

## **Bellini's esthetics and the interpretation of Bottesini's Fantasias**

### Introduction

Giovanni Bottesini, the great nineteenth century virtuoso of the double bass wrote four Fantasias on themes from Bellini's operas. They are Fantasia sulla *Straniera*, sulla *Beatrice di Tenda*, sulla *Sonnambula* and sui *Puritani*. Bottesini wrote two versions on *Puritani*: *Fantasia per contrabbasso e pianoforte* and a *Duetto concertante per violoncello e contrabbasso sul tema dei Puritani* (composed and premiered with Carlo Alfredo Piatti on 29th february 1852 for the Philharmonic Society of London). Commercially available, we can also find a Fantasia on Norma, but no original manuscript has been found. We know about the existence of a manuscript in Forgione's archive. Forgione was a double bass player in the Orchestra of Teatro alla Scala, who inherited Guido Gallignani's library. Gallignani was a famous Italian double bassist and composer, probably for this Fantasia, too. It is easy to note that variations and harmonization in this work are much different in style from other Bottesini works. Anyway we thank whoever filled an inexplicable gap in the choice of musical themes used by Bottesini and will consider it in the present contribution to the Italian virtuoso's interpretation.

The popularity of the great Bellini in the time of Bottesini's youth (the première of *La Sonnambula* was given when Bottesini was twenty) gave the opportunity to the young aspirant virtuoso to show his bravura with well-known melodies. We know through the chronicles that Italian people used to sing favourite opera arias on the way, to play them in wind bands, or in transcriptions for pièces de salon, sometimes in pirated editions. Bellini, in his letters, complained many times about this to Ricordi. Another element explaining the choice to use so many of Bellini's themes is their simplicity, recognized by their author, too. Over the melodies Bottesini arranged *variazioni di bravura* exploiting harmonics, the technique for which he is famous.

A deep interpretational research on these Fantasias requires the knowledge of the Bellini arias chosen by Bottesini, of their mood, and of their text. By so doing we will get the criteria to make good interpretative choices.

This analysis considers as crucial Bellini's esthetics, that is his deep desire in writing music and operas, the purpose he had for composing. We may obtain this information through his letters. I'm persuaded that as a performer expresses himself by playing, so we find the soul of a composer in his music. Bellini did not write any treatise, so only in his letters, to friends, editors and singers, can we find explicated what in his music is hidden: character, dreams, expressive desires.

### Bellini's character and esthetics

Bellini principally wrote operas, except for scholastic production and something else. He was a young, ambitious composer pointing to success. Opera gave this opportunity in his time, and he didn't want to be one in a million. His purpose was to change the standard imposed by Rossini, he desired to be the best. To attain this goal it was necessary to be original, to change the way. He decided to strengthen the unity between text, music and action, writing music to enhance dramatic situations and the power of

poetry.

His first step in melodrama composition was the choice of title and subject. He needed a subject inspiring strong impressions. He accepted advice from his schoolfriend in Naples, Francesco Florimo, then friend and confidant for life, or from Romani, the librettist, or from famous singers like Giuditta Pasta, the soprano who premiered *Norma*. Anyway Bellini had the final word, so the subjects of his operas also tell us about him. We know his method of composing was text-based, so much importance was given to words full of passion and fire. Here is an article published on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1835 in the “*Pirata*” review, a Milan music magazine, where we have a report about this Bellini characteristic.

*Before Pirata was heard, theatre and music lovers had little or no interest for poetry. (...) Bellini was the first to entrust to poetry the glory of music. (...) Bellini didn't begin his work if the subject wasn't convincing him, or if the story didn't exalt him. Poetry had first to spread soul wings to contemplate a Beauty that no counterpoint school could teach. The libretto reading gave rise, in our composer, to compassion, love, hatred, to the various powerful feelings inspired by great virtues and awful felonies, by the story of pitiful cases he had to represent, and his notes enhanced the poet's imaginings so that so easy was the domain over our joy, throbs and tears.*

