

NORMA

Tragedia lirica in two acts by Vincenzo Bellini to a libretto by Felice Romani after Alexandre Soumet's verse tragedy *Norma*; Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 26 December 1831.

The demanding role of Norma was written for Giuditta Pasta. Lacking his favourite tenor, Rubini, Bellini had the services of the forceful veteran Domenico Donzelli, whose voice he once described as dark and low; his part rarely rises above *g'*. Adalgisa, now usually given to a mezzo-soprano, was written for the high soprano Giulia Grisi; she later became a famous Norma herself, and also created

Elvira in *I puritani*. Oroveso's role was limited by the insufficiencies of Vincenzo Negrini.

Oroveso <i>head of the Druids</i>	bass
Pollione <i>Roman proconsul in Gaul</i>	tenor
Flavio <i>friend to Pollione</i>	tenor
Norma <i>Druidess, daughter of Oroveso</i>	soprano
Adalgisa <i>young priestess at the temple of Irminsul</i>	soprano
Clotilde <i>Norma's confidante</i>	mezzo-soprano
Two Children of Norma and Pollione	mime
<i>Druids, bards, priestesses and Gallic soldiers</i>	
<i>Setting</i> The sacred forest and temple of Irminsul, Gaul, during the Roman occupation	

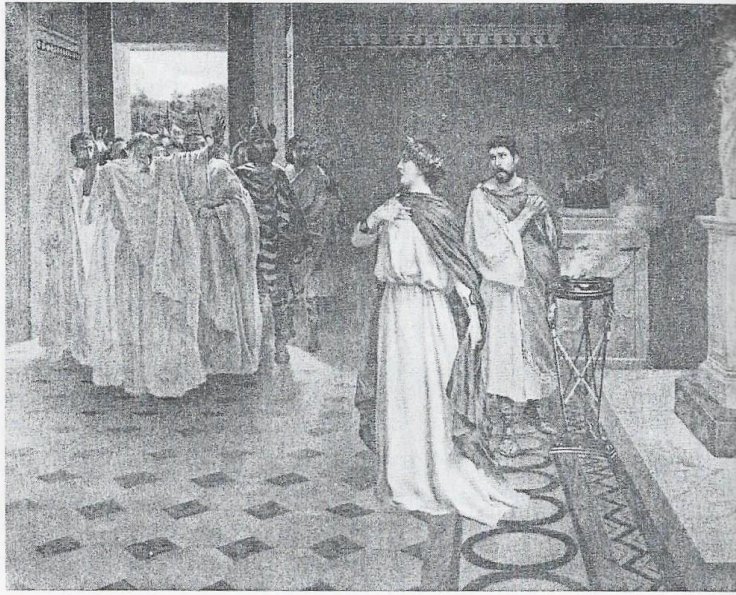
Norma was written as the second of two operas planned in summer 1830 for Milan, for which Bellini was paid an unprecedented 12,000 lire. Romani's libretto uses themes from several earlier works: Jouy's libretto *La vestale* (1807, Paris) for Spontini, Chateaubriand's novel *Les martyrs* (Paris, 1808) and Romani's own earlier librettos, *Medea in Corinto* for Mayr (1813, Naples), also treating infanticide, and *La sacerdotessa d'Irminsul* for Pacini (1820, Trieste). Bellini intervened continuously, revising and trimming the libretto. They did not use Soumet's fifth act, a mad scene where Norma leaps into an abyss, but devised the celebrated final ensemble. The subject was chosen by 23 July 1831 and Romani gave Bellini the text for the *introduzione* on 31 August; the opera went into rehearsal about 5 December. The manuscript evidence affords ample testimony to Bellini's continual revisions. He is reputed to have made eight versions of 'Casta diva', and may have discarded an entire sinfonia before composing the present one. There are many sketches of the Act 1 duet between Adalgisa and Pollione (producing melodies developed in 'Mira, o Norma' and 'Già mi pasco' in Act 2). Bellini made changes to the trio at the end of Act 1, possibly for the performances he directed at Bergamo in 1832. Current scores present many problems, and the Boosey vocal score (London, 1848) offers alternative readings to Ricordi's.

