

# Norma

Music by Vincenzo Bellini  
Libretto by Felice Romani

## Study Guide to the Opera

Teatro Antico overlooking the city of Taormina (Sicily)  
<http://www.gbopera.it/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/norma-venero%20C3%A1r16.jpg>



***Through singing, opera must make you weep, shudder, die.***

by Jill Leahy

(Quote by Vincenzo Bellini)

*Norma* is an opera in two acts by Vincenzo Bellini that can make audiences weep and artists shudder. And, the title character dies at the end! The immediate source for Romani, the librettist, was a 5-act play, *Norma, ossia L'infanticidio* (*Norma, or The Infanticide*), by the French poet Alexandre Soumet. However, the roots of the story go back to the Greek myth about Medea, who was a priestess of the moon-goddess in Colchis in Asia Minor. In Bellini's *Norma*, usually set in 50 BCE soon after Caesar's conquest of Gaul, the Druid priestess Norma falls in love with a Roman soldier.



Giuditta Pasta as Norma

Bellini chose the subject in July 1831 and composed the opera in time for its premier at La Scala on December 26, 1831—the traditional start of the carnival season in Italy. The custom of the time was for opera composers to create parts for specific singers whose voices and capabilities they knew because opera singers were the “rock stars” of their day. One such singer, Giuditta Pasta, was a soprano who some consider among the greatest opera singers ever. Bellini wrote *Norma* for her and it was not only one of her greatest roles, but also Bellini's masterpiece and a leading example of the *bel canto* opera genre.

Praised for its beautiful melodies throughout, music experts agree that the role of Norma is one of the most taxing vocal and dramatic roles in all of opera. One writer said: “God knows it isn't an easy part to sing, with its demanding mixture of vocal and emotional textures, its Cs above (some go for Ds) and B-flats below the staff, its long-breathed lines, and octave drops and showpiece trills. One must be able to sing a strong, natural-sounding contralto and some of the highest coloratura ever written. The role of Norma calls for an authentic *bel canto* soprano voice, one that can be both mercurial-birdlike and witchy-dramatic.”

# Norma Synopsis

Gaul, 50 BCE, during the Roman occupation

**ACT I** In a forest at night, the priest Oroveso leads the Druids in a prayer for revenge against the conquering Romans. After they have left, the Roman proconsul Pollione admits to his friend Flavio that he no longer loves the high priestess Norma, Oroveso's daughter, with whom he has two children. He has fallen in love with a young novice priestess, Adalgisa, who returns his love (**Meco all'altar di Venere**). Flavio warns him against Norma's anger. The Druids assemble and Norma prays to the moon goddess for peace (**Casta diva**). She tells her people that as soon as the moment for their uprising against the conquerors arrives, she herself will lead the revolt. At the same time, she realizes that she could never harm Pollione. When the grove is deserted, Adalgisa appears and asks for strength to resist Pollione. He finds her crying and urges her to flee with him to Rome. She agrees to renounce her vows (Duet: **Vieni in Roma, ah! vieni, o cara**).

Norma tells her confidante Clotilde that Pollione has been recalled to Rome. She is afraid that he will desert her and their children. Adalgisa confesses to Norma that she has a lover (Duet: **Sola, furtiva, al tempio**). Recalling the beginning of her own love affair, Norma is about to release Adalgisa from her vows and asks for the name of her lover. As Pollione appears, Adalgisa answers truthfully. Norma's kindness turns to fury. She tells Adalgisa about her own betrayal by the Roman soldier. Pollione confesses his love for Adalgisa and asks her again to come away with him, but she refuses and vows she would rather die than steal him from Norma (Trio: **Oh! Di qual sei tu vittima**).

**ACT II.** Norma, dagger in hand, tries to bring herself to murder her children in their sleep to protect them from living disgracefully without a father (**Teneri, teneri figli**). She changes her mind and summons Adalgisa, advising her to marry Pollione and take the children to Rome. Adalgisa refuses: she will go to Pollione, but only to persuade him to return to Norma. Overcome by emotion, Norma embraces her, and the women reaffirm their friendship (Duet: **Mira, o Norma**).

The Druids assemble at their altar to hear Oroveso's announcement that a new commander will replace Pollione. Oroveso rages against the Roman oppression, but tells the Druids that they must be patient to ensure the success of the eventual revolt (**Ah! del Tebro al giogo indegno**).

Norma is stunned to hear from Clotilde that Adalgisa's pleas have not persuaded Pollione, and in a rage she urges her people to attack the conquerors. Oroveso demands a sacrificial victim, and just then Pollione is brought in, having profaned the sanctuary. Alone with him, Norma promises him his freedom if he will leave Adalgisa and return to her (Duet: **In mia man alfin tu sei**). When he refuses, Norma threatens to kill him and their children, and to punish Adalgisa. She calls in the Druids and tells them that a guilty priestess must die, then confesses that she is referring to herself. Moved by her nobility, Pollione asks to share her fate. Norma begs Oroveso to watch over her children, then leads her lover to the pyre.

## Characters of the Opera

**Oroveso** [oh-roh-VAY-zoh] *bass*  
Leader of the Druids

**Pollione** [pohl-lee-OH-nay] *tenor*  
Roman Proconsul in Gaul

**Flavio** [FLAH-vyoh] *tenor*  
Friend of Pollione, a centurion

**Norma** [NOHR-mah] *soprano*  
Druid High Priestess, daughter of Oroveso

**Adalgisa** [ah-dahl-JEE-zah] *mezzo-soprano*  
A novice in the Druid Temple

**Clotilde** [kloh-TEEL-deh] *mezzo-soprano*  
Norma's confidante

**Children** of Norma and Pollione  
*actors*

## Meet the Composer and the Librettist

by Jill Leahy

**Vincenzo Bellini** is best remembered as having “a gift for creating vocal melody at once pure in style and sensuous in expression.” Although his working life was short, music historians claim his style influenced many later operatic compositions, including the early works of Richard Wagner, and the music of Chopin and Liszt. Even Verdi was quoted as raving about his “long, long, long melodies such as no one before had written.”

Many members of Bellini’s family were musicians, so it wasn’t unusual that he was already composing and producing his first works while he was still a student at the Naples Conservatory. Bellini acquired an important patron and impresario who commissioned *Bianca e Fernando* for the Naples Opera—and that success led to other commissions. The composer’s international reputation was solidified when his opera *Il pirata* (1827) was performed at La Scala, when he was just 26 years old.

*Norma*, despite its initial failure, has remained popular, and Bellini composed an additional ten operas, most of which were popular at the time. His last opera, *I puritani*, was a triumph, but Bellini was only able to enjoy his success for a short time. Feeling ill a few months after the 1835 premier, Bellini left Paris and went to stay with some friends in their villa in Puteaux. With cholera running rampant in the country, and thinking that Bellini had contracted it, his friends left him there alone. He was found dead, not from cholera, but from an inflamed intestine and an abscess of the liver.

**Felice Romani** was the best Italian theatre poet of the day and produced over 100 libretti. While his family sent him to school to study law, Romani instead fell in love with literature, antiquities, mythology, and French language. After graduating, he traveled extensively before winning a position as a librettist at La Scala.

Being proficient in French, Romani preferred to adapt successful French stage plays rather than try to create original work. He also had an understanding of and love for mythology. Romani wrote for the composers Rossini as well as Donizetti, but he is probably most remembered for his work with composer Vincenzo Bellini. They seemed to be of like minds—Romani believed that in opera the words were as important as the music, and Bellini is quoted as saying: “Give me good verses and I will give you good music.”

These two creative giants wrote six operas together: *Il pirata* (1827), *La Straniera* (1829), *Zaira* (1829), *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830), *La Sonnambula* (1831), *Norma* (1831), and *Beatrice di Tenda* (1834). Sadly it was this last opera that broke up their collaboration and eventually their friendship. Bellini used another librettist for *I puritani* and swore he would never write an Italian opera with anyone but Romani, but he died without ever having that chance. And Romani, hearing of Bellini’s early death, wrote an obituary expressing his regret over their estrangement.



Vincenzo Bellini (1801—1835)



Felice Romani (1788—1865)



## Casta Diva, Sung by the Divine Callas

by Jill Leahy



Giuditta Pasta commented to Bellini that she disliked “Casta diva”, the aria he composed for her in *Norma*. The composer asked her to practice it every day for one week, promising her that he would rewrite it if she still thought it didn't suit her voice. After that week he didn't need to make any changes, but she transposed it down to F from the original G. The music is

still sung in the key of F today. The great Wagnerian soprano, Lilli Lehmann, said that she found it easier to sing all three of Wagner's Brunhilde roles than one *Norma*.

The most prolific *Norma* of the postwar period was Maria Callas, with 89 stage performances (several of which exist on recordings), along with two studio recordings (made in 1954 and 1960). Wrote Harold Rosenthal of Callas's 1957 London *Norma*, "when she is onstage she is as no other artist today. When all is said and done, opera is more than singing; it is music drama; and Callas's *Norma* is a dramatic creation of the highest order."

### “Casta diva” Italian Lyrics

Casta Diva, che inargenti  
queste sacre antiche piante,  
a noi volgi il bel sembiante  
senza nube e senza vel . . .  
Tempra, o Diva,  
tempra tu de' cori ardenti  
tempra ancora lo zelo audace,  
spargi in terra quella pace  
che regnar tu fai nel ciel . . .

### “Casta diva” English Translation

Pure Goddess, whose silver covers  
These sacred ancient plants,  
we turn to your lovely face  
unclouded and without veil . . .  
Temper, oh Goddess,  
the hardening of your ardent spirits  
temper your bold zeal,  
Scatter peace across the earth  
Thou make reign in the sky . . .

In the 2011 movie, *The Iron Lady*, about British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, as she leaves Number 10 Downing for the last time the soundtrack is the music of “Casta diva” from Bellini’s *Norma*, with Maria Callas’s soaring voice.

## A Divine Dish

*Pasta alla Norma*, a divine combination of eggplants, tomatoes, basil, and ricotta, is one of the most elegant traditional Sicilian recipes. It was so popular in 19th-century Sicily that it was named after Sicilian composer Bellini's hugely successful opera *Norma* to honor both dish and opera.



(Find the recipe: <http://fxcuisine.com/Default.asp?lanuage=2&Display=84&resolution=high>)

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