A peculiarity of his way to write operas was the importance given to the libretto, to the poetry and to composing easy melodies, with few or no *fioriture*, maybe too little for some of his contemporaries. The public has to understand the text, because it produces identification with the characters. Bellini's music enhanced the situations and feelings, and excited never-heard reactions and loud cheers, making a great hit and much fanaticism every time, as he tells us in his letters. Music has to touch one, to move one to tears, to change the listener, burning fire in the heart. Here is another letter: “*Once the poet ends his work, I study deeply the characters, their passions, their feelings. Invaded by their affection, I imagine to be that character, and I try to feel and express him in the right way. (...) Alone in my room, I recite the text with plenty of passion, observing in the meantime the inflections of my voice, the languor and releasing of the words when man is at the mercy of passion, so I find melodies and tempi fit to show, and transform them by means of harmony.*”

That was the way to be different from Rossini, who enchanted using the voice almost as an instrument, with the power of an almost absolute music full of embellishments where words were sounds, more than ideas, whilst Bellini based his music on poetry, and upon it he created his famous charming melodies.

Now here is a letter to Carlo Pepoli, the librettist of *Puritani*, in which I guess we can find the key to the right interpretation of all his music: (*...*) *Engrave in your head, with diamond fonts: Music drama has to make us weep, be horrified, die singing! (...) Poetry and music, to make effect, require naturalness and no more; whoever abandons this is lost and in the end will have brought about an opera both heavy and stupid that will please only the sphere of pedantry, never the heart- the poet that is the first to receive the experience of passion; and if the heart is moved, it will always be in the right, in the face of many words that prove nothing.*

Librettists, singers, orchestras

Bellini was very demanding with the librettists. In particular with Romani, who wrote the *Pirata*, *La Straniera*, *Zaira*, *Capuleti e Montecchi*, *La Sonnambula*, *Norma* and *Beatrice di Tenda*. He had great respect for him, despite the disagreements due to the slowness of his work. Delays in writing, combined with various misunderstandings, unfortunately led to the breaking of their artistic partnership in 1833. The young maestro asked him to remake entire arias, asked for words full of passion, made him move pieces, just because his music lives on speech. Even more demanding was he with Carlo Pepoli, who wrote the poetry of the *Puritani*, and we have an example in the fragment of the letter transcribed

*Don't forget to take with you the pièce just sketched, to speak for good about the first act, which, if you will have a good dose of patience, will be interesting, magnificent, and worthy poetry to music, in spite of all your absurd rules, all good for gossip, without convincing any living soul that is induced into the difficult art of making one cry by singing*

With singers who played in his premières he was very strict, and his favorite tenor, Giovanni Battista Rubini, pioneer of *Bianca e Fernando*, *Il Pirata*, *I Puritani*, was often tortured in rehearsals by Bellini who urged him to sing and act according to his taste. The tenor, used to a flourished way of singing, in which he gave a display of his technique, sometimes sang with his hands in his pockets. The young Maestro, instead, asked him to involve himself in what he declaimed, to identify with the character, to act as was shown in the libretto, to respect the text, without embellishing it, and finally to show passion and feeling. Bellini is complaining about him in a representation of the *Pirata* in Venice in these terms: "Rather, it is that, with Rubini not animating a part like that, full of soul and fire, everything is languishing".

From the orchestra too he was expecting energy, as he tells his friend Florimo, hoping that the Orchestra of the Carlo Felice theatre in Genoa, for *Bianca e Fernando*, would be "*valente e vigorosa*." (valiant and vigorous).

### Public Influence

The passion, the whirlwind of feeling, unbridled excess, the unreasonableness of the characters are the elements that Bellini sought, the elements inflaming the bourgeoisie of the twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century, in the repressive political climate of the Restoration, at a time when the excesses of the Revolution had to be reassembled and the Enlightenment ideals of reason showed their weakness. The Maestro from Catania intercepted, with his works, the new romantic taste of his contemporaries who filled the ticket-paying theaters without public subsidies that could influence or direct their taste. The audience was the ultimate judge, and an opera was repeated for as long as the spectators required it. Multiple replicas decreed more success and glory for the composer, beyond the opinions of critics, journalists, intellectuals and colleagues.

