

NORMA

Tragedia lirica in two acts, 2¾ hours

1831

26 December 1831, La Scala, Milan (Italy)

Felice Romani, after Alexandre Soumet's 1831 verse tragedy *Norma*

In *Norma*, Bellini's finest and most popular opera, the music reinforces the drama to create a deeply moving work. Felice Romani's libretto is stirring, but it is the score that lifts the work to greatness. Surprisingly simple orchestration sustains long and complex ensembles as well as richly melodic arias, notably the spine-tingling "*Casta diva*", or "Chaste goddess". The role of Norma is particularly testing, requiring a coloratura soprano with a voice of immense power, range, stamina, and virtuosity along with a talent for conveying tragedy on stage. As it happens, the premiere of *Norma* was sabotaged by friends of a rival composer, Giacomo Pacini, prompting Bellini to describe the occasion as "a fiasco, a total fiasco". But within a few years, the opera had conquered Europe and the United States.

Wagner never hid his distaste for most Italian opera, but he made an exception for *Norma*. After hearing Bellini's masterpiece, he said: "We must not be ashamed to shed a tear and express emotion."

→ PRINCIPAL ROLES ←

Pollione *tenor*
Roman pro-consul and father
of Norma's children
Oroveso *bass*
Archdruid and
Norma's father
Norma *soprano*
Druid high priestess
Adalgisa *soprano*
Druid priestess
Clotilde *soprano*
Norma's attendant
Flavio *tenor*
A centurion
Two children of Norma
and Pollione *silent*

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Roman-occupied Gaul around 50 BCE

ACT ONE In a sacred forest, Archdruid Oroveso and his followers hope the high priestess Norma will lead a revolt against the Roman occupiers. Nearby, the Roman pro-consul Pollione, the father of Norma's two secret children, reveals he loves another priestess, Adalgisa. But he fears Norma's wrath. Expecting an uprising, he hears Norma proclaim that the Gods alone will decide the moment. The Druids obey her as a chaste "Casta diva" | Goddess ♀, while she yearns to recover Pollione's love. As

the Druids disperse, Adalgisa feels guilty for betraying her vows of chastity. When Pollione reiterates his love

for her,
she rejects
him ♀. He

"Va crudele,
al Dio
spietato"

invites her to Rome and she first refuses, then yields. In her home, Norma is torn between love and hate for her children. Adalgisa arrives to confess she has fallen in love with someone. Norma sympathizes, having herself broken

The Spanish soprano

Montserrat Caballé played a part in the revival of *bel canto*, with Norma one of her preferred roles.



her vow of chastity. But as Adalgisa describes how she was won, Norma recalls Pollione using the same words. Norma asks the name of her lover and, as Pollione approaches, Adalgisa points to him. Turning on Pollione in fury,

"Oh di qual
sei tu vittima"

Norma tells Adalgisa
she has been deceived

¶. Adalgisa suddenly realizes that she has taken Norma's lover and decides she must reject him.

ACT FOUR Watching over her sleeping children, Norma imagines they might be better dead, but she draws back from killing them. Summoning Adalgisa, she demands obedience. She then discloses her decision to die and tells Adalgisa to care for her children in Rome. But Adalgisa refuses to leave Gaul and

"Mira, o
Norma"

vows to reawaken
Pollione's love for
Norma ¶. In the sacred

forest, Oroveso tells the Druid warriors that a commander worse than Pollione is coming, but that Norma wants her army to disband. Oroveso urges the warriors to hide their hatred until it can explode. Learning Pollione has sworn to abduct Adalgisa, Norma summons her warriors to battle. As they sing to their victory, a Roman is found violating the sacred cloister of the virgins and is captured. When Pollione is brought in, Norma ignores cries to kill him and orders him to leave without Adalgisa and never

"In mia
man"

to return ¶.
Pollione prefers
to die, but

Norma decides Adalgisa will be sacrificed in his stead. Pollione pleads for Adalgisa's life and asks for Norma's dagger to kill himself. Norma then says a different victim will be sacrificed. "Speak then, and name her!" the Druids cry out. As the pyre is prepared, Norma

MARIA CALLAS AS NORMA

Of the many *bel canto* heroines revived by Maria Callas, none matched her powerful voice and fragile personality more perfectly than Norma. As her own life became more tragic, she embraced the role with ever greater passion. "In a lifetime, one can see many great things in the theatre," Mirto Picchi, her first Pollione, recalled, "but to see Maria Callas in *Norma*, what is there to compare to it? As Norma, Maria created the maximum of what opera can be."

*Maria Callas as Norma,
her most performed role,
at the Paris Opéra in 1964.*



then reveals that she is the traitress who must die ¶.

Suddenly remorseful,

Pollione now wants to die with her.

The Druids are shocked to learn of Norma's unchaste relationship with a Roman, but Norma begs her father to protect her children. As the Druids call for her sacrifice, Pollione steps forward to die with her. Together, they ascend the pyre.

"Qual cor
tradisti"



