

*Virginia
Opera*

BELLINI'S

NORMA

STUDY GUIDE

2005-2006 SEASON

NORMA
by
Vincenzo Bellini

Libretto by Felice Romani
after a play by
Alexandre Soumet

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Premiere

First performance at Teatro alla Scala on December 26, 1831, in Milan, Italy.

Cast of Characters

Oroveso , leader of the Druids.....	Bass
Pollione , Roman Proconsul in Gaul.....	Tenor
Flavio , friend of Pollione, a centurion.....	Tenor
Norma , Druid High Priestess, daughter of Oroveso.....	Soprano
Adalgisa , a novice in the Druid Temple.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Clotilde , Norma's confidante.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Children of Norma and Pollione.....	Actors
Druids, bards, priestesses, soldiers	Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: The sacred forest and temple of Irminsul, during the Roman occupation of Gaul

Oroveso and the Druids resent Roman rule and are planning a rebellion. They call on Norma, their High Priestess, solemnize their plans with sacred rites honoring their goddess, Irminsul. Nearby, the Roman Proconsul Pollione confides in his friend Flavio that he has fallen in love with a young priestess of the temple, Adalgisa. Flavio cautions him about the reaction of Norma to this revelation. Norma and Pollione have had a secret relationship for many years and are the parents of two children. Pollione shudders with the thought of her revenge.

Adalgisa confides in Norma that she is torn between her feelings for a Roman soldier and being faithful to her vow of chastity as a priestess. Norma questions her further and learns Pollione's name. Pollione enters the room just as his identity is revealed. Norma rages at him and threatens the lives of their children as well as the life of Adalgisa.

Norma stands over her sleeping children and resolves to kill them. Ultimately her maternal feelings overcome her need for revenge and she is unable to carry out the deed. The alarm sounds when an intruder is caught in the quarters of the virgin priestesses. Pollione is brought in under guard. Norma demands to question him in private. Once alone she offers him his life and freedom if he will renounce Adalgisa. He refuses. Norma calls the Druids to her and states that a priestess has broken her vows and will be sacrificed in the sacred pyre. The Druids demand the identity of the vow-breaker. She replies, "It is I." Norma's fearlessness rekindles Pollione's love and admiration for her. After gaining her father's promise to care for her children, Norma and Pollione walk together, hand in hand, to the funeral pyre.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Act I

The opera opens with a majestic *sinfonia*. Themes from the Norma/Pollione duet in Act II and the famous "Guerra, guerra" chorus are introduced. The music continues without pause as the curtain rises revealing Oroveso as he addresses the Druids. In a *cavatina* (short aria) with chorus "Ite sul colle, o Druidi," (To the hills, O Druids) Oroveso instructs the Druids to watch for the moonrise and listen for three strokes on the bronze shield of Irminsul. This will signal the start of the sacred rites. In the chorus "Dell'aura tua profetica" (Inspire her, O terrible God) the Druids call on Irminsul to arouse a fierce hatred of the Romans in Norma's heart. As the Druids leave, Pollione and Flavio enter the sacred grove. Pollione once loved Norma and fathered her two children but his feelings for her have grown cold. He is now besotted with Adalgisa, a young Druid priestess. Flavio reminds Pollione of Norma's wrath and asks if he does not fear her anger. Pollione shudders at the thought and in a *cavatina*, "Meco all'altar di Venere" (At the altar of Venus) tells of his recent dream where Norma's revenge is proclaimed by an appalling spectre. Pollione's *cavatina* is interrupted by three strikes of the gong signaling the imminent start of the sacred rites. As the voices of the Druids demand that outsiders leave the sacred grove, an off-stage chorus, accompanied by a rousing march, signals the Druid's return. Using a theme inspired by the Druid's march, Pollione and Flavio quickly leave.

