ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Carolyn Abbate is Professor of Music at Harvard University and the author of *Unsung Voices* and *In Search of Opera*. Her work has been translated into many languages. She herself is a translator, and has been involved in theatre as a dramaturge and director.

Roger Parker is Professor of Music at King's College London and the author of *Leonora's Last Act* and *Remaking the Song*. He is founding co-editor of the Donizetti critical edition, and editor of *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*.

CAROLYN ABBATE
AND ROGER PARKER

A History of Opera

The Last Four Hundred Years

PENGUIN BOOKS

a little shabbier, their authority and grip on power more fragile, but in charge again. Was it possible to reverse the clock, to put Pandora back in the box? With these kinds of questions in the air, and with a prevailing uncertainty about even such basic beliefs as the existence of one's nation, it may suddenly seem apt that the characteristic musical voice of the age was owned by Gioachino Rossini, with his ambiguous emotions and his Janus face, at once turned back to the past and forward to the future. But now, nearly two centuries on? One reason might be that we have freed ourselves, or at least established some distance from, the later nineteenth century's operatic ways, with its 'music of bumps, of clashes, of caprices'. With the help of that distance, we can once again take pleasure in mellifluous, well-behaved tragedy; and, more important, we can relish anew the ambiguities and manic escapism, the energy and ornament and sheer musical allure that Rossini so unfailingly brought to operatic drama.

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The tenor comes of age

In May 1911, at the bottom of the world, a party of Antarctic explorers must devise a way to wake the Watch in the dead of night. They were men sent out on a mission to Cape Adare by Robert Falcon Scott, whose bid for the South Pole was to end in disaster in March 1912. The Cape Adare group had forgotten their alarm clock, and a reward was offered to the man who could invent a substitute that was both shocking and sure. The winner constructed a device called the Carusophone:

> At midnight, the latest member of the party turned in, and before doing so lighted the candle on the 'Carusophone'. This then burnt steadily for two hours while all hands slept the sleep of the just, until at two o'clock . . . the thread which passed through the wick was burnt through. Then the bamboo spring, released by the breaking of the thread, sprang back and pulled the starting-lever of the gramophone. The plate and record then commenced to revolve, increasing in speed little by little to the accompaniment of a noise which bordered on the infernal, and was at first calculated to wake the whole party. . . . The record which performed this honourable duty every night [was] the 'Flower Song' from *Carmen*, sung by Signor Caruso, not, I am afraid, because of our classical taste in music, but because it was the loudest we possessed.[1]

This anecdote, besides documenting the ingeniousness of the British navy, gives voice to several operatic truths. Enrico Caruso (1873–1921) was *the* great operatic star of early sound recording, famous for a clear, piercing tone that cut through any and all acoustic undergrowth. The voice type Caruso possessed, that of the Italian heroic tenor, was loud in ways that transcend sheer decibels – somehow it has more volume than all the dance tunes, sentimental songs and military favourites otherwise

preferred by Antarctic explorers. When this kind of tenor hits a high note – generally defined as anything higher than the A above middle C – and hits it in chest voice (that is, without a hint of falsetto), the resulting acoustic explosion is a force of nature that would come to represent overwhelming male passion. This voice type is now regarded as quintessential, the prerequisite for phenomena like the Three Tenors and Andrea Bocelli, for the caricature of Italian opera as a tussle between sopranos and tenors competing on the high wire, and for so many more givens of the genre in legend and song. But we have to remember that this heroic tenor voice did not exist until the nineteenth century. The coming of that voice, and the special ground prepared for it within new operas of the 1830s and 1840s, were one of those seismic events that pepper operatic history.

An emerging new tenor voice coincided with Gioachino Rossini's farewell to operatic composition in 1829, not yet in his forties and at the height of his European fame. Rossini, we should recall, wrote only a single part for a heroic tenor, and that was in a French grand opera, *Guillaume Tell*. The roster of operas at Milan's La Scala in 1829, however, demonstrates that both his serious and his comic operas still dominated the repertory. The Carnival season, which started on 26 December 1828, opened as always with a serious opera – his *L'assedio di Corinto* (The Siege of Corinth, first performed, as *Le Siège de Corinthe*, in Paris in 1826, although itself a remake of an earlier Italian opera, *Maometto II*); the very next opera to appear was his *Zelmira* (Naples, 1822); his early *Demetrio e Polibio* (Rome, 1812) was also part of the season. Later in the year, three of his comic operas, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), *La pietra del paragone* (The Touchstone, Milan, 1812) and *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie, Milan, 1817) were also revived. No other composer came remotely close to his total of six operas in the year. What is more, this dominance could be repeated almost everywhere that opera was performed. There was continuing Rossini fever in the major capitals of Europe, such as London, Paris and Vienna; and, increasingly, in parts of South America and elsewhere around the globe. By the mid-1830s, Italian opera had been performed in New York and several other US towns, in Buenos Aires, Valparaíso and Rio de Janeiro, in Calcutta and many other far-flung places that intrepid travelling troupes could reach. In almost every place, Rossini was the staple fare.

