

**Norma** première 1831 at La Scala in Milan

VINCENZO BELLINI (1801-1835)

Libretto by Felice Romani

Running time: 151 mins

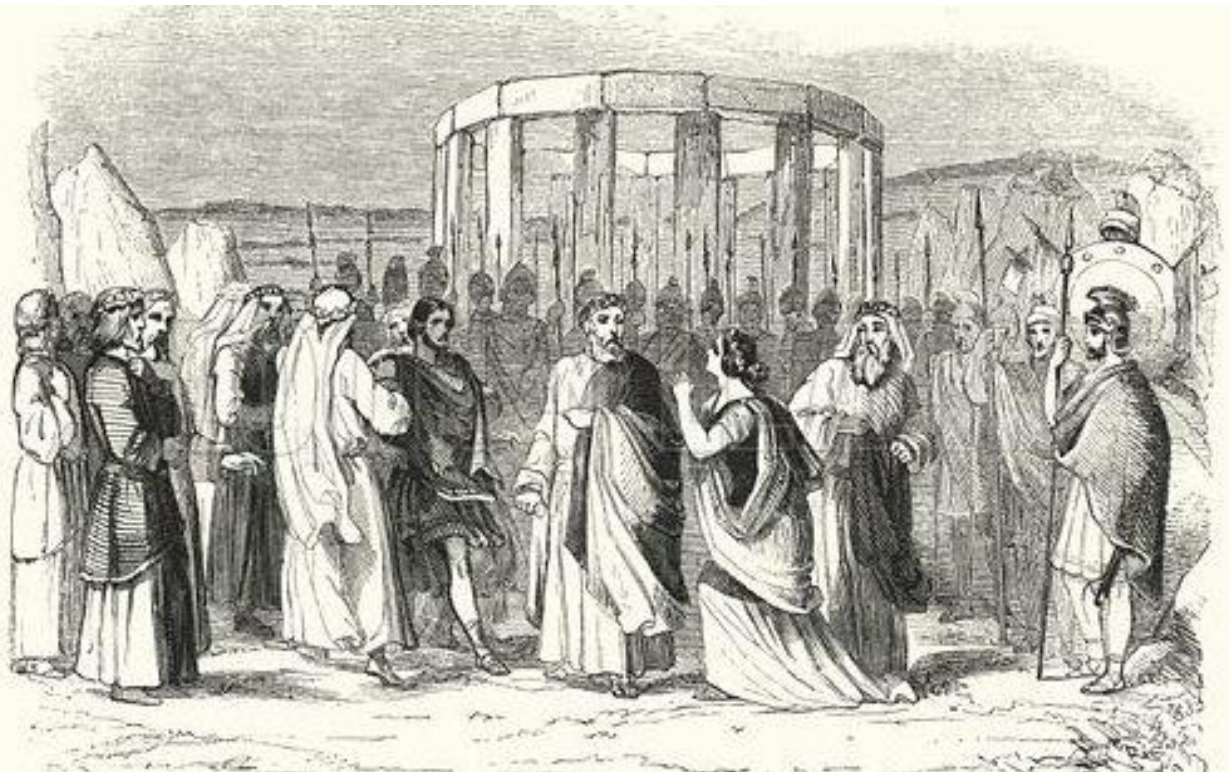
Performed by Opera Australia, Sydney: 1978 remastered 1991

Oroveso, Druid chief and father of Norma	<i>Clifford Grant</i>	Bass
Pollione, Roman Proconsul in Gaul	<i>Ronald Stevens</i>	Tenor
Flavio, Centurion	<i>Trevor Brown</i>	Tenor
Norma, Druidess	<i>Joan Sutherland</i>	Soprano
Adalgisa, young Priestess	<i>Margreta Elkins</i>	Soprano
Clotilde, confidante of Norma	<i>Etela Piha</i>	Mezzo
Conductor	<i>Richard Bonyng</i>	
Director	<i>Sandro Sequi</i>	

**Synopsis**

Location: Gaul around 50BC during the Roman Occupation

ACT 1 SCENE 1 a Druid forest at night – Gaulish druids and warriors led by Oroveso the chief Druid process to the sacred oak Irminsul. They hope the Druidess Norma will signal a revolt against the Romans. Pollione enters with his centurion Flavio. Pollione’s love for Norma has been overshadowed by his new passion for Adalgisa, an acolyte in the Druid temple. Despite an ominous dream he’s determined to take her to Rome as his wife.