### Application of the present study to the interpretation of Bottesini's Fantasias

Based on these findings, we could never justify flat, faded, or naive interpretations. All textual references in the epistolary agree that, in order to approach the music of Bellini or its paraphrases, one

must light the fire of passion in the audience, to convey the fullness of feeling, to transport and, if possible, to create the same enthusiasm caused by his melodramas through the voices of the beloved singers Henriette Meric-Lalande, Giovanni Battista Rubini, Antonio Tamburrini, Giovanni Lablache, Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran, Adelaide Tosi, Giulia Grisi and Giuditta Grisi.

Performers, singers, or, in our case, double bassists, require the ability to erupt into lovers' and warriors' outbursts, and at the same time to be able to explore every elegiac and melancholic inflection. This type of atmosphere is present also in many of the melodies of Bottesini, who strongly felt the elegiac character. Here is an example of a beautiful theme, with a charming simplicity, extracted from Fantasia on *Beatrice di Tenda*. It is Agnese's aria "*Ah, non pensar che pieno sia nel poter diletto*". The melody is repeated four times in two different octaves, almost as if no one could break away from its beauty, and should be performed with very clean string crossings in order to obtain an extremely fluid legato.

In achieving the purpose of giving a warm interpretation, one obstacle might be, to our post-romantic, post-Wagnerian or post-modern ears, the simple, basically classical Bellini melody. Right here, in my opinion, is the challenge: to give romantic warmth to a writing that is yet classic, simple and sometimes deliberately bare so the audience could understand the words. Here is an example from the Fantasia on Norma:

At first glance it is a simple melody without energy, but it is the Chorus of Druids and Gaul soldiers that quiver to start the war against the Romans, and hope that the god, Irminsul, talks to Norma that the time has come for Gaul to be free from "enemy Eagles" ("sgombra farà le Gallie dell'aquile nemiche"). The opening words of the chorus are: "*Dell'aura tua profetica, terribil dio l'informa! Sensi o Irminsul le ispira, d'odio ai Romani e d'ira*". Note the repetition of consonant r in the text that gives a good tip on the bow stroke to use, more aggressive and martial. Knowing the text of the melodies may help you give a convincing interpretation through the use of different attacks on the notes in imitation of the consonants underlying the melody, to be varied and emphasized in the way of a good opera singer. Another important technical element to remember and to enhance, as functional to our purpose, is the *crescendo lirico*. A true invention by Bellini, it is that kind of crescendo, in a slow movement, where the climax is reached through chord progressions and repetitions of melodic elements in a gradual transition from piano to forte. In Bottesini's Fantasias we find examples of this in *Casta Diva* and in the third theme of *Beatrice*, of which we quote the opening words; it is the Air of the opera protagonist: "*Al tuo fallo ammenda festi*".

As vocal music, I think it is important to reflect on the use of *portamento*. Considered an abomination by a good orchestra musician and by a school that offers the pianoforte as the highest model for the choice of fingerings, in this music it becomes rather important. No singer would perform

large jumps without preparing them, and therefore they should be used with taste, moderation, and made on one string if the expression needs it. Here personal taste and the art of the performer step in, refined by listening (by now very easily via YouTube) to the best and most celebrated singers of the past and the present. In the following fragment, taken from the fantasy *Sonnambula*, I put over the notes the original words sung by Amina and suggested two *glissandi* for the jumps of the sixths in the second and fourth bars. If executed with precision and with the right speed, they emphasize the ascending interval and increase the expression of the melody.

In my opinion a bias all too common in the music of Bellini, which could harm even a good performance of the Fantasies we are speaking about, is related to the simplistic identification of Bellini only with the Cavatina "Casta Diva". Familiarity with his works, on the contrary, will bring us to discover the virile, warlike, vigorous element present in many other melodies in *Norma* as in all his works, especially in the choruses. We find this character expressed in the Fantasias, especially in the interludes entrusted to the piano, which will be most effective when they diverge from the part entrusted to the *cantabile* of the double-bass, where, instead, the piano should be delicate like a string orchestra in *pianissimo*. In demonstrating the above, it is worth remembering that Italian musical newspapers of the time criticized Bellini about the "great noise" of his music, the hard work of his orchestra, even "the abuse of metal instruments".

This is a fragment of the Fantasia on *La Sonnambula*. The pianoforte must be truly "*valente e vigoroso*" and then disappear when the aria "*Ah non giunge uman pensiero*" begins. One note: the points below the ligature, as with the eighth note rest before the minimum should be read as a sign of assertiveness, not to sound short, with reference to the words of the Opera.