The reasons Rossini decided to retire at this particular moment, when his star was so much in the ascendant, were complex. He may initially have stopped writing for personal reasons such as illness and depression. But it was also significant that important changes were happening in serious Italian opera at just that time, changes certainly not to Rossini's taste. What is more, once he was becalmed the operatic horizon altered so swiftly about him that any thought of matching his style to the demands of shifting taste must quickly have become daunting in the extreme.

One of the changes that occurred quite suddenly, however, was a new array of voice types in Italian serious opera: a shift in vocal register felt over much of Europe. By 1830, the castrati, already in decline during the later eighteenth century, had all but disappeared from *opera seria*. Their last days were gloomy indeed – a far cry from the time a century earlier when theatres could celebrate their vocal feats with shouts of 'Evviva il coltello!' (Long live the knife!). As early as the 1790s, rumours were circulating of strange physical reversals. One persistent story was of a man who had been born without testicles, and who in adult life had made his living by singing as a castrato. But then disaster struck: during an act of impassioned singing, his hidden body spontaneously emerged. A late-eighteenth-century version described the event thus:

> This man was born without any visible signs of those parts which are taken out on castration .... One day, he exerted himself so uncommonly in singing an arietta, that all of a sudden those parts, which had so long been concealed by nature, dropped into their proper place. The singer at this very instant lost his voice, which became even perceptible in the same performance, and with it he lost every prospect of a future subsistence.[2]

This fantastic tale is arresting because it depicts as a (literally) dramatic physical event something that happened gradually to an entire culture: condensed into a single moment are the years during which the castrato fell away, to be replaced by the male singing voices we know today.

The way this actually happened was inevitably less spectacular, but its suddenness is still surprising. The principal castrato of these twilight years was Giovanni Battista Velluti, who managed to enjoy international renown into the 1820s, singing roles created for him by, among others, Rossini. In the mid-1820s he signed a contract with a London theatre, and was at first a success. But in the last years of the decade audiences

turned on him, his concerts were drowned out by howls of derision (amateur falsettists in the galleries had a field day), his very person became a source of horror and disgust. When the young Mendelssohn heard him in London in 1829, the experience was literally the stuff of nightmares: 'his voice so excited my loathing that it pursued me into my dreams that night'.[3] A British critic of the same period described Velluti's singing as 'the spectral moan of an unearthly being'.[4] Unable to bear such demotion to the underworld, Velluti fled back to Italy, but even there his career was soon over. He retired, preserving what dignity he could muster, spending his last years in pastoral seclusion.

The heroic roles with which castrati once thrilled audiences had by this time migrated. At first, in the hands of Rossini, they often became the province of so-called 'trouser roles' (cross-dressed sopranos or contraltos), so preserving the eighteenth-century love of high voices, and also something of that age's laissez-faire attitude to gender representation on the operatic stage. But around the time of Rossini's retirement the cross-dressed soprano herself became an implausible and even vilified figure, at least in heroic roles. She would resurface occasionally during the later nineteenth century in various new guises, but tended to be on the periphery and comic in nature – a winsome page or other stock type. A trousered or helmeted soprano would no longer suffice to impersonate the romantic lead, the ardent troubadour or gallant knight. As a critic expressed it in 1833:

> We always see the woman who dresses as a man on stage . . . as a female in male garb, as if for a joke or a masquerade. Never does she take on the character and the appearance [of a man]. . . . How shall we ever deceive ourselves, seeing a Conquistador, a fearsome warrior, being represented by these figures through the whole performance?[5]

This critic, by the way, was an ex-tenor (Nicola Tacchinardi). He thus had a professional stake in the matter. To impersonate the 'fearsome warrior' with heaving chest and ready sword, a significantly more manly presence was now thought necessary. The romantic tenor came of age.

Tenors had been on stage since the start of Italian opera, but they were rarely among the first rank of characters. In eighteenth-century *opera seria* they mostly appeared as the senior citizens of the metropolis, perhaps of noble extraction, but unlikely to be enmeshed in the

central emotional tangles. As we saw in Chapter 4, Mozart's Idomeneo, a role written specially for an elderly tenor of the fading Metastasian school, fits the bill perfectly. Even in *opera buffa*, which favoured natural voices, tenors tended to have the whiff of redundancy about them, albeit often with compensatory lyric charm. Again there is a classic Mozartian example: the ineffectual Don Ottavio of *Don Giovanni* is a character as long on beautiful cantilena as he is short on decisive action. In Rossini's Italian operas, the lead tenor came into his own in the comic genre. But in serious operas, and with the exception of certain works written for Naples, where female heroes were in short supply, sword-waving women held their ground. *Otello* is the most obvious Neapolitan counter-example: it has no fewer than three leading tenor roles and, partly for that reason, remained in the repertory much longer than most of Rossini's serious operas.

