

Ornaments and Improvisations: Early Nineteenth-Century *Bel Canto* Singing in Bellini's *Norma*

by Xuan Qin

The University of Texas

xq364@utexas.edu

The American Musicological Society Southwest Chapter

Spring 2016

Trinity University

At the end of 1831, Vincenzo Bellini wrote *Norma* for the one of most famous singers of the early nineteenth century, the soprano Giuditta Pasta, and the opera has become a symbol both of Bellini's work and of Pasta's abilities as a performer. *Norma* is one of the most important Italian operas of the 1830s within the tradition and practice known as *bel canto*. Within the tradition of *bel canto*, ornamentation is a typical and conventional practice of both composition and singing. Therefore, singing *Norma* is an authentic way to demonstrate the virtuosic skills of singers in *bel canto* singing. After Pasta, many other contemporary sopranos performed *Norma*, such as Giulia Grisi (also the first Adalgisa in the opera), Maria Malibran, and Laure Cinti-Damoreau. They all performed *Norma* in their own ways of improvisation and physical acting.

In this paper, I will analyze Bellini's original ornamentation in *Norma*'s aria "Casta diva" and argue that the composer uses appoggiaturas and turns not only as embellishments, but also as thematic elements. Based on this statement, I will continue with an analysis of two contemporary singers' improvisation of the *cantabile* portion of the aria— Pasta and Cinti-Damoreau. Pasta's ornamentation can be recovered from an unpublished notebook that was left by the soprano Adelaide Kemble, who studied with Pasta in the 1830s. I will use this notebook as evidence to hypothesize that Pasta's vocal improvisations may have been more extensive than has previously been supposed. Cinti-Damoreau's ornamentation will be provided from transcriptions in her notebooks, *Méthode de chant composée pour ses classes du Conservatoire par Mme. Cinti-Damoreau* (1849), which contains many excerpts from Italian opera. Based on my comparison of the Cinti-Damoreau and the Kemble notebooks, I show that the ornamentation and improvisation in Kemble's notebook is more virtuosic than in Cinti-Damoreau's, perhaps reflective of the particular strengths of her teacher, Giuditta Pasta.

The plot of *Norma* is well-known. The opera is set in Gaul of the Roman occupation. *Norma*, a priestess of Gaul, and *Pollione*, a Roman, are secretly married with two children. *Pollione*, however, has fallen in love with a younger priestess, *Adalgisa*, who returns his affections. Unaware of *Norma* and *Pollione*'s married status, *Adalgisa* innocently tells *Norma* of her love and *Norma* curses *Pollione* for his treachery. The second act opens with a very disturbed *Norma*. Greatly distraught over her husband's treachery, she wants to kill her children, but her love for them as a mother prevents her from doing so. *Pollione* refuses to leave *Adalgisa*, but feels guilty about the decision *Norma* comes to, which is that she will sacrifice herself. At the end of the opera, *Norma* and *Pollione* leave to go to the funeral pyre together.

Bellini's *Norma* was an opera written in the *bel canto* tradition. *Bel canto*, which literally means "beautiful singing," was an approach to the voice that encouraged singers

to aim for a sensuously full, rich, sweet tone and smooth phrasing. It was also a series of compositional and vocal improvisational strategies that included *fioriture*, variation, ornamentation, and improvisation. “Casta diva” in *Norma* is in some ways typical of a *bel canto* aria. It is the *cantabile*, the second movement of Norma’s entrance aria in Act I, scene 4, and it is a prayer to the chaste moon goddess (or “casta diva”). Norma seeks to calm her people by commanding them to wait for their opportunity to go to war against the occupying Romans..