The première was unsuccessful, partly because the first act ends unconventionally with a trio instead of with a more complex ensemble. However, *Norma* quickly became popular; it was staged at Naples, Bergamo and Venice during 1832 and at Rome in 1834 when, because 'norma' was also a liturgical term, performances were given as *La foresta d'Irminsul* with the principals changed to Delia and Galieno. Outside Italy, *Norma* was staged in Vienna (in German) during May 1833, and at the King's Theatre, London, during June of that year, when the cast included Pasta and Donzelli. *Norma* reached New

York (in English) in 1841; it was the inaugural opera at the Academy of Music in 1854, with Grisi and Giovanni Mario. The first performance at the Metropolitan was in 1890 (in German) with Lilli Lehmann in the title role; Rosa Ponselle sang her first Norma at the Metropolitan in 1927, while Maria Callas, having made her London début as Norma at Covent Garden in 1952, made her American début at Chicago in 1954 and her first appearance at the Metropolitan, in 1956, in the same role. The exciting partnership of Joan Sutherland (Norma) and Marilyn Horne (Adalgisa) began in 1967 at Covent Garden.

ACT 1.i The sacred forest of the Druids The sinfonia uses themes from Norma's duet with Pollione in Act 2 and a section of the chorus 'Guerra, guerra'. Oroveso, in 'Ite sul colle, o Druidi', instructs the Druids to watch for the first sight of the new moon and then to signal, with three strokes on the bronze shield of Irminsul, the start of the sacred rite over which Norma will preside. The Druids call on Irminsul to inspire Norma with hatred against the Romans in the chorus 'Dell'aura tua profetica'. As they leave, Pollione and Flavio enter the grove. Although Pollione once loved Norma (who has borne him two children), his passion for her has cooled and he now loves Adalgisa, who returns his love. Flavio asks if he does not fear Norma's anger – Pollione trembles at the thought and relates his dream of approaching the altar of Venus in Rome with Adalgisa, only to be confronted with a dreadful phantom while the voice of a demon proclaims Norma's revenge. His cavatina 'Meco all'altar di Venere', more robust than those written for Rubini, is interrupted by the sound of the gong and the voices of the Druids, accompanied by a march, announcing that the moon has risen and commanding that all profaners of the sacred grove be gone. After Pollione's cabaletta on a theme inspired by the march, he and Flavio hurry away.

The Druids file into the grove; in the chorus 'Norma viene: le cinge la chioma' they evoke her appearance, with her hair wreathed in mistletoe and a golden sickle in her hand. Norma arrives surrounded by the priestesses. In her recitative, 'Sediziose voci', she criticizes the Druids' warlike chants; the time is not yet ripe to rise against the Romans, who will be defeated at the appointed hour. Norma cuts a branch of mistletoe from the oak-tree in the centre of the grove; then, raising her arms, she prays to the chaste goddess of the moon in 'Casta diva' (in the autograph MS this cavatina is pitched one tone higher than in Ricordi's printed scores). She asks that there be peace for the present; when the moment arrives to shed the Romans' blood she, Norma, will lead the revolt. The Druids demand that the first victim should be Pollione; Norma realizes that she could not kill him



'Norma' (Bellini), Norma confessing her guilt to the Druids, colour lithograph

herself, and in the cabaletta, 'Ah! bello, a me ritorna', admits that if he were to return to her, she would defend his life. The melody of this cabaletta is adapted from one used in *Bianca e Fernando* (1828) and the unsuccessful *Zaira* (1829) with a new coda added. When the Druids have left the grove, Adalgisa laments her weakness in succumbing to Pollione, then in 'Deh! proteggimi, o dio', prays for strength to resist him. Pollione returns to find her in tears. At first she professes to have overcome her love for him, but in a duet, 'Va, crudele, al dio spietato', he urges her to fly with him to Rome and finally she agrees to renounce her vows.