The arrival of the manly tenor is itself sometimes turned into a primal scene, enacted by the famous French singer Gilbert-Louis Duprez (1806–96) in a 1837 revival of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829) at the Paris Opéra. Duprez recollected later that his appreciation of the 'manly accents' in Arnold's Act 4 aria 'Suivez-moi' caused him to attack the high Cs of that number (which would traditionally have been produced in a mixed voice, with elements of falsetto) in an all-out chest voice.[6] Rossini was horrified by this extreme vocal machismo; he tried to unman Duprez's innovation by describing it as 'the squawk of a capon with its throat cut' (telling shades of the castrato in that reference to the 'capon').[7] But a Rubicon had been crossed. After Duprez's Arnold, or so the story goes, nothing was the same; like it or not, the road to Caruso and those Three Tenors was paved and signposted.

As might be guessed, this simple tale of yet another momentous staged event in vocal history is far too neat. Tenors (Duprez included, as we shall see) had for some time been experimenting with darker, more forceful vocal production, and with higher chest notes. What's more, the voice's gentler, 'floated' high notes by no means disappeared overnight: as any devotee of old recordings will know, such notes remained an important part of all but the most unrelentingly robust tenorial armoury well into the twentieth century. But the years around 1830–40 still marked an important aesthetic shift. A type of vocal sound that to earlier generations would have seemed extreme, even animal (witness the

capon), became uniquely exciting. Italian composers who moved to the front rank as Rossini retired, above all Donizetti, but also Bellini and Saverio Mercadante, were quick to exploit its potential.

The rise of the heroic tenor was closely related to other alterations in the Italian operatic universe around 1830. An obvious parallel was the emergence of the dramatic baritone, who became the tenor's classic antagonist ('I am her brother/father/uncle; so long as I breathe she shall *never* be yours'), or even – although rarely until around 1850 – the all-out protagonist. Both these new male voices had one aspect in common: they sacrificed flexibility for sheer power. The typical Rossinian bass or tenor could and would ornament his aria with as much dexterity and showy virtuosity as his female counterpart; indeed, in the entire history of opera up to and including Rossini, the vocal skills required of men and women had differed only marginally. But around 1830 that began to change. Some sopranos and mezzos followed the tenors and baritones, specializing in a darker, more forceful delivery. But most did not. Florid vocal writing gradually became the exclusive domain of female singers. Instead of the charged beauty that Rossini and his audiences wished to hear in all operatic characters, vocally florid music became feminized, akin to the corsetry and crinoline that now surrounded, constricted and adorned the female body. Male singers, on the other hand, increasingly adopted the vocal equivalent of stovepipe hats and dark suits, fast becoming the obligatory masculine uniform in society. This is not to say that their actual costumes changed much – in sartorial terms males on stage still remained largely wedded to tights and jerkins, often accessorized with – for us – an alarming quantity of paste jewellery. No, the new operatic garb was acoustic in nature. Duprez's 'manly accents' were *de rigueur*; real men no longer trilled or sketched roulades, they sang the words plainly, so the words could be understood; and as a default they sang them loud. Gender difference, long ignored or deliberately confused on the operatic stage, had arrived with a vengeance.

These alterations in operatic voice types were not confined to Italian serious opera, even if felt most acutely there. They can be linked to larger changes in society, most obviously to new ways in which men felt the need to differentiate themselves from women, as evinced in visible form by the new fashions. But there are also more narrowly theatrical explanations. These years saw an inexorable amplification of operatic orchestras. Technological developments in instrument making, married to aesthetic preferences deriving from instrumental genres, saw the wind and brass instruments of the orchestra increase in volume, a development that in turn required string sections to expand their numbers; what is more, and in tandem with a new extravagance of operatic plot subject, the centre of gravity of the Italian opera orchestra became lower, with new importance granted to the lower brass (trombones in particular). This was not so great a problem for sopranos, whose voices could ride above this darker, heavier orchestral sound; but for male voices, obliged to make themselves heard in the same range as these newly powerful instruments, the acoustic competition was severe. They reacted in the only way possible, by darkening their voices, in the process making them more powerful but also less flexible. Another explanation might connect the move from heroic sopranos and altos to heroic tenors and (later) baritones to new perceptions of operatic realism. Opera came closer to the manners of spoken drama when singing voices were differentiated in ways similar to those of spoken voices in a stage play. This desire for a new realism was, in its turn, fuelled by technology. Gas lighting appeared in theatres around 1820. As well as being (a little) safer than previous, naked-flame expedients, which routinely resulted in fires that burned theatres to the ground, gas also allowed for more sophistication of stage illusion.

AMOR VIOLENTO

What did the first examples of this new serious opera sound like? The best come from among the approximately seventy operas produced by Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), one of a pair of post-Rossinian Italian composers (the other is Vincenzo Bellini) whose most famous works have remained in the repertory to this day. Donizetti spent the first decade of his career – the 1820s – writing operas (both comic and serious) that are for the most part unabashedly Rossinian in manner. His maturity is sometimes said to emerge with *Anna Bolena* (1830), an opera that brought him new national and then international prestige. In formal terms *Anna* does indeed show a gathering freedom from the Rossinian code, in particular by investing greater emotional significance in heightened recitative. But the opera's basic vocal manner remained old-fashioned, in particular in its continued use of Rossinian ornamentation for all characters.