[play “Casta diva”]

Ca - sta Di - va, ca - sta Di - va, che i - nar
 4 gen - ti que - ste sa - cre, que - ste
 7 sa - cre, que te sa - cre an - tiche pian - te, a noi vol - gi il bel sem
 10 bian - te, a - noi vol - gi, a noi voi - gi il bel sem - bian -
 13 - - - te, il bel sem - bian - te sen - za nu - be e sen - za
 15 vel, sen -

18
za - vel, si,

21
sen - za -

23
vel. Tem - pra o

27
Di - va, tem - pra tu de' - co - ri ar - den - ti,

The *cantabile* movement consists of two stanzas and an interlude between them. Each stanza has four phrases. Norma's first phrase (measures 1-4) begins on A, as a dotted-half note tied to a dotted-eighth note, followed by a written-out turn. In measure 3, the melody leaps to D, which is preceded by a turn on A, and the melodic line resolves by falling to B flat. The second phrase follows the shape of the first, but begins a step higher, on B flat. In the third brief phrase, Bellini applies appoggiaturas in measure 9 and 10. Then the melody accents on repeated high A and touches the climax on B flat, and then falls in ornamented stepwise motion. The interlude (measures 17-23) has two phrases, each consisting of five small arches. The first two small arches of these two phrases are similar in shape to turns, and can be thought of as a kind of ornamentation. The other three melodic arches are also short and they complete the interlude. The melody of the second stanza is the same as the first. The interlude, however, is replaced by a cadenza that ending the aria. [slow and point out corresponding measure]

According to my analysis, the two most frequently used ornaments in "Casta diva" are appoggiaturas and turns. Many scholars have already discussed the figure of the appoggiatura in Bellini's operas. Melina Esse argues that his extensive use of appoggiaturas is a reflection of the close attention Bellini paid to the relationship between the text and the melody. Mary Ann Smart is even more explicit in drawing a connection between musical figures and the expression of emotions. She explores the appoggiatura's potential as a melodic imitation of human sighing and groaning.

The turn is even more conspicuous in the aria. In the first phrase of "Casta diva," the turns are notated in two different ways, with short-hard turn symbols and fully written out. Why would Bellini have notated some turns and not others? In *bel canto* performance practice of this period, the singers used improvisation to add ornamentation and embellishment to the melody, and it is possible that Bellini wrote out some of the turns in order to discourage singers from engaging in improvisation and to encourage them to adhere more closely to the score. Perhaps Bellini also wrote out the turns in order to indicate that they were not merely ornaments, but a fundamental part of his music.

Turn figures also appear later in “Casta diva,” for example, in measures 14, 17, 18, 21, and 39. According to Clive Brown, “the expressive effect of a turn depends on its position in the melody, its rhythmic configuration, its melodic shape and the speed with which it is executed.” Any nuanced differentiation or improvisation of these turns will bring about melodic and thematic variation. In my opinion, Bellini’s turns can ultimately be interpreted in two ways. First, they are used to vary and add detail to what would otherwise be a very simple melody. But, second, they are important elements of Bellini’s melody with their emphasis on stepwise movement. Whereas in *bel canto* composition and performance, ornaments had traditionally been used to decorate and embellish a melody, Bellini’s ornaments here are a crucial part of the melody. If one removes them, the essence of the line is lost.

Besides the ornamentation of the original score, improvised embellishment was also significant for *bel canto* style. It was conventional that singers sing very differently than the original version of a phrase in their own performance. Pasta and Cinti-Damoreau performed *Norma* between the 1830s and 1850s, and have left behind evidence for how they embellished Bellini.

Pasta had a very wide-ranging voice. According to written accounts, the timbre of her voice had the qualities of both a soprano and a mezzo-soprano. This wide range and multi-colored timbre gave Pasta the ability to perform an extensive variety of roles. Early in her career, Pasta moved to Paris and performed at the Théâtre Italien between 1821 and 1824. During these years she established a reputation as a singer and an actress. Stendhal, the French critic and novelist, noticed Pasta and produced the most interesting descriptions of her voice and performance style, devoting an entire chapter to her in his now celebrated *Life of Rossini*, which was published in 1824. Stendhal thought that Pasta set herself apart from other contemporary singers through her “ideal beauty.” He continued that Pasta is “an actress who is young and beautiful; who is both intelligent and sensitive; whose gestures never deteriorate from the plainest and most natural modes of simplicity, and yet manage to keep faith with the purest ideals of formal beauty.”

Cinti-Damoreau was a French soprano known for her performances of Italian opera. She was trained in the Italian style at the beginning of her education, concentrating on “the simplest of ancient airs” and got her first offer from the Théâtre Italien in Paris. In addition, Cinti-Damoreau was one of the few French singers to perform in Rossini’s Paris operas, which otherwise were cast with native Italian singers. She created principal roles of Pamyre in *Le siège de Corinthe* (1826), Anaïs in *Moïse* (1827), Countess Adèle in *Le comte Ory* (1827), and Mathilde in *Guillaume Tell* (1829). Contemporary critics viewed her voice that equal of other rivals and “perhaps she had even a bit more refinement in her vocalization.” [François-Joseph Fétis, *Biographie Universelle des musiciens*, II 420.]

Studying singers’ improvisations is the most significant way to research their own performance. However, evidence for exactly what nineteenth-century singers did is difficult to find. I was lucky enough to be able to explore an unpublished notebook belonging to the soprano Adelaide Kemble, who was a student of Pasta. This notebook provides evidence of early nineteenth-century ornamentation and improvisation, and raises important questions about what Pasta did vocally and how we should ultimately understand her performance of *Norma*. The musicologist Philip Gossett has studied *bel canto* opera and vocal practice extensively and it is due to his generosity that I have been

able to gain access to a photocopy of Kemble's notebook. The date of the notebook is not known, but Kemble's studies with Pasta fall in the middle point of her brief career, which lasted from 1835 to 1843. Unfortunately, we do not know where the original notebook is currently housed, even though photocopies of it have been circulating for many years.

Regarding Cinti-Damoreau, she left one printed book and seven volumes of manuscripts during her teaching at the Paris Conservatoire between 1833 and 1856. They offer a great deal of detail regarding the ornamentation and improvisation that she employed and/or recommended to students for operas by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and other Italian composers. These notebooks were discovered by Everett Helm and have been held in the Lilly Library at Indiana University since 1971. Austin Caswell has already studied Cinti-Damoreau's notebooks and identified most of the excerpts in relation to their corresponding operas. Cinti-Damoreau notated ornamentations for Bellini's *Norma*, *La sonnambula*, *I puritani*, and *Beatrice di Tenda*. Until Caswell's work, all of the ornamentation the soprano prescribed for *Norma* has remained unidentified because no text is given in the examples and they are very difficult to decipher. Two and a half pages of Cinti-Damoreau's notebooks are devoted to *Norma*.

Both singers choose to embellish the same phrases in "Casta diva" and several different phrases in the *cabaletta* "Ah! bello a me ritorna" in their notebooks. I only discuss those in the *cantabile* in my paper. I have transcribed and identified Kemble's and Cinti-Damoreau's ornamentations for *Norma* in Examples 1, 2, and 3. The texts in Kemble's notebook make it easy to find the original phrases. However, the precise identification of every excerpt from Cinti-Damoreau's manuscripts is more difficult due to the lack of text. In addition, her embellishments for "Casta diva" are given in E flat major, not in F major, the key in which the aria is normally printed and sung. [It is well known that Bellini originally wrote the *cantabile* in G major.]

Ex. 1 mm. 39 (the fourth phrase of the second stanza)

Bellini

gnar, re - gnar tu fai, tu fai nel

Kemble

re - gnar, re- gnar tu fai, tu fai nel

Cinti-Damoreau

Ex. 2

mm. 17-18 (the first phrase of the interlude)

Bellini

17

sen - - - - - za -

Kemble

17

tr *tr*

sen - - - - - za

mm. 21-22 (the variation in the interlude)

21

sen - - - - - za -

Cinti-Damoreau

tr *tr*

Kemble

sen - - - - - za

Ex. 3

mm. 41-43

41

a piacere

fa - - - - - i

42

nel - - - - - ciel.

Kemble

19

fa - - - - - i

2

Kemble

nel - - - - - ciel

Cinti-Damoreau

The first example comes from the fourth phrase of the second stanza. Bellini composed four groups of turns moving primarily in stepwise motion, but both Kemble and Cinti-Damoreau prescribe the insertion of descending arpeggios into the melodic line, and many more accented notes. There are more leaps than in the original score. [pause to specific] In addition, Cinti-Damoreau's version is exactly the same as Kemble's (although in a different key). It is difficult to know why the two documents should coincide in this way. Other than Caswell's study, very little research has been done on the Cinti-Damoreau notebooks, and none on Kemble's other than a brief reference in Gossett's *Divas and Scholars*. There has also been very little research conducted on the possible professional and/or personal connection between the two singers and whether the two may have, in different ways, been influenced by Pasta. Given the evidence, I would hypothesize that perhaps Pasta's ornamentations could be the model of singing Norma and then have influenced later sopranos, including Cinti-Damoreau.

Example 2 comes from the two phrases in the interlude, and both Kemble and Cinti-Damoreau prescribed trills, replacing the turns written by Bellini. Although these two embellished versions are similar to each other, the version in Kemble's notebook seems to pertain to the first phrase of the interlude (mm. 17-18)--note the pitch E on the downbeat of measure 18-- whereas that in Cinti-Damoreau's notebook points to the second, repeated phrase (mm. 21-22). [pause to explain] Kemble applied brief trills on weak beats in measure 17, and then portamento from high B flat to E. Cinti-Damoreau, however, used two long trills, and also introduced a descending portamento from the high B flat.

The last example is the cadenza. Bellini's notation suggests a rhythmically free version, and Cinti-Damoreau's version is very similar to the original score. The cadenza in Kemble's notebook, however, is quite different. Her version of mm. 41-43 in particular draws attention to the singer's range (lower octave on A) [pause to explain]. In this case, the variation shows off the extensive range of the singer's voice, and we know, as noted earlier, that Pasta had an extremely wide-ranging voice, with the elements of a mezzo-soprano in range and color.

Based on my comparison of the Cinti-Damoreau and the Kemble notebooks, I conclude that the ornamentation and improvisation in the Kemble's notebook is more aggressive and virtuosic than in Cinti-Damoreau's. Most of the variations of Cinti-Damoreau typically are produced based closely on the composer's score. In the Kemble notebook, on the other hand, the ornamentation is more unusual and individual.

Ultimately *bel canto* was a style of composition and performance that sought to imitate nature. This included the imitation not only of the natural, physical environment, but also of human emotions. In the richness and the smoothness of their tone, and in their many ornaments, both written and improvised, singers sought to imitate human passion and present it in a kind of abstract, transfigured form. In his score for *Norma*, Bellini used relatively clear and simple ornaments in order to evoke specific emotions. For example, appoggiaturas and turns are partly given such emphasis in “Casta diva” because they have historically been used to imitate sighs or sobs.

In addition to emotional function, Bellini composed turns and appoggiaturas in “Casta diva” and made them part of the building blocks of the melody. However, Kemble’s notebook suggests that early nineteenth-century sopranos’ performances of Bellini’s ornamentation, perhaps especially those of Giuditta Pasta, may have included a more individual and impressive element. As we can see, the Kemble notebook shows not just turns and appoggiaturas, but trills, arpeggios, scales, accents, leaps, and portamento, which are more personal and varied. Moreover, Cinti-Damoreau’s embellishments might be influenced by Pasta, but also unique with her own style.

Although my research attempts to uncover a small chapter in the relationship between composer’s ornaments and singers’ improvisations in *bel canto*, my conclusion is only a hypothesis because no one is the witness to nineteenth-century opera and there are no recordings of any performance during that early period. In the future, more research needs to be done in order to understand and verify this relationship.