The Druids enter the sacred grove singing the chorus, "Norma viene" (Norma, come). The notes of a major triad are used to create a stately theme of great simplicity. This theme is associated with Norma and is heard three times in Act I. Norma arrives and begins a recitative, "Sediciose voci," (Seditious voices) where she censures the Druids' belligerence and reminds them that the time is not yet right to rise against the Romans. Cutting a branch of mistletoe from an oak tree, Norma raises her arms and in her aria, "Casta Diva" (Chaste Goddess) prays to the virgin goddess of the moon. "Casta Diva" is one of the most famous arias in the operatic repertory and is an excellent example of *bel canto* style. Exceedingly difficult, its reputation is well earned due to the incredible breath control required to sing the long expressive phrases over a very transparent accompaniment. Following the aria is a spirited *cabaletta* (concluding section of an aria, generally at a fast tempo).

Norma appeals for peace. When the time for battle with the Romans arrives, she will lead the rebellion. The Druids demand that Pollione be the first victim. Because of her secret love for him Norma knows that it would be impossible for her to kill Pollione. In her *cabaletta*, "Ah! bello, a me ritorna" (Ah, return to me) she admits to herself that if Pollione were to return to her, she would defend his life. The "Norma" motive used previously to both foreshadow and herald her first entrance is heard once again to accompany her departure.

As Norma, the Druids and Priestesses exit the grove, Adalgisa remains to lament her weakness in yielding to Pollione's passion. In "Deh! proteggimi, o Dio," (Protect me, O God) she prays for strength to resist him. Pollione enters the grove to find Adalgisa very distressed. At first she resists him, claiming to have overcome her love for him, but in their

duet, "Va crudele, al dio spietato" (Go cruel woman), Pollione urges her to flee with him to Rome. Her resolve weakened, Adalgisa agrees to renounce her vows of chastity.

In her private quarters Norma is distressed by the news that Pollione has been recalled to Rome. At the sound of an intruder, Norma asks her servant Clotilde to hide her children. Adalgisa enters and implores Norma to give her help and guidance. Adalgisa tells Norma that recently during prayer in the sacred grove she saw a man who seemed like a heavenly vision. In "Sola, furtiva, al tempio" (Alone, secretly at the temple) Adalgisa tells Norma how she has continued to see this man in secret and has fallen deeply in love with him. Her confession is overlaid with Norma's emotional remembrances of her own love affair. Norma agrees to release Adalgisa from her vow of chastity so that she may flee with her new love. The two women blend their voices in "Ah! si, fa core e abbracciami" (Ah! yes, take heart, embrace me) with extensive cadenzas (vocal passages of great virtuosity) that characterize their warm friendship. As Norma inquires as to the identity of Adalgisa's new love, the girl speaks his name, Pollione, who at that moment enters the dwelling. With the scathing "Oh! di qual sei tu vittima" (Oh, you are the victim) Norma launches into a denunciation of Pollione. She is joined by Pollione and Adalgisa in a trio. Norma informs Adalgisa of her own betrayal by Pollione and forcefully condemns him. Pollione admits his love for Adalgisa and begs her to come away with him. Adalgisa refuses while Norma bursts out with even greater fury in "Vanne, si: mi lascia, indegno" (Leave me, yes, worthless man), dismissing Pollione from her sight. From afar, the sound of the gong and the voices of the Druids summon Norma to the altar of Irminsul.

Act II

Norma stands over her sleeping children with a dagger in her hand, anguished over their future. Introduced by a plaintive cello melody, she sings one of Bellini's best known recitatives, "Dormono entrambi ... non vedran la mano" (They are both asleep ... they will not see that hand that harms them). Considering the shame they will endure if they remain alive, Norma condemns her own children to death while they peacefully sleep. She sings "Teneri, teneri figli" (Tender babies) as she contemplates their innocence, accompanied once again by the mournful cello melody. As Norma raises the dagger she realizes she cannot kill them, and embraces them instead. She calls for Clotilde to summon Adalgisa, who is nearby. Norma instructs Adalgisa to follow her heart and marry Pollione, accompanying him to Rome. However, with one condition -- that Adalgisa take Norma's children and care for them as her own after Norma's death. Adalgisa refuses. She will go to Pollione but only to convince him to return to Norma and his children. The two women herald their everlasting friendship in the moving duet "Mira, o Norma" (See, o Norma) which contains highly ornamented passages for both singers and is followed by the cabaletta, "Si, fino all'ore estreme" (For the rest of our lives) which uses identical melodic lines for both singers, with Adalgisa singing down a third in harmony with Norma.