Departure of a more radical kind comes in a slightly later and less well-known opera, *Parisina*, first performed in Florence in 1833. The libretto was written by Felice Romani (1788–1865), commonly thought the most talented stage poet of the day, but someone who, because of this, regularly became over-committed. In spite of frequent complaints and pleading, the last sections of the *Parisina* libretto arrived on Donizetti's desk little more than a month before the scheduled premiere. In terms of its plot, and small wonder given the time pressures, *Parisina* is highly conventional: set in the standard-issue Middle Ages, it relies on the conventional love triangle of soprano, tenor and baritone. But by Rossinian standards the story – taken from a long poem by Byron – is unusually violent and bleak. Aristocratic, grizzled Azzo (baritone) is married to young Parisina (soprano); but she nurses a secret passion, ardently reciprocated, for Ugo (tenor). Azzo sniffs out the passion but then discovers that Ugo is his son by a previous wife. This complicates things, but not for long: consumed by jealousy, Azzo has Ugo murdered. In the final scene, he presents Parisina with her lover's cadaver, at which sight she falls lifeless to the ground. This gruesome tale was parcelled into a sequence of musical numbers that conforms to the standards of the day: multi-movement entrance arias for each of the principals, a series of duets to place them in confrontation, and a grand central finale.

Given the predictable exterior, reviews of the premiere make curious reading. *Parisina* was generally a success with the public, but the critics were divided. Even the positive ones had caveats. The music, one warned, was 'extremely austere, and tiring both for the singers and instrumentalists'.[8] There was praise for the poetry, although some found the story morally repellent. The most intense criticism, though, came in reaction to a new type of vocal delivery. The first-act finale was 'more noisy and irritating to the ear than instructive and delightful to the soul'; some other scenes were 'too intense and prolonged'; it seemed to some that the opera was being 'shouted rather than sung'. One critic reported open discussion in the theatre:

> A shout thundered from the stage. 'Good!' was proclaimed from some sides. 'Bad!' was murmured from others. The first group said: 'In certain terrible situations, a shout can be singing raised to the sublime'. The second replied: 'A shout is always a shout, and never singing'. 'But', added the first, 'in nature, when the soul is tormented, men shout'.

Attending to *Parisina* today, we may find these comments puzzling. Donizetti's operas are, after all, now thought the essence of *bel canto*, of beautiful singing, but it's clear that for those in 1833 who were listening with Rossinian ears, attuned to the operatic past, something was amiss.

This conundrum can in part be explained by looking at the singers who created *Parisina*'s major roles. Donizetti, like all good opera composers of the time, carefully tailored his music to the skills of his first performers, and for very good reason – if they were successful, then his opera would be successful too. And the performers engaged for this 1833 Florence season were extraordinary. Caroline Ungher (Parisina) was an Austrian mezzo who had come to Italy in the mid-1820s. Famous above all as a singing actress, her voice was not conventionally beautiful, especially in its somewhat forced upper register. Bellini, definitely of the old school vocally, said that 'every sound she utters is like the stab of a stiletto';[9] Rossini, only a little kinder, said she had 'the ardour of the south, the energy of the north, and brazen lungs'.[10] Domenico Cosselli (Azzo) had started life as a Rossinian bass but now, halfway through his brief career, specialized in higher, more forceful roles, becoming one of a group of singers who created the new baritone voice type. The Ugo was Duprez, whose voice was at this point in transition. He had started life in Paris as a light, Rossinian tenor, but in these Italian years his voice had darkened and become more powerful. In his memoirs he mentions *Parisina* as the dividing point, the crucial move into a different kind of vocal production, one that – as we have seen – would lead him to become the iconic 'manly tenor' of the late 1830s.

Looking at *Parisina* from the perspective of these singers – as Donizetti's attempt to create a new style of music drama out of performers with new expressive means – we find an opera that, although conventional in its outer trappings, is radical in its treatment of the major roles. A good example comes in Act 2, when Azzo steals into Parisina's bedchamber and overhears her murmur Ugo's name in a dream. He awakens her and confronts her; she admits her love and the duet ends with furious imprecations from him and desperate, suicidal asides from her. All this is standard operatic fare for the 1830s. What is extraordinary is how much the scene relies on declamation rather than well-tuned melody, with no hint of a conventional slow movement of lyrical repose. The tenor part is if anything more unusual still. Donizetti tailored for Duprez a role that freely mixes his old and new styles of singing. In his

second-act aria, for example, the slow section has a great deal of florid writing reminiscent of the Rossinian past (Duprez's debut, in 1825, was in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*). The tessitura is set very high, with high Cs in abundance and even a high D in the cabaletta. But the musical context and markings in the score make clear that Donizetti intended many of these high notes to be declaimed forcefully rather than floated in a falsetto-tinged voice. At the same time, then, as Duprez was in transition, so too was the very language of serious Italian opera. Fresh demands were emerging in the alchemy between performers, composers and audiences.

