

These are rough notes intended for a lecture in a music class at Virginia Tech to a group of students who will be traveling to London to attend a performance of *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* at Covent Garden. Comments welcome.

*I Capuleti e I Montecchi* is an opera written by Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835). It was written for the 1830 Carnival season of Teatro La Fenice in Venice, and because he was able to incorporate a fair amount of music (ten melodies) from a previous, unsuccessful, opera of his, *Zaira*, he completed the composition in a month and a half. This was not as formidable a task as it might seem; this opera falls into the so called “bel canto” class, one of whose attributes was the minor role played by the orchestra, so Bellini didn’t have to spend a lot of time on orchestration. “Bel canto” means, literally, “beautiful singing;” the entire focus of the opera was on the vocal aspects. Brass instruments were de-emphasized in bel canto orchestras, which relied principally on strings (including the harp) and woodwinds, with minimal percussion. (*I Capuleti* is actually scored for two trumpets and three trombones as well as drum, triangle, bass drum and cymbals and the omnipresent tonic-dominant tympani, but in listening to the opera I had to strain my ears to hear the brass or percussion, except in the final, tomb, scene. But I heard lots of horn, and flute, clarinet and even bassoon.)

Very little bel canto music was written in minor keys. Even scenes which could be considered sad, like the Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, were written in Major mode. (The tomb scene in *Lucia* is in D Major, while in *I Capuleti* both Romeo and Juliet die in C Major.) There is a technical reason for this: minor chords are inherently dissonant, and thus cannot really be called “beautiful music.” In addition, the keyboard recitative accompaniment (if any; *I Capuletti* is not scored for keyboard) was provided by a harpsichord, an instrument more in harmony with the bel canto

concept than the fortepiano used by Mozart for the same purpose (often changed to a harpsichord in modern productions). There was also the character of the music called *morbidezza* (tenderness) which is difficult to define, but obvious when it is heard. This property was, for 150 years or so, thought to be sufficient to carry the dramatic aspects of the opera, with no need for the singers to portray emotion on stage. Maria Callas changed that idea, and showed that it was possible to inject drama into bel canto opera; she actually used the *morbidezza* to her advantage, actually capitalizing on it. Callas' technique was copied by other singers such as Victoria de los Angeles and Beverly Sills, leading to a big comeback in the popularity of bel canto opera in the mid to late 1900's.

The bel canto period in opera fell roughly between the time of the death of Mozart (1791) and that of Gaetano Donizetti (1848). It is important to understand that it involved only Italian opera. E.T.A. Hoffman was writing, and staging, romantic operas in German as early as 1812, and the first German romantic opera to survive to the present is Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821). So the bel canto era in Italian opera and the romantic era in German opera actually overlapped. This was no doubt due to the influence of Goethe (1749-1832) and E.T.A. Hoffman himself on German literature. (Many of Goethe's stories have formed the basis for libretti of romantic operas in German, French and Italian. Similarly, the *Tales of Hoffman* became a French opera by Jacques Offenbach.)

Some musicologists include Mozart in the bel canto era, and I have worked with stage directors who refer even to middle Verdi (e.g. *La Traviata*) as bel canto. However I have come to accept the definition of bel canto as consisting of specifically the operas of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. Period. (I wouldn't argue with someone who decided to include very early Verdi, such as *I due Foscari* (1844); but *Ernani*, produced the same year is clearly

romantic, based on a play by Victor Hugo (1773-1828). So one would have to be selective about including early Verdi in the bel canto canon, and I prefer to stick with my definition.)

Besides its great emphasis on “beautiful singing,” and de-emphasis of the orchestra, what are some of the other attributes of bel canto? An important one is the appearance of the “cabaletta.” (From Italian *cobola*, “couplet.”) Many bel canto arias tended to be broken into two parts, with the second part generally in a livelier tempo than the first, the two parts were often being separated by a considerable amount of recitative and even choral passages. Famous examples of bel canto arias with cabalette include the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Donizetti) and “Casta Diva” from *Norma* (Bellini). Verdi also made extensive use of the cabaletta, most famously perhaps in Violetta’s great scena which concludes the first act of *La Traviata* (“A fors’ è lui” 3:8 time, andantino and “sempre libera” 6:8, allegro brillante.) The very first aria in the opera we are studying, I Capuleti e I Montecchi, Tebaldo’s “È serbata” is followed, after a hiatus of some three pages of recitative and choral singing, by the cabaletta “L’amo, ah! L’amo,” which, as is customary with cabalette, is sung twice, with choral interjections the second time through.

How did the cabaletta originate? Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725, father of Domenico) is credited with the invention of the “da capo” aria (A-B-A form) in some of the 80 or so operas he wrote, most of them lost. The da capo aria promptly became a prominent fixture in all baroque opera and oratorio. (In Handel’s *Messiah* well known da capo arias include “Rejoice;” “He was despised;” and “The trumpet shall sound.” Note that this includes soprano, alto and bass arias, so the da capo form was not restricted to a single fach.) In the repetition of the A part it was customary, and expected, for the singer to introduce embellishments and ornamentation, perhaps to avoid boring the audience who was hearing the music for the second time. The idea of such repetitions

may have originated with Monteverdi, who wrote madrigals in various patterns including A-B-A, A-B-A-B and A-A-B-B, the latter adopted by J.S. Bach in many of his partite movements. (The second B is often dropped, especially by Glenn Gould, perhaps in an effort to shorten the piece.)

These highly stylized baroque operas consisting mainly of exit arias connected by recitative and written primarily on mythological or heroic subjects continued up to the time of Mozart (in fact, Mozart's final opera, *La Clemenza di Tito*) was an opera seria. However, the da capo aria vanished.

But at this time a new form of opera was appearing on the scene, a descendant of the "intermezzi;" comic operas, usually with stylized Commedia dell'arte characters, which were used to fill in the intermissions of the opera seria. This new form of opera was called "Opera buffa" which literally means "comic opera" but soon this term came to be applied to the form of the opera, not the plot. (*Don Giovanni* is properly classified as an opera buffa, just because it's not an opera seria. While *Don Giovanni* does contain some humorous touches, it can't rightly be called "comic," I think everyone will agree.) The bel canto operas still retained many aspects of the *intermezzi*, especially the requirement that at the end of each act there be a "finale" in which the entire cast, or almost the entire cast, participated. This is certainly the case in *I Capuleti*. Another imperative of the *intermezzi*, that they contain a bass patter aria, survived in the comic bel canto operas such as *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Rossini) and *L'elisir d'Amore* (Donizetti) but obviously not in the tragedies such as *I Capuleti*.

The da capo aria can, I think, be considered the precursor of the sonata form. The first A became the exposition, the B the development, and the reprise of the A part the recapitulation. (It comes as no surprise to anyone who has studied the history of music that vocal music formed the background upon which

instrumental music was based. Example: The baroque style was invented in Italy in the late 1500s to as a means of making the words intelligible, a reaction, by the way, to the Council of Trent which, in addition to launching the counter-reformation abolished the use of polyphonic music in the Mass on the grounds that the words couldn't be understood. ) Anyway Mozart wrote his arias more or less in sonata form, and that style persisted, through the bel canto era, with the addition of the cabalette, which were a retrospective look at the da capo arias of the past.

Now let's turn to *I Capuletti*. The saga of Romeo and Juliet, familiar to most of us from Shakespeare's play and various musical adaptations (*Romeo e Juliette* of Gounod not to mention Bernstein's *West Side Story*) is based on fact, as we can deduce from Dante's *Purgatorio VI*: (Longfellow translation).

Come and behold Montecchi and Cappelletti,  
Monaldi and Fillippeschi, careless man!  
Those sad already, and these doubt-depressed!

Most scholars believe the story is true, and that it took place in the early years of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Verona was under the rule of Bartolomeo. (Dante spent the years 1312-1318 in Verona, during which time he presumably learned of the tragedy.) Since most of the events described in the Divine Comedy were more or less contemporaneous with Dante, we can fix the date as slightly before the year 1300 (because Dante's trip through Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso took place in that year). Let's say 1275 as a (wild) guess.

Bellini's libretto is based not on Shakespeare but on an Italian play *Giulietta e Romeo* by Luigi Scevola in 1818 which was, in turn, based upon a 16<sup>th</sup> Century novella. However there had been a number of earlier treatments of the same story, by composers forgotten today. (Maraschalchi, Zingarelli, etc.) Bellini continued

to display *morbidezza* already evident in his earlier works. The feud between the two families is based on their political differences. The Capuleti, family of Giulietta, are Guelfs, the Montechchi, Romeo's family are Ghibellines. We don't have time to go into the details of the Guelf-Ghibelline conflict of those times, other than to say that they grew out of the struggles between the Pope (Guelfs) and the Holy Roman Emperor (Ghibellines), for temporal power. (Another opera whose plot hinges on the Guelf-Ghibelline struggles is Verdi's *I Vespri Siciliani* [1855]). Due to some peculiarities in paternity, the Emperor, whose home base was actually German, controlled the area of Italy south of Rome, from Naples all the way to Sicily. The Papal State, on the other hand, covered a southwest-northeast swath of Italy from, just south of Rome to about Ravenna. So the struggle was primarily to control the city-states of Italy in between the Papal States to the south Holy Roman Empire to the north: Florence, Siena, Verona, etc. Passions ran high, enough for families like the Capuleti and Montecchi to hate each other. (Dante himself became involved in the Guelf-Ghibelline unpleasantness. If you are interested, read my program notes on Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*,

[http://pzweifel.com/notes/gianni\\_schicchi.htm](http://pzweifel.com/notes/gianni_schicchi.htm)

According to Shakespeare, Juliet (Giulietta) is 14 years old, the youngest heroine in all opera as far as I know (except for children, like Gretel). It is reasonable to assume that Romeo is about the same age, and as was customary his role was assigned to a mezzo-soprano, a so-called "trouser role." Other famous trouser roles, all representing male youths, are Cherubino of *Le Nozze di Figaro*; Octavian of *Der Rosenkavalier*, Orfeo of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*; Oscar of Verdi's *Ballo in Maschera*; Frederic of Thomas' *Mignon*; and no doubt many others. The mezzo-soprano voice is ideally suited for the music, the tessitura, and the dramatic imperatives of the role. I actually own a recording of *I Capuleti*

with the tenor Giacomo Argelli taking the part of Romeo, and it just doesn't work.

The plot of the Bellini opera, in two acts, is considerably simpler than the Shakespeare play and the Gounod opera, both in five acts. The Gounod opera has 13 characters (plus of course chorus) while the Bellini version contents itself with only five (plus, of course, chorus). The Gounod opera belongs to a genre called "Grand Opera." It is a French form, (almost) always in five acts, always including an elaborate ballet (French opera evolved from the ballet during the 1600's and for a long time the singing and the dancing were of equal importance; think Lully and Louis XIV). As we have already seen, the Bellini opera is *bel canto* (*con morbidezza*).

Both acts of *I Capuleti* is divided into three scenes; Capellio, Giulietta's father and Tebaldo, her fiancé reject a peace offer brought by Romeo. (For this reason, Capellio must take the blame, at the end of the opera for the deaths of the two title characters.) Lorenzo, a doctor, advises that Giulietta is too weak to marry immediately, but Capellio rejects his advice. (Lorenzo is the analogue of Friar Lawrence in the Gounod and Shakespeare.)

Scene 2 of Act I is the most famous and, I think, has the most beautiful music of the entire opera. (The *morbidezza* mentioned above is particularly obvious in this scene.) Dr. Lorenzo has arranged for Romeo to come to Giulietta's room via a secret door, and he begs Giulietta to run away with him. She refuses, reluctantly, citing her filial duty to her father.

In Scene 3, the wedding is taking place in the Capuleti palace, and the disguised Romeo enters, again unsuccessfully entreating Giulietta to flee with him. She again refuses, and then Romeo's disguise is penetrated by the Capuletti. However, a group of Montecchi enter to protect him and general fighting ensues

In Act II, Scene 1, Lorenzo tells Giulietta that Romeo is safe. He produces a sleeping pill that will put her into a death-like trances and says that he and Romeo will be present when she awakes. Capellio enters, and Giulietta begs his forgiveness, although she doesn't tell him for what.

In Scene 2, Romeo, not knowing of drugging, is waiting outside the Capuleti palace, hoping to see Lorenzo who, however, does not appear. Instead, Tebaldo appears, and he and Romeo have a swordfight which is interrupted by Giulietta's funeral procession.

In Scene 3, the tomb scene. Romeo enters and takes poison as he cannot live without Giulietta, who he think is dead. Giulia awakens before he dies, and he explains what has happened. Giulietta dies of grief on his body. Both families appear, and blame Capellio for what has happened. He mourns "Killed? By whom?" and they reply "By you, pitiless man." (*Uccisi! Da chi?* This is similar to Shakespeare, where the two families, realizing that their idiotic feud has caused this double tragedy, reconcile.)

Both the Gounod and Bellini operas are less dramatically cogent than is the Shakespeare play. In the play, Romeo has been exiled to Mantua for killing Tybalt (in the Bellkini opera Tebaldo is not killed). Friar Laurence sends a letter explaining about Juliet's drug-induced coma with Friar John, but Friar John comes in contact with a plague victim, and is quarantined. When Friar Laurence finds out what has happened, he rushes to the tomb to prevent what actually occurred (in the play and both operas) but stumbles over a tombstone in the dark, losing just enough time to be unable to prevent Romeo from taking the poison. Hence, the workings of fate are at play—Star-crossed lovers. (People in those days believed in astrology, so that the stars were responsible for everything.)

