

Bellini, Excerpts from *Norma*

ABOUT THE COMPOSER: Born in Sicily in 1801, Vincenzo Bellini was a child prodigy among a family of musicians. Considered a master of the *bel canto style*, he is best known for his long, flowing melodies. Bellini's operas, of which *Norma* is perhaps his most famous, brought him success and recognition throughout his lifetime. He was admired by his contemporaries—including Verdi, Wagner, Chopin, and Liszt—for whom his works provided inspiration.

Excerpts from Norma (1831)

Set in Gaul, an ancient region of Western Europe, in the year 50 BCE, *Norma* is a tragic story of hidden love. Its libretto is based on the play *Norma, ou L'infanticide*. *Norma* premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1831; after its first night, Bellini called it a "Fiasco! Fiasco! Solemn Fiasco!" However, subsequent performances were highly successful. Its famous aria "Casta Diva" has thrilled audiences for centuries.

Synopsis

Roman forces have occupied the territory of Gaul. The Gallian troops pray in hopes of leading a rebellion; however, they must wait for a signal from Norma, their high priestess, before attacking. Norma initially refuses to declare war. She has borne children with Pollione, a Roman general, and is sympathetic to the Roman cause. Unbeknownst to Norma, Pollione no longer loves her, and has begun an affair with the young virgin priestess Adalgisa. Adalgisa innocently tells Norma she is in love, and Norma soon finds out it is with Pollione. She feels betrayed, but Adalgisa convinces her to maintain peace for the sake of the two children. Adalgisa attempts to convince Pollione to return to Norma, but fails; Pollione is no longer in love with her. Furious, Norma hastily declares war. In the temple, the soldiers are attempting to find a victim for a ritual sacrifice when Pollione is found. After interrogating him, Norma announces that the sacrificial victim will be a priestess who has broken her vows; she will sacrifice herself. Norma's bravery and virtue revive Pollione's love for her, and the two enter the flames of the funeral pyre together.

Mira o Norma...si, fino all'ore estreme (Act II, Scene 3) - Norma, Adalgisa

In this emotional duet, Adalgisa asks Norma to take pity on Pollione and the Romans for the sake of their two children. The orchestra provides a tranquil background for Adalgisa's pleas to the near-hopeless Norma. Norma will not yield until she realizes Adalgisa has prioritized their friendship over her feelings for Pollione. In "Si, fino all'ore estreme," the two women proclaim that their solidarity will triumph over the "trials of fate."

Meco all'altar di Venere...Me protegge, me diffende (Act I, Scene 2) - Pollione

Pollione details his experience of a terrifying dream. An omniscient voice broadcasts that Norma is exacting her revenge. Adalgisa will be taken away from him as a punishment for his infidelity.

Casta Diva...Ah! bello a me ritorna (Act I, Scene 4) - Norma

Translated as "Chaste Goddess," "Casta Diva" is among the most famous opera arias of the 19th century. Norma prays to the moon goddess begging for peace between her father's rebels and the Roman colonizers.

Perfido!...Vanne, si: mi lascia, indegno (Act I, Finale) - Norma, Adalgisa, Pollione

After Norma calls him a traitor, Pollione attempts to persuade Adalgisa to leave for Rome with him. He claims it is his fate to leave Norma and love Adalgisa instead. She refuses: "I should rather die." Adalgisa denounces their relationship and Norma swears her vengeance.