering internal injuries, she kept her health a secret and continued to perform works by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Rossini, and Bellini as her body deteriorated. When she left the world at age

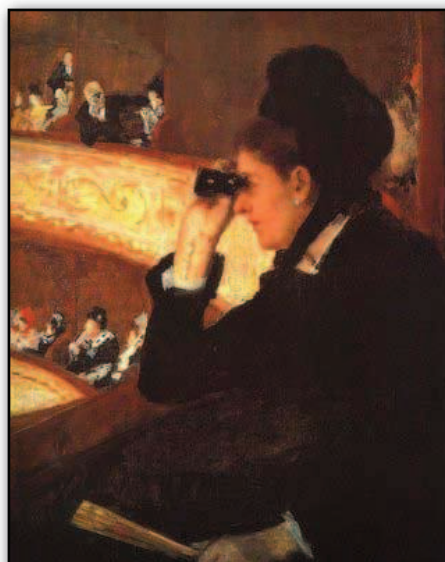
28, biographies of her were already in print and locks of her hair were distributed like saintly relics.

When these singers died, bel canto music lost its popularity, going into hibernation like a cruel, endless winter. Twentieth century appreciation for bel canto music did not blossom into spring until Maria Callas arrived to give her listeners a 'master class' on the music of

the bel canto composers. In 1953, her definitive *I Puritani* with conductor Tullio Serafin gave birth to a revival of recordings

and productions of Bellini's final opera, the most recent being the Metropolitan Opera's 2007 production of *I Puritani* starring Anna Netrebko. But while we consider opera today an elitist art, in its day, the bel canto singers were young, warm-blooded pop icons, demi-gods of extraordinary talent that embodied the new era: beauty, love, talent, fame, and tragedy.

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At the Opera. Oil painting by Mary Cassatt, 1880. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston