

Public Abstract

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Title: Bellini's *Norma*: A Comparative Study of Significant Leading Ladies from Pasta to Callas

In the rich tradition of bel canto opera the surviving details surrounding the performances of the leading role from *Norma* (1831) of Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) provide ample basis for a comparison of seven celebrated divas: Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865), Maria Malibran (1808-1836), Giulia Grisi (1811-1869), Thérèse Tietjens (1831-1877), Lilli Lehmann (1848-1929), Rosa Ponselle (1897-1981), and Maria Callas (1923-1977). The bel canto style is considered by many scholars and performers to be one of the most difficult to perfect, with this opera recognized as the zenith of any soprano's repertory, and yet all seven of these women reigned as the consummate *Norma* in their time. This study comprises of a chronological comparison of the interpretations of each new generation in order to determine if and how the role of *Norma* has varied over time. Many singers took on the part prior to Callas, and yet few were praised as frequently and regarded as highly as these leading ladies. Various criticisms have been brought together in this discussion in an effort to create a concrete idea of what these women would have looked and sounded like when singing *Norma*. The omission of certain bel canto characteristics in the renditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries supports the assertion that Maria Callas was instrumental in reviving this operatic tradition in the 1950s.