Summoned by a gong, the Gauls reassemble. Norma is angered by their impatience, as all will be lost if they strike too soon. Norma invokes the moon ('Casta diva'), while priestesses gather sacred mistletoe. In reality she still longs to win back Pollione’s love. Left alone, Adalgisa prays for relief from the emotions that torment her. When Pollione appears, he urges her to abandon the cruel gods of the North, and she agrees to elope the following night.

ACT 1 SCENE 2 Norma's dwelling – Knowing that Pollione has been recalled to Rome, Norma is troubled by the sight of the children she has secretly borne him. Adalgisa comes to seek Norma's guidance about her own love affair. Norma, oblivious of the object of Adalgisa's passion, is willing to release Adalgisa from her vows. When Pollione appears, the truth is clear. Adalgisa is appalled to learn that he's Norma's seducer, and swears that she'd rather die than let him abandon Norma. As they argue, the temple gong sounds and Pollione learns that he's in danger.

[Interval]

ACT 2 SCENE 1 Norma's dwelling – Norma, dagger in hand, watches over her sleeping children. Wouldn't it be better to kill them than have them carried off to Rome as slaves? As she must die to atone for her guilt, she solemnly entrusts her children to Adalgisa. During a long emotional dialogue Norma is persuaded that all may yet be well: Adalgisa vows to stop loving Pollione, and to bring him back to Norma.

ACT 2 SCENE 2 a desolate spot near the Druid forest – While eagerly awaiting Pollione's departure, the Gauls are dismayed to hear from Oroveso that an even harsher Proconsul has been appointed as his successor: they must be patient a bit longer.

ACT 2 SCENE 3 the temple of Irminsul – Hearing that Adalgisa's mission to Pollione has been unsuccessful, Norma strikes the sacred shield to summon the Gauls: the time to destroy the Romans has now arrived. All they still need is a human sacrifice. Pollione is reported captured, while sacrilegiously breaking into the virgins' temple enclosure. Norma insists that she is left alone to question him, but unafraid of death Pollione refuses to renounce Adalgisa.

Norma calls back the Gauls and orders a pyre to be prepared, revealing that she herself is the sacrificial victim. Her nobility revives Pollione's love, but Oroveso is deeply ashamed. Only Norma's most eloquent prayers can persuade him to accept guardianship of her children. She's stripped of her sacred insignia, anathematized, and led veiled with Pollione into the flames.



### Operatic Context

Of all Bellini's operas *Norma* has been least affected by changing fashion. Richard Wagner – agreeing with librettist Romani – described it as 'indisputably Bellini's most successful composition'. Bellini who was now at the height of his powers and self-confidence was exacting in his libretto demands, and many sections were repeatedly rewritten before they satisfied him. The role of Norma was created for the celebrated soprano Giuditta Pasta. Although she initially felt that 'Casta diva' was ill suited to her voice, her performance ensured that this became one of the highlights of the score.

*Norma* enjoyed a less immediate success than most of his operas. After an initial 'fiasco' it received 34 performances during its opening season, and had conquered the whole of Europe within a few years. Although it now enjoys a reputation as one of the most demanding in the repertoire, it held a central position in popular music making during the 19th Century. For example Glinka witnessed an 1845 performance by a local children's theatre in southern Spain. Around the same time Dickens heard an act of this opera performed at a local theatre in Carrara, with a chorus provided by labourers from the nearby marble quarries.

Dissonant tensions set up between an impassive harmony of three or four basic chords and singing voices which soar above them give Bellini's music its weight of expressiveness. Amid all the more obvious contemporary excitements of musical Romanticism, Bellini asserted his belief that the true magic of opera depended on a kind of incantation, in which dramatic poetry and song are perfectly fused. In his mature works the melody is exquisitely sculpted around the words, with crucial phrases highlighted in a variety of ways.