Parisina is today only on the fringes of the repertory, but its new style was certainly a popular success, both in Italy and on the ever-expanding international operatic stage. A sure mark of Donizetti's popularity in this new manner was the fact that operas of his in a similar vein opened the Carnival season at La Scala no fewer than three years running in the mid-1830s (*Fausta* in 1832, *Lucrezia Borgia* in 1833 and *Gemma di Vergy* in 1834). But *Parisina* is doubly radical – and different from those other three operas – in that it attempts this new, darker vocal style for the soprano as well as the tenor. As mentioned earlier, forceful sopranos of the Ungher type were relatively rare; for the most part Donizetti was encouraged by his principal female performers to retain the old, gentler, more ornamental style.

The classic case comes in Donizetti's most enduringly popular opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), a work that has remained in the repertory through nearly two centuries of changing fashion. *Lucia* again centres on the classic vocal triangle. Edgardo, the heroic tenor, is in love with and loved by Lucia, the tragic soprano. Their union is implacably opposed by Enrico, the nasty baritone, who is Lucia's brother and for reasons of finance and ancient family rivalry wants her to marry a husband of his own choosing, the mild-mannered Arturo (tenor). There are the usual entanglements and tragic misunderstandings. Lucia, thinking Edgardo has deserted her, ends up engaged to Arturo and is publicly denounced by Edgardo when he shows up out of the blue just as she is signing the nuptial contract. This event spawns the famous *Lucia* Sextet, a great frozen moment (Italians called it the *concertato*) in which all the principals, backed by a chorus of shocked onlookers, face one another and together sing out their pain, anger and confusion. In the last act

Lucia murders her new husband in their wedding bed, falls into an elaborate vocal madness and dies. In the final scene Edgardo is told of her death. Bidding her spirit a passionate farewell, he stabs himself onstage and then expires, singing to the last. Donizetti succinctly defined his taste in libretti: 'Voglio amor, e amor violento'[11] (I want love, and violent love); *Lucia di Lammermoor* supplied it in full.

Edgardo was written for Duprez, now well settled into his second, more robust vocal manner. The final scene, at night amid the tombs of Edgardo's ancestors, is thus a good place to spot the new heroic tenor in his natural habitat. Like almost all solos and duets in the opera, the scene is in the standard multi-movement form: orchestrally accompanied recitative leads to a slow movement (in which Edgardo, thinking he has been spurned by Lucia, resolves to kill himself); a change of pace heralds the *tempo di mezzo*, in which the chorus brings news of Lucia's death; this leads to the cabaletta, during which the hero commits suicide. The slow movement, 'Fra poco a me ricovero' (Soon to give me refuge), shows how far we have moved from Rossinian vocal ornament. The opening strains are more like recitative; only later does Edgardo expand into lyrical melody and a few perfunctory melismas; at the end he again retreats into declamation, repeating the spare motto of the opening. What substitutes for the lack of vocal flourish is quite simple: Edgardo's part is studded with vehement high notes – moments in which he pauses to shout forth his feelings of loss and despair.

The announcement of Lucia's death is marked by an incursion of operatic funeral clichés: a sudden turn to the minor mode in a slow march, punctuated by solemn orchestral drum beats. But as the chorus launches into its narrative of Lucia's last moments, there is a stunning about-face. The music turns to sunny major and to light-voiced close harmony, as though adopting the language of the heroine whose death is being described. The contrast with Edgardo's anguished reaction couldn't be more obvious. His cabaletta, 'Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali' (You who have spread your wings to God), in which he imagines joining his beloved in heaven, seems at first to take on some of the chorus's delicacy; but soon, as he repeats the words 'bell'alma innamorata' (beautiful, beloved soul), Edgardo returns to the upper reaches of his voice. In between the two stanzas of the cabaletta, he deals himself the fatal blow, and in the second stanza his melody is seconded by a lachrymose solo cello. But what breath he has left is saved yet again for impassioned

high notes. By the end, ornament has disappeared, even lyrical, periodic melody has become fragmented. The tenor is down to his essentials, the high notes sung to a long, drawn-out 'Ah!', the desperate cry of the new, manly man.

Lucia's famous mad scene, which precedes this finale, is in exactly the same multi-movement form (orchestrally accompanied recitative, slow movement, *tempo di mezzo* and cabaletta), but its vocal style couldn't be more different. In the recitative, the deranged heroine is assailed by orchestral themes. Some of them are reminiscences of earlier numbers, but in her disordered state she is unable to respond to them adequately. The slow movement, 'Ardon gl'incensi' (The incense burns), seems at first to repeat this pattern, with the melody held by the orchestra and Lucia responding in fragments of declamation. But at 'Alfin son tua' (At last I am yours), in which she retreats into fantasies of a happy wedding to Edgardo, Lucia's utterances become progressively more florid until, by the end, she seems little more than an instrument herself, a mechanical producer of vocal noise, released from the constraints of the word. The cabaletta, 'Spargi d'amaro pianto' (Sprinkle with bitter tears), repeats this trajectory: the final cadences are also marked by disintegration into a world close to pure vocal sound.