1.ii Norma's dwelling Norma is troubled because Pollione has been recalled to Rome. She asks Clotilde to hide her children as someone is heard outside. It is Adalgisa, who comes to ask Norma for help and counsel. She confesses that while praying in the sacred grove, she saw a man who seemed to be a heavenly vision. In 'Sola, furtiva, al tempio', Adalgisa tells Norma how she continued to see the man in secret and at each meeting fell more deeply in love with him. Her confession is overlaid with Norma's nostalgic recollections of her own love affair. Sympathetically Norma agrees to free Adalgisa from her vows (which are not yet final), so that she can depart with her lover. The two voices unite in

'Ah! sì, fa core e abbracciami', whose cadenza in thirds characterizes their warm friendship throughout the opera. Norma asks who Adalgisa's lover might be; the girl indicates Pollione, who enters at that moment. With 'Oh! di qual sei tu vittima' (adapted from the *Ernani* sketches of 1830), Norma launches into the trio that replaces the usual finale ensemble. She enlightens Adalgisa on her own betrayal by Pollione and vehemently denounces him; he admits his love for Adalgisa and begs her to come away with him, but she refuses, while Norma bursts out with even greater fury in 'Vanne, sì: mi lascia, indegno', dismissing him from her sight.

ACT 2.i Inside Norma's dwelling Norma, clutching her dagger, stands regarding her sleeping children and ponders their fate, in one of Bellini's best-known recitatives, 'Dormono entrambi . . . non vedran la mano', introduced by a cello melody. Deciding that death while they slept would be preferable to the shame that they would endure alive, she considers their innocence in her arioso, 'Teneri, teneri figli', which re-uses the cello melody. She moves to kill them, but cannot bring herself to do so; she embraces them and calls for Clotilde to summon Adalgisa. Norma proposes to the younger priestess

that she marry Pollione and accompany him to Rome, on the condition that she take the children with her and care for them after Norma's death. Adalgisa refuses, insisting that she will go to Pollione, but only to persuade him to return to Norma. The expressive duet, 'Mira, o Norma', contains extensive coloratura for both singers and is followed by the brilliant 'Sì, fino all'ore estreme', in which they again sing in thirds as they proclaim their friendship.

2.ii A lonely place near the Druids' wood The Gallic warriors discuss Pollione's imminent departure for Rome in 'Non parti? Finora è al campo' (from *Bianca e Fernando* and *Zaira*). Oroveso warns them that freedom is still far away; a more tyrannically oppressive proconsul will certainly replace Pollione, and Norma has given them no guidance. In his aria with chorus, 'Ah! del Tebro al giogo indegno', Oroveso rails against the infamy of the Roman yoke, but bids the Gauls have patience: their chance for revenge will come.

2.iii The temple of Irminsul Norma hopes to hear of Pollione's repentance, but Clotilde tells her that he intends to abduct Adalgisa from the temple. Rushing to the altar, Norma strikes the shield of Irminsul three times, the signal for war; the Gauls respond with the ferocious war hymn 'Guerra, guerra! Le galliche selve'. When Oroveso demands to know why Norma does not complete the sacrificial rite, she replies obscurely that the victim is ready. Clotilde brings news that a Roman has been caught in the cloister of the virgin priestesses. It is Pollione, who is brought in under guard. He refuses to answer Oroveso's questions and Norma raises the sacred dagger, but is unable to kill him. She decides to interrogate him alone and the others withdraw. In their duet, 'In mia man alfin tu sei', Norma offers Pollione his life if he will swear to abandon all thoughts of Adalgisa. When he refuses, she threatens to kill not only Pollione but their children as well, and to punish Adalgisa by fire for breaking her vows.

Norma summons back the Gauls and announces that a guilty priestess must die on the sacrificial pyre. When Oroveso and the Druids demand to know the culprit's name, Norma replies 'Son io' – 'It is I'. A huge ensemble builds up, beginning with 'Qual cor tradisti' in which Norma claims that Pollione has not escaped her, for they will die together in the flames; Pollione's love for Norma is reborn in the face of her sublime courage; Oroveso and the Druids, reluctant to believe Norma's confession, gradually accept its truth. In 'Deh! non volerli vittime', Norma beseeches her father to spare her children and to look after them when she is dead. Oroveso at first refuses, then relents, promising to honour Norma's last request. Norma and Pollione are led to the pyre.