### Vincenzo Bellini

Bellini is one of the four great figures of Italian Romantic opera, whose work remains fundamental to the repertoire of most international opera houses. Less versatile during his short life than Rossini, Donizetti or Verdi, he initially produced a group of operas that established a distinctively Romantic musical language in Italy. In his masterpieces of the early 1830s he brought the art of *bel canto* to its apogee.

Bellini originally studied with his father and grandfather, who were professional musicians in his native Sicily. In 1819 he enrolled as a Conservatory pupil in Naples. As well as studying Haydn, Mozart and Neapolitan masters, his teacher Zingarelli shrewdly encouraged him to refine his skills as a melodist (while he 'protected' all his students from Rossini whose music dominated the contemporary repertoire).

<i>Selected Operas</i>	<i>Libretto</i>	<i>Première</i>
Il pirata	Felice Romani	La Scala, Milan 1827
I Capuleti e I Montecchi	Felice Romani	La Fenice, Venice 1830
La sonnambula	Felice Romani	Teatro Carcano, Milan 1831
Norma	Felice Romani	La Scala, Milan 1831
Beatrice di Tenda	Felice Romani	La Fenice, Venice 1833
I puritani	Carlo Pepoli	Théâtre-Italien, Paris 1835

Bellini's operatic début in this conservatory theatre was so successful that he was commissioned to compose a full length piece for the prestigious local Teatro San Carlo. As the impresario Barbaja also helped to run La Scala, Bellini's Neapolitan success next led to an invitation to compose *Il pirata* his next opera in Milan. This introduced him to the librettist Romani, the most admired theatre poet of the age: their partnership was to prove one of the most successful in operatic history. Romani wrote libretti for every opera that Bellini subsequently composed in Italy, including five acclaimed triumphs. Full-blooded Romanticism encompassed plots that were bizarre, violent, and sentimentally tender, as well as the Classical tragedy of *Norma*.

Until early 1833 Bellini enjoyed a prodigiously successful career. By now his fame had spread across Europe and reached America. From an early date he demanded high fees because he wanted more independence than most of his predecessors. He liked to work slowly, and was reluctant to accept the official posts they had usually filled. His Romani partnership broke down when *Beatrice* was less successful, and his personal life was also in turmoil. When a longstanding love affair with Giuditta Turina was discovered by her husband, a London invitation was providential. After helping to produce three of his opera there, he lingered in Paris a traditional Mecca for Italian composers.

He found it extremely stimulating to compose *I puritani* in Paris. During its composition he was often with Rossini, who remained the presiding genius of Parisian opera. Bellini benefited much from the older composer's advice. Hoping to revive his Romani partnership, it is however indubitably true that an untimely and wretched death prevented his imminent return to Italy.

### La Prima Donna

Norma has proved one of the most alluring roles in the soprano repertoire. In the nineteenth century it was usually given to agile sopranos such as Malibran and Patti, whereas more dramatic singers were preferred later on. Although Norma's dramatic character demands such a singer, coloratura and secure high notes are also necessary. This character was practically reinvented by Maria Callas in the mid 20th Century. More recently the role has been taken on by lyrical sopranos such as Joan Sutherland, Montserrat Caballé and Renata Scottò. Sutherland went on to sing this part 111 times, a feat only surpassed by her 221 appearances in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.



Adelina Patti (1843-1919)

### Selected Musical Biographies

NORMA: JOAN SUTHERLAND DBE was born in Sydney in 1926. She made her début with the Covent Garden Company in 1952. Richard Bonyngé, who became her husband, directed her towards the coloratura repertoire and their enduringly successful partnership. In 1959 she triumphed in a pivotal production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The following year her *La Stupenda* nickname was bestowed by an Italian audience, after a spellbinding performance of Handel's *Alcina* at La Fenice in Venice. Subsequent title roles included Bellini's *La sonnambula* and Verdi's *La traviata*. She died in 2010.

CONDUCTOR: Richard Bonyngé (born 1930) is the widowed Australian husband of Joan Sutherland. His career was dominated by engagements in which he conducted his wife, often alongside other stars such as Pavarotti, Caballé and Marilyn Horne. He's also specialised as a ballet conductor.