

If we can accept, condone, and enjoy both a mezzo and a soprano CARMEN; both a mezzo and a soprano Rosina; why is there such an issue over both a lyric and a high soprano ("coloratura") version of LUCIA? To accept this new lyrical approach to LUCIA one should not have to downgrade the traditional, florid version. Both versions should be accepted and used depending on the singers used in a particular performance -- not one version judged as being better or more accurate than the other. If conductors like Muti and Lopez prefer to perform "bel canto" scores note-by-note as written, this intention is noteworthy but not necessarily what the composer expected. Traditional, coloratura performances of LUCIA should not be condemned since these are probably more accurate according to the idiomatic style of the so-called "bel canto" era.

The voice reigned supreme in this period of opera, even above drama and music. A character's music and mood had to be moulded around the vocal talents of the singer for whom the role was written. Considering that competition and vanity prevailed among these singers, this music was sometimes quite showy. A performing "licenza" was also the rule.

Evidence of letters written to, from, and between singers and composers of this period show that arias were being transposed, embellished, and even interpolated into other operas. Case in point: Persiani (with Donizetti's approval) had interpolated Rosmonda's 'Perche non ho' into french performances of LUCIA. She made key changes in this music and added the long and egotistical cadenza to the mad scene. Donizetti, himself, composed the showy aria 'O luce di quest' anima for her performance of LINDA.

Often hurriedly composed to meet a commissioned deadline, these scores were not the sacred manuscripts they seem to be now. They were often being revised even years after their premiere. Vocal changes were expected and adjusted to by the composer. Bellini wrote both a soprano and a mezzo version of PURITANI; it took changes and persuasion to satisfy Pasta with Norma's great aria 'Casta diva'. Granted changes were not always to the composer's liking; Rossini, tired of singers' embellishing his music to unrecognizable lengths, wrote out all coloratura in his later opera.

Embellishing was, is, and should be done as an individual's interpretation of a role. Donizetti would certainly want his opera performed to the best ability of the engaged

singer. If this means altering or adding a few notes to bring life to an otherwise dull, cardboard character, then why not? There is little need to alter a flowing cavatina, but there's nothing wrong with vocalising a repeat of a cabaletta, to add variety, since the melody has already been introduced in the first verse. This should be done with good musical taste, done within the character's mood, and done to emphasize drama or emotion. There is also nothing with an interpolated, candential top note in alt. to cap an aria or ensemble (always providing it is well sung). These top notes are not egotistical but should be added to emphasize a climactic moment. In order to add these notes though, the music should not be transposed; this is probably why Persiani made some key changes in LUCIA.

Complaints concerning these key changes in LUCIA are valid. Yet nothing was heard when: 1) Tebaldi transposed Sempre libera lower. 2) Callas recorded 'Je suis Titania' sans written Eb in alt. 3) Caballe recorded 'Ah! non giunge' omitting the written Eb's in alt. 4) and countless tenors have transposed 'Che gelida manina' to a lower key.

Original keys are preferable; a far worse crime, however, lies in making cuts in a score. One would not think of cutting a Puccini score. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Pacini, Mercadante, etc. should be shown the same respect. Quality of principle should not be sacrificed for brevity of time.

While there are some now who feel "bel canto" scores should be done note-for-note "as the composer intended", there are still some of us who appreciate and prefer those little vocal feats of added fioratura that make an ordinary performance special. Isn't that what "Bel Canto" is all about??.



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