A small industry has grown up around Lucia's madness, with producers and other arbiters of operatic fashion all seeking to tell us precisely what such vocal extravagance might mean. Some remind us that both real-world and operatic madness in the nineteenth century was typically a 'female malady': Lucia's manic vocalism is thus a sign of her imprisonment in a cruel male world. She is trapped in beautiful, ornamental singing just as she is trapped by society at large.[12] Others, finding this reading too depressing, stand it on its head. According to them, Lucia's flights of vocal fancy are a feminist victory, a proud refusal to obey the rules of convention. Her extravagant vocal finale now marks a triumphant *release* from male authority.[13] The fact that both interpretations use as evidence exactly the same music suggests that both attempt too precise a relationship between the notes and their cultural meaning. The message of the *Lucia* mad scene is probably best seen as more basic. Once upon a time in opera, elaborate vocal ornament was the province of all opera characters; now, in opera's Romantic age, florid singing was, like colourful costume, becoming a marker of the feminine. Small wonder, then, that those who contract the

'female malady' display as a prime symptom an uncontrollable excess of singing.

The *Lucia* mad scene has had a fascinating afterlife on stage as well as among academic interpreters. Scholars studying Donizetti's autograph score (the manuscript that contains his hand-written draft of the entire opera) discovered that the slow movement, 'Ardon gl'incensi', was originally conceived with the accompaniment of a glass harmonica, something that would have added an exotic and uncanny timbre to the scene. But it seems that the resident glass harmonica virtuoso in Naples got into a contractual argument with the theatre, and Donizetti (as ever, pragmatic about such matters) crossed out the part and substituted a solo flute. Modern performances sometimes reinstate the glass harmonica, which is one way of refreshing a passage now very well-known. But a more important variation to the scene occurred some thirty years after Donizetti's death. Around 1880, the Australian soprano Nellie Melba began to perform an extended cadenza with solo flute at the end of the slow movement, a nearly incredible high-wire act in which the soprano enters into an 'anything-you-can-play-I-can-sing-higher' competition with the flute. This crazy cadenza became the most famous moment in the opera, and is to this day faithfully reproduced by most sopranos, even though it obviously reflects a conception of soprano vocalism much later than Donizetti's.[14] What are we to make of such accretions to the opera's text? Purists might automatically welcome the 'authentic' glass harmonica and automatically denounce the later cadenza-with-flute. But the fact that sopranos continue to test themselves (and each other) against the cadenza's extreme difficulty could also be something to celebrate – if nothing else, as another demonstration that, in opera at least, the living performer can still exert power over the dead composer.

In part by means of additions and alterations such as the mad-scene cadenza, *Lucia di Lammermoor* survived momentous changes in fashion, changes that might in other circumstances have caused the entire opera gradually to seem ridiculous. An early indication that its violent contrasts were becoming dated is captured in one of the most famous novelistic scenes to take place in an opera house. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), the adulterous heroine, Emma Bovary, and her dull husband, Charles, go to see a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* (or rather its French version, *Lucie de Lammermoor*) in provincial Rouen. Much is made of the artificiality of the acting and dramatic

premises – Flaubert, at the forefront of modern developments in literary realism, clearly disapproved of such old-fashioned behaviour. The Act 2 Sextet is described with all the novelist's famous precision of language and eye for telling detail:

> The instruments and the singers began the sextet. Edgar, flashing with fury, dominated all the others with his clearer voice; Ashton hurled homicidal provocations at him in deep notes; Lucie uttered her shrill plaint, Arthur at one side, his modulated tones in the middle register, and the bass of the minister pealed forth like an organ, while the voices of the women repeating his words took them up in chorus delightfully. They were all in a row gesticulating, and anger, vengeance, jealousy, terror and stupefaction breathed forth at once from their half-opened mouths. The outraged lover brandished his naked sword; his guipure ruffle rose with jerks to the movements of his chest, and he walked from right to left with long strides, clanking against the boards the silver-gilt spurs of his soft boots, widening out at the ankles.

But then, quite suddenly, the ridiculous physical exertions of the singers become unimportant as Emma is drawn into the operatic spectacle, in particular into the orbit of the tenor hero:

> He, she thought, must have an inexhaustible love to lavish it upon the crowd with such effusion. All her small fault-findings faded before the poetry of the part that absorbed her; and, drawn towards this man by the illusion of the character, she tried to imagine to herself his life – that life resonant, extraordinary, splendid, and that might have been hers if fate had willed it. They would have known one another, loved one another. With him, through all the kingdoms of Europe she would have travelled from capital to capital, sharing his fatigues and his pride, picking up the flowers thrown to him, herself embroidering his costumes. Then each evening, at the back of a box, behind the golden trellis-work she would have drunk in eagerly the expansions of this soul that would have sung for her alone; from the stage, even as he acted, he would have looked at her. But the mad idea seized her that he was looking at her; it was certain. She longed to run to his arms, to take refuge in his strength, as in the incarnation of love itself, and to say to him, to cry out, 'Take me away! carry me with you! let us go! Thine, thine! all my ardour and all my dreams!'[15]

The trajectory is revealing: the tawdry dramatic details are cast aside,

they fade 'before the poetry of the part'; then, 'drawn towards this man by the illusion of the character', Emma constructs an elaborate fantasy about an alternative life she might lead – not with the operatic hero, but with the tenor who impersonates him. Previously in this book we have seen a castrato or soprano having the same effect; but this time the repercussions are more insidious. Those 'manly accents', we can guess, worked on Emma Bovary in what were for her unpredictable ways. The mood generated in her that evening leads to decisions that change her life disastrously and for ever.

