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Vincenzo Bellini

Norma

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521480369

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First published 1998

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Kimbell, David R. B.
Vincenzo Bellini: *Norma* / David Kimbell.
p. cm. – (Cambridge opera handbooks)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 48036 1 (hardback). – SBN 0 521 48514 2 (paperback)
1. Bellini, Vincenzo, 1801–1835. *Norma*. I. Title. II. Series.
ML410.B44K56 1998
782.1–dc21 97-32615 C1P

ISBN 978-0-521-48036-9 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-48514-2 Paperback

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General preface

This is a series of studies of individual operas, written for the serious opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns. The first is historical: to describe the genesis of the work, its sources or its relation to literary proto-types, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. The history is itself a record of changing attitudes towards the work, and an index of general changes of taste. The second is analytical and it is grounded in a very full synopsis which considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects. In most volumes there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score, showing how the music serves or makes the drama. The analysis, like the history, naturally raises questions of interpretation, and the third concern of each volume is to show how critical writing about an opera, like production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. Some conflict of interpretation is an inevitable part of this account; editors of the handbooks reflect this – by citing classic statements, by commissioning new essays, by taking up their own critical position. A final section gives a select bibliography and guides to other sources.

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For Susi, Sergio and Sara

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Preface

The purposes of this book are straightforward: to provide a biographical and cultural context for Bellini's *Norma*, to examine its artistic qualities, and to suggest something of the impression it has made on our imaginations and sensibilities in the 165 years since it was first produced in Milan in December 1831. From time to time I have felt entitled to open up my discussion a little to embrace Bellini's work more generally, particularly in presenting some of the critical reactions to his music. For Bellini's career was short; his reputation rests entirely upon his ten operas; and *Norma*, by common consent his finest achievement, represents his genius more comprehensively than is usually the case with any single work by an operatic composer.

I should perhaps make it clear that the book contains neither analysis nor theory as those terms are currently understood in academic circles. I was tempted (though to tell the truth not very tempted) to invite contributions in those modes. On reflection, however, it seemed that a unity and clarity to match the subject would best be achieved by writing the whole thing myself. Besides, while my indebtedness to other scholars is considerable and will be apparent to the reader, I found too many aspects of *Norma* interested me to wish to let them go. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

I am grateful to the University of Edinburgh and particularly to my colleagues in the Faculty of Music for enabling me to take a term's sabbatical leave in 1994. I acknowledge the assistance of Mr Jeremy Upton and his colleagues in the Reid Music Library, University of Edinburgh; the staff of the Music Room of the National Library of Scotland; the British Library; the Museo Civico Belliniano, Catania; the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan; the Biblioteca Comunale Carlo Magnani, Pescia; the Accademia Musicale Chigiana, Siena. And I thank most warmly those who have assisted me with their skills, their

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knowledge, their advice, their friendly support, their hospitality, and many permutations of all these things: Mr and Mrs Steuart Bedford; Maestro Domenico De Meo; Mr and Mrs David Gwilt; Mrs Jo Leighton; Dr Federica Pedriali; Dr Matteo Sansone and Signora Sansone; Professor Jonathan Usher; Miss Beatrice Wickens; Dr Victoria Cooper at Cambridge University Press; and my wife Ingrid.

The indebtedness most happily recalled is to my daughter and son-in-law, Susi and Sergio Cilea, in whose beautiful Sicilian home most of the groundwork for the book was done, and to my young Sicilian friends Fabio Federico, Guglielmo Magri, Giuseppe and Dora Vinci, thanks to whose kindness I learned to savour the subtle pleasures of life in Catania.

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A note on Italian prosody

The standard textbook on Italian versification, on which the following remarks are based, is W. Th. Elwert, *Italienische Metrik*, Munich 1968.

The technical terms used in the description of Italian verse depend upon the number of syllables in the line. Thus *quinari*, *senari*, *settenari*, *ottonari*, *novenari*, *decasillabi*, *endecasillabi*, *dodecasillabi* are, respectively, lines of 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 syllables. This simple principle is, however, complicated by the fact that lines of Italian verse normally have feminine endings. If a line in fact ends with a strong syllable, or is extended by means of an additional weak syllable, these abnormal circumstances are ignored in counting the syllables but acknowledged in an additional descriptive term, either *tronco* – ‘truncated’ – or *sdrucchiolo* – ‘sliding’. The following lyric from the opening of *Norma* thus combines normal *settenari* (lines 2, 4, 5, 6), *settenari sdrucchioli* (lines 1, 3, 7), and *settenario tronco* (line 8):

Ite sul colle, o Druidi,
 Ite a spiar ne' cieli
 Quando il suo disco argenteo
 La nuova luna sveli;
 Ed il primier sorriso
 Del virginal suo viso
 Tre volte annunzi il mistico
 Bronzo sacerdotale.

The ‘classic’ line of Italian verse is the *endecasillabo*; it forms the basis for the *terza rima* (three-line stanzas) of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, for the sonnets and *canzoni* of Petrarch, and for the *ottava rima* (eight-line stanza) of Ariosto and the epic poets. Verses written entirely in non-rhyming *endecasillabi* are known as *versi sciolti*, the Italian equivalent of blank verse. More loosely, the term *versi sciolti* is

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often used in an operatic context to mean the kind of verse written for recitative. But that is normally a mixture of *endecasillabi* and *settenari* with the occasional rather casual use of rhyme, and should perhaps more strictly be described as *versi a selva*.

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A note on the vocal score

The abbreviation VS used throughout the text refers to the modern vocal score (Ricordi, 1974 reprint, plate no. 41684). References are to page, or to page, system and bar (e.g. VS 81.1.1f. = vocal score, page 81, system 1, bar 1 and following).