The Druid warriors deliberate Pollione's impending departure for Rome in the all male chorus, "Non parti? Finor e al campo" (Has he gone? He is still in the camp). Oroveso admonishes that liberation is still far from their grasp. A more harshly oppressive official will certainly replace Pollione and Norma has given no guidance. In his aria with chorus,

"Ah! del Tebro al giogo indegno," (Ah, I too chafe under the Roman yoke), Oroveso rails against Roman oppression, but cautions the Druids to have patience. Their opportunity to act will come.

Norma waits and yearns to hear of Pollione's atonement. Instead, Clotilde enters suddenly with the news that Pollione intends to abduct Adalgisa from the temple. Infuriated, Norma rushes to the altar, striking the shield of Irminsul three times, summoning her people. The Druids respond to Norma's summons with the fierce hymn, "Guerra, guerra!" (War! War!). The melody maintains its intensity through its AAB form. The close intervals of major and minor seconds comprise the melody of the A section, in sharp contrast to the use of fourths and fifths in the B section which create a militaristic flavor.

Oroveso demands to know why Norma does not perform the sacrificial rite. Cryptically, Norma replies that the altar does not lack for victims. A disturbance is heard in the distance and Clotilde arrives with the news that a Roman has been captured in the quarters of the virgin priestesses. Pollione is brought in under heavy guard, defiantly refusing to answer questions. As Norma raises the sacred dagger to kill the offender, she realizes she is unable to kill her lover. She demands to question him alone and orders the others to exit. In the duet "In mia man alfin tu se" (At last you are in my hands), Norma offers Pollione freedom if he will abandon his love for Adalgisa. Pollione refuses and Norma threatens to kill him, their children and to condemn Adalgisa to the pyre.

Norma recalls the Druids to announce that a guilty priestess must die in the flames of the sacrificial pyre. When Oroveso and the Druids demand to know the name of the guilty priestess, Norma replies, "Son io" (It is I). As part of a building ensemble, Norma sings, "Qual cor tradisti," (The heart you betrayed), asserting that Pollione will not elude them he will also die in the pyre. In the face of her magnificent resolve, Pollione's love for Norma is reborn. Oroveso and the Druids are hesitant to believe Norma's confession, but gradually accept its truth. In "Deh! non volerli vittime" (Oh do not let them be victims), Norma entreats her father to spare her children and to look after them when she is dead. At first Oroveso refuses, and then relents, promising to honor Norma's final request. With the knowledge that their children will be cared for, Norma and Pollione walk together to the sacrificial pyre.

Historical and Literary Background

If only one composition could be chosen to define the Bel Canto period of opera, NORMA would be an extremely strong candidate. Extended arias of lyrical beauty are followed by rousing cabalettas that require extreme virtuosity by the soloist. Accompanied recitative punctuates the dialogue of the singers, providing for the steady and even flow of the drama. The title role is one of the most demanding and wide-ranging parts in the operatic repertory. It captures the essence of bel canto style with its beautiful flexible vocal line supported by a regular accompaniment pattern. The voice is able to take on many different emotional shadings as it moves along its unencumbered path. Norma's composer, Vincenzo Bellini, had a unique talent to create melodic lines of incomparable beauty and to marry words and music into a perfect union.