Lucia successfully entered the operatic repertory, but most of Donizetti's seventy or so operas were forgotten until the closing decades of the twentieth century, when they began to be revived in a 'Donizetti Renaissance' that followed on from, and then rivalled, the contemporary explosion in Rossini performances. This renaissance has made available several extraordinary works, particularly from his final creative phase in the early 1840s, when Paris was his base of operations. There and in Vienna, where from 1842 he took up a court position, he produced a string of innovative works in a startling array of genres, from full-scale *grand opéra*, to *opéra comique*, to both comic and serious Italian opera. One in the last of these genres, *Maria di Rohan* (1843), is influenced by French *mélodrame*, to the extent that it condenses the usual Italian forms and focuses on moments of intense theatrical tension in which the music is sometimes little more than atmospheric. On the other hand, *Linda di Chamounix* (1842) engages with the tradition of *opera semiseria*, in which liberal injections of local colour enrich a plot that wavers between the tragic, the sentimental and the downright comic.

A third opera, *Don Pasquale* (1843), is that *rara avis*, an *opera buffa* from the mid nineteenth century that has thrived and endured. Why so rare? Recall that for the greater part of its history, serious Italian opera had been partnered by, often lampooned by, its comic twin. Composers tended to write in both genres, and by the time of Rossini there was sometimes little to distinguish between the musical style of one and the other. Around 1830, though, this too had begun to change. Composers increasingly specialized in one genre or the other (both Bellini and Verdi kept by and large to serious works), and although *opere buffe* continued to be composed, after 1840 they rarely had the cachet or prestige of *opera seria*. Again the repertoire at La Scala bears this out. Until

around 1830, comic operas hugely outnumbered serious ones, even though an *opera seria* always inaugurated the new Carnival season (the most prestigious event of the year). But in the 1840s the number of comic works drastically declined: in 1842 only two *opere buffe* were staged in the entire year, and both were elderly classics – Rossini's *Il barbiere* and Donizetti's own *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* (1827), a comic work that explicitly lampooned serious opera. Partly as a result of this fall in esteem, comic opera became stylistically somewhat stagnant – as late as the 1850s, new works in the genre might still repeat old Rossinian clichés, orchestral crescendos and all.

Donizetti was the last major Italian composer to ignore this trend. He continued to write comic operas as readily as serious ones, and excelled in both genres even at the end of his career, when such versatility went against prevailing trends. Part of the reason he did so was because in his hands comic opera was itself mutating, becoming more consistently coloured by a sentimental vein – a tone that had emerged in earlier decades only occasionally. This new atmosphere is present as early as his *L'elisir d'amore* (The Elixir of Love, 1832), another enduring success. But in *Don Pasquale* the innovations go further. The plot could hardly be more traditionally farcical: basically it parades the *commedia dell'arte* standby of a rich old man (Don Pasquale, bass) duped by a pair of young lovers (Norina, soprano, and Ernesto, tenor) with the help of a wise old friend (Dr Malatesta, baritone). But the *music* of *Don Pasquale* is anything but old-fashioned; indeed, so imbued is it with sentimental and even serious touches that it periodically calls into question its very identity as a comedy. In this respect it is revealing that Donizetti tried to insist that at the Parisian premiere (given at the Théâtre Italien) the main characters dress in contemporary costume, something on which he was overruled by most of the singers and the librettist, who insisted on 'perukes and velvet habits'.[16]

The new departures are signalled musically as soon as the curtain goes up. Most obviously, there is no opening chorus, no larger social world from which the main characters can emerge. The concentration, here and throughout the opera, will be on individuals, immediately increasing the possibility of the kind of audience identification usually reserved for serious subjects. At the heart of this opening Introduzione, embedded in its *opera buffa* exterior, lies a cantabile aria, Malatesta's 'Bella siccome un angelo' (Beautiful as an angel), that has few concessions

to the comic style. Ernesto's cantabile, 'Sogno soave e casto' (Sweet and chaste dream), follows in the same vein. There is no dissolve into *buffo* patter, simply because the melody will accommodate little interruption or deflation. Instead the phrases build powerfully towards a lyrical release, almost in the manner of middle-period Verdi. As Donizetti's music oscillates between the comic and the sentimental, it encourages us to believe in the emotional capacity of the cast: their comic antics onstage become merely a surface, as if the *characters* (rather than the actors) are acting out their roles. And this is surely why the opera survived (indeed thrived) despite its clichéd plot. The comic superstructure is really only a pretext, making the road forward to Verdi's *Falstaff* (1893) clearer than the road back to Rossini's *Il barbiere*.