#### The Fantasia on the theme of the Puritans for double bass and piano

The limit that we have set ourselves in this study is to discover the poetic Bellini and to identify the feeling conveyed by the arias of the Fantasias. Therefore we will not refer to the technical peculiarities of Bottesini's music and to the various virtuoso parts of bravura.

The fantasias we are analyzing have a fixed compositional scheme. The introductory part is first assigned to the piano, followed by a free cadential part, in the form of a recitative, elaborated by Bottesini, in which the double bass is presented with scales, arpeggios and chromaticism over its entire extension. There follow the arias by Bellini, announced by the same introductions present in the operas, followed by *Variazioni di bravura* in the bass and followed by the pianoforte conclusion which leads to the next aria. The "Fantasia su temi dei Puritani" respects this pattern. An exception instead presents itself with Fantasia on *Norma*, which starts directly with the orchestral introduction of the second act of

the opera and Norma's aria "Teneri figli".

In order to begin to get into the understanding of the music, let us remind ourselves very briefly of the plot of the opera. Elvira, daughter of Valton, Puritan, is in love with and betrothed to Arthur, loyal to the party against the Stuarts. Arturo escapes just before the wedding with a prisoner, whom he recognizes to be the wife of the late King Charles I. Elvira is mad with pain. Arturo returns after a storm and finds her singing in a small house in the garden. She does not recognize him and calls the guards. They capture him, she returns to her right mind and the news of an amnesty comes allowing them to get married.

On the basis of what is stated on the close relationship between words and music in Bellini's music, we may cite the texts of melodies chosen by Bottesini for this Fantasia with the suggestion of putting the words over the notes to have a more accurate understanding of the meaning of dots, *legature* and rests and to comprehend the sentiment underlying the music and to find the arias in the opera and learn, through singers, the right expression. After the piano introduction- the overture of the opera, performed as indicated- *Allegro con fuoco*, and a short cadenza for double bass, we find the famous aria of Arturo to Elvira. After several secret meetings because of Elvira's father who did not allow the union with a political opponent, Arturo is happy because of the consent to marriage through the intercession of an uncle (Valdeburgo). It is an explosion of love, joy and passion. This is the text:

A te o cara, amor talora / Mi guidò furtivo e in pianto  
Or mi guida a te d'accanto / Tra la gioia e l'esultar

Here is the final part of introductory cadenza, to be performed with enthusiasm. Then the character completely changes at the beginning of the aria. Note how in this edition the dots under the notes f and g in the last measure are to be interpreted, considering the text, as a sign expressing enhancement of those two semiquavers and not, in the conventional sense, as short, detached notes.

After the virtuoso accompaniment of the *Poco meno*, in which the theme is repeated by the piano, the *Allegretto* proposes a different aria of Arturo, which is used as thematic material for the *variazione* that begins at bar 120. Here is the text:

Nel mirarti un solo istante /io sospiro e mi consolo  
D'ogni pianto e d'ogni duolo / Che provai lontan da te

There follows a 6/8 section in which there is no indication of tempo, in fact the same *allegretto* tempo has to be maintained for the presentation of the final Bellini theme, in measure 150, which, in the aria, is entrusted to the woodwind, in accompaniment to a choir at the beginning of the opera.

Here's the incipit.

It is a song of celebration, at the dawn of a new day when the castle celebrates Elvira's beauty and goodness. It is also taken up in the second act, always in the woodwind, during the madness of Elvira, at a time when she confuses her father with Arturo, and imagines herself to marry him. The Fantasia concludes with a final *variazione di bravura*.

### **LIBRI CONSULTATI**

CARMELO NERI, *Vincenzo Bellini, Nuovo epistolario 1819-1835 (con documenti inediti)*, Agorà, Aci Sant'Antonio (CT), 2005

BRUNO GALLOTTA, *Invito all'ascolto di Bellini*, Mursia, Milano 1997

GIOACCHINO LANZA TOMASI, *Vincenzo Bellini*, Sellerio, Palermo 2001

Lettera 254 a i, in C. Neri, cit.

Lettera 254, in C. Neri, cit.