

The Contribution by Beverly Sills to the 'Bel Canto' Revival

by David J. Samuels

With the virtual retirement from the operatic stage of the American soprano Beverly Sills (she is now administrative director of her home company, the New York City Opera) I feel it is an appropriate time to assess her contribution to the resurgence of interest in the nineteenth century Italian 'bel canto' opera repertoire in general and that of Donizetti in particular.

The primary gauge of an artist's involvement with a particular period, style or composer is the extent of roles and performances undertaken both on stage and in the recording studio. Of the sixty or so roles Sills has sung on stage over one quarter are from the 'bel canto' school - the ratio is all the more marked when one considers the number of appearances in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Roberto Devereux*, *La Fille du Régiment* and *Don Pasquale*, Bellini's *Norma* and *I puritani* and Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *L'Assedio di Corinto*.

Of the score of complete works Sills has commercially recorded, nine of the foregoing (only *La Fille* surprisingly did not reach the studios - being for some reason or other confined to barracks?) plus *I Capuletti ed I Montecchi* and if one is permitted to include *Rigoletto* and *Traviata* in this category, demonstrate, altogether, a substantial contribution to the revival of the 'bel canto' era. Private recordings of all the foregoing also include an outstanding *Lucrezia Borgia* which ranks alongside those portrayals by Caballé and Sutherland.

This proportionate interest is no less diminished when one considers her recital discs. These include "Favourite Duets with Tenors" (where two of the four duets are from *Lucia* and *Bolena*), "The Mad Scenes" (three of the four from *Lucia*, *Bolena* and *Puritani*), *The Three Queens*", *Opera Arias*" (Bellini, Rossini and Verdi) "New Age of Bel Canto" and her first such disc issued in 1968 "Bellini and Donizetti Heroines" whose success speaks for itself. To quote from Sills autobiography 'Bubbles' "My second trip to Vienna was to record an album for ABC of Donizetti and Bellini arias. I had stalled ABC in 1967 when they first made the offer because I wanted to ask my friend Roger Hall, then head of artists and repertoire at RCA if he was interested in my

recording those arias for him. "What street does your mother live on?" Roger asked. "59th Street" I said. "Well" Roger said "it'll sell three records on 59th. Street and your mother will buy them all." Roger! I said "one day your going to have to eat that record. I should have insisted on it - the recording has sold more than 100,000 copies."

Such involvement is also all the more notable when one considers this coloratura soprano's extensive interest in opera from Handel (her major breakthrough was as *Cleopatra* in *Julius Caesar* in 1966) through Mozart, the Italians (of course), the French school of Meyerbeer, Offenbach, Charpentier and Massenet to Menotti (she premiered *La Loca* in 1979).

The staging of the trilogy of Donizetti's *Queens* (*Roberto Devereux*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Anna Bolena*) produced what Sills considers to be her greatest achievement in the former as *Elizabeth I*; (that along with *Manon*, she also reckons to be her most satisfying roles).

That such a prominent artist (along with Callas, Caballé, Sutherland, Bonyngé, Horne and others) has had such a pronounced influence on the 'bel canto' revival should ensure that the music of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini etc., will retain the prominence in the musical and artistic world it so richly deserves.

While so many of Sills stage and studio performances will forever be available to us - thanks to the efforts of that other great 19th century 'composer', Edison, and his successors - it must be with some regret that this legacy includes little, if any, of the true 'bel canto' style of singing. Such a voice with its tessitura and ability for 'imbellimenti' could have, I am sure equalled, at least, the marvellous outpourings of the art's exponents of its day: Malibran, Grisi, Pasta etc. etc. Perhaps one is being unreasonable to have expected even more from her; but is it really conceivable that the 'bel canto' revival will not continue its natural course without greater efforts being made to compliment the beautiful music of this past age with the remarkable style of singing which was once equally popular. Just how deeply Beverly Sill's continued commitment to this period's music is, is to be fair, probably too early to judge - the current season at The New York City Opera is devoted substantially to early Verdi and its original policy to promote contemporary works by American composers is being revived.

Nevertheless, it is without doubt that we owe an immense debt to Beverly Sills for her efforts in this field up till now and I, for one, certainly hope that beautiful singing of the type with which we have become so familiar will continue to be heard from that stage at Lincoln Center. David Samuels (C) 1980