According to this reading of Donizetti's last comic opera, it is fitting that that most celebrated passage of the score is Ernesto's Act 2 aria, 'Cercherò lontana terra' (I will seek a distant land). The orchestral prelude features a long, beautifully poignant trumpet solo. Whatever its contemporary associations, the strange effect of this gentle, sorrowful melody enunciated on the most unlikely of instruments can for us stand as a symbol of the ambiguity of the opera as a whole. Small wonder that the passage provided so transparent a model for the greatest modern master of musical ambiguity. In Act 2 of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (1951), a haunting re-composition of Donizetti's prelude sounds as Anne Trulove arrives at Tom Rakewell's house. She raises her hand to knock on the door, but hesitates:

> How strange! although the heart for love dare everything,
> The hand draws back and finds
> No spring of courage. London! Alone! seems all that it can say.

The hesitation is there in the music, in Stravinsky's shuddering opening dissonances and – most of all – in the delicate conceit that allows the trumpet, Donizetti's trumpet, to peal forth a song of isolation and loneliness.

The desolate trumpet solo in *Don Pasquale* might supply an apt soundtrack for Donizetti's last years, which were tragic indeed – locked away in an asylum and increasingly paralysed by syphilis contracted many years earlier. As befitted the time, his infirmity was wrapped in layers of romantic narrative by contemporary men of letters. The French publisher Léon Escudier left a memoir informing the world that

Donizetti had been driven insane by an imperious prima donna at the Paris Opéra, who had forced him to make compositional adjustments to his final *grand opéra*. The story has scant basis in fact but is repeated to the present day, so well does it chime with a strain of operatic criticism that sees singers as the constant potential enemies of composers.[17] As Donizetti languished in the asylum, friends occasionally came to visit, one even trying some strains of the mad scene from *Lucia*, vainly hoping the music might awaken the stricken musician to reason.[18] Heinrich Heine reported a surreal picture of the composer ever in attendance:

> While his melodies cheer the world with their merry playfulness, while they are sung and hummed everywhere, he himself, a terrible image of imbecility, sits in a sanatorium near Paris. With regard to his appearance alone he has, until lately, retained some childish consciousness, and had to be carefully attired every day in complete evening dress, his coat adorned with all his decorations; and would thus sit without moving, from early morning until late at night.[19]

Heine's fantasy cunningly recycles two German stereotypes about Italian opera during this period: its essential lack of seriousness, its 'merry playfulness', and the readiness of its composers to please at all costs, to be endlessly in waiting, for a new commission or for audience applause to call them onstage. But Donizetti's career and his music tell a different story. True, he seemed to write un-selfconsciously and made it his business to suit his inspirations both to his performers' abilities and his audiences' tastes. Yet for these very reasons, his greatest works articulate with passion and precision a moment of tumultuous change in Italian opera.

TO DIE THROUGH SINGING

Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35) suffered his own tragic fate by dying young. Bellini's earliest operas, like Donizetti's, show an inevitable Rossinian influence, despite the fact that his teachers in Naples took an old-fashioned line against Rossini. For them, Rossini was too artificial and elaborate, even too 'German', in his orchestral writing. But *Il pirata* (The Pirate, 1827) and *La straniera* (The Stranger, 1829) signalled that

Bellini had something different to offer, something often called 'romantic' or even 'philosophical' by contemporary critics. These appellations had little to do with the plots. Though both operas were influenced, as were several of Donizetti's, by the fashion for the Gothic, it was Bellini's highly individual writing for the solo voice that was heard as 'romantic'. His gift was to imagine melody, extended arcs and lines that could poise human voices to break hearts on the turn of the smallest phrase. This was his unique marker, recognized as the source of his creative force, and it made him immediately distinguishable from Donizetti.

An important strand of Bellini's originality sprang from his close relationship with the librettist of all but the last of his mature works, that same Felice Romani who had sent a frantic Donizetti the *Parisina* libretto just weeks before its premiere. But Bellini wrote much more slowly than Donizetti – he produced an average of just one opera a year during his short career – and would not have tolerated such last-minute scrambles. His preferred method was to involve himself extensively in the making of the libretto, frequently insisting on revisions and ensuring that the text was precisely what his music needed. Given his slower rate of production, he could not possibly match the overall popularity and reach of Donizetti; but several of his operas became instant classics, remaining in the repertory to this day.

Il pirata was the first opera Bellini wrote with Romani, and his first great success. Set in thirteenth-century Sicily, the plot centres again on a classic love triangle. Ernesto (bad, jealous, baritone) and Gualtiero (good, heroic, tenor) are rivals for the hand of Imogene (gentle, frail, soprano), who of course loves Gualtiero but is blackmailed into marrying Ernesto after Gualtiero has been exiled and has taken to piracy. Gualtiero appears (post-shipwreck) at Ernesto's castle and kills him in a duel. Imogene goes mad. Because of the individual singers Bellini wrote for and also because of his particular sensibility, which always tended towards the gently sentimental, he tended to avoid the new, more robust tenor voice that Donizetti employed to such great effect. In *Il pirata* both the baritone and the tenor are granted a fair degree of ornamentation, particularly in the slow movements. Gualtiero was written for one of the most famous singers of the day, Giovanni Battista Rubini (1794–1854), who started life as a Rossinian tenor and never made the transition that Duprez underwent, instead retaining his extreme flexibility and ability to sing in the stratosphere with a mixed, falsetto-tinged