Norma is a noble character whose tragedy lies in her fatal love for the enemy of her people. In its simplest form the story of a priestess falling in love with a Roman was a popular scenario in the annals of tragedies and opera manuscripts. The writer Felice Romani was familiar with many of these stories, and some years earlier had also written a six-volume series on mythology and antiquities. An experienced librettist, he had already collaborated with Vincenzo Bellini on several operas, including *Il Pirata* and *La Sonnambula*. Earlier in his career Romani had dealt with dramatic themes similar to those found in NORMA in the operas, *Medea in Corinto* and *La Sacerdotessa d'Irminsul*. Always alert to the prospect of suitable material for an opera libretto, Romani became aware of a play by the French poet Alexandre Soumet that had recently opened to considerable success. It was entitled *Norma, ou L'Infanticide*.

Soumet's play had drawn on three different literary sources to shape the complex character of Norma. Three mythical women from three different classical tales provided Soumet with the grist to create his Druid High Priestess. The first source was Euripides' vengeful Medea, the second, Chateaubriand's seductive pagan Velleda, and lastly, Spontini's wayward Vestal virgin, Julia. In two of the sources the contribution to the character of Norma seems straightforward. From *Medea*, the betrayal of her husband Jason results in her murdering their children out of vengeance. The case of the Vestal virgin is a violation of the vow of chastity, a high crime for a priestess. The third source, the story of Velleda of Gaul, a druidess and leader of her people who falls in love with a Roman and ultimately commits suicide, seems the most compelling in outlining the character and motivations of Norma. In Romani's capable hands, Soumet's play became the best libretto that Bellini ever set to music. Romani focused the libretto on the plight of Norma and her struggles. He created a human drama that emphasized the breadth of Norma's character as she found her path to nobility and virtue.

The close relationship between music and text is foremost among the essential nature of Bellini's music. Using Romani's text, the many aspects of Norma's temperament are marvelously drawn by Bellini, not only in the famous aria, "Casta diva", but also in Norma's superb duets with Adalgisa and Pollione, in the first scene of Act II, and in the finale of Act II, where Bellini reaches his peak as a musical dramatist. The music from this "gentle Sicilian" portrays emotions ranging from mournful melancholy to spiteful

vengeance. The music demands a style of singing which achieves the proper balance between bel canto and dramatic tension.

It is clear from archived manuscripts that continual revision was part of Bellini's composition process. He is reputed to have made eight versions of "Casta Diva" and may have discarded an entire Sinfonia before settling on the version we hear today. There are many versions of the duet between Adalgisa and Pollione in Act I as well as numerous recorded changes to the trio which ends Act I. His process of composition helps to explain why he wrote so few operas in comparison to his contemporaries. Both Rossini and Donizetti each wrote over one hundred operas. Bellini wrote just nine. An additional limiting factor was Bellini's death at the early age of thirty-four.

Discussion Questions

1. One of the antecedents for the character of Norma is the tragic Greek figure, Medea. How does the story of Norma compare with that of Medea?
2. Norma's tragedy is centered around her love for a man who is the enemy of her people. Discuss the principles of loyalty and betrayal as it applies to Norma.
3. Pollione also has issues that relate to loyalty and betrayal. Discuss his split loyalties and the nature of his betrayal.
4. Norma is a character that has many different aspects. What are the various roles she plays? (i.e., priestess, leader, mother, betrayed lover, vengeance seeker)
5. The issue of self-sacrifice is also explored in the opera. Discuss the self-sacrifice present in the actions of the characters of Norma, Pollione, and Adalgisa.
6. Considering all aspects of Norma's actions in the opera, do you consider her to be a noble character?
7. Discuss the relationship between Norma and Adalgisa, in both positive and negative aspects. How is their relationship borne out musically?
8. The role of Norma is considered one of the most difficult soprano roles ever written. What musical qualities make this the case?
9. Pollione has a change of heart towards Norma as he is facing his death. Why do you think he had a change of heart?
10. This opera is considered a masterpiece of the "bel canto" style, which means "beautiful singing." One of the requirements of this style is a beautiful vocal line supported by a simple, rhythmic accompaniment. Why do you think only a simple accompaniment was required or desired?

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

