

Carmelo Neri *Lettere di Vincenzo Bellini (1819-1835); Prefazione di Domenico Danzuso*. Publicicula Editrice, Palermo 1991, 451pp.

The hagiographic impulse frequently goes too far, and the adored, instead of being maximised, is minimised. Mercadante, Felice Romani, and yes, Rossini, have all been victims of hagiographers. And then scholarship - the legitimate study of a composer's career - should never be confused with loving irrelevance, pointless minutiae, a list of his foibles, his table manners, toilet training and the like. But where do a composer's letters stand in this? How much are we - to whom they are not addressed - to read into them?

Bellini is a case in point, Carmelo Neri has supplied us with the most engaging compilation imaginable, virtually a printing of every genuine letter available to the assiduous scholar, but do they help us to understand - or even appreciate - this celebrated purveyor of sublime melodies? Indeed, there is an excellent case for examining these letters in a purely therapeutic light. As if a troubled patient was pouring out his torments and bile in a series of letters to his doctor in the hope of a healing touch to the fevered brow. Alas the recipient of most of the letters, Francesco Florimo, is as sick as his patient. What is more, a respectable analyst would have kept these pitiful exchanges to himself. No composer has had his reputation so endangered as poor Bellini by the cherished preservation of his every word, the *douce Bellini*, blond and 'angelic' is completely destroyed by such a betrayal. This compilation is not only comprehensive, it is a devastating account of the envious and vindictive perseveration of an insecure genius, consumed by ambition. It is a volume to be put down in disgust - and then taken up again in absolute fascination.

These letters stretch from 1819, and his Naples studentship, to 1835 and his puzzling death, quite alone, in a forsaken house in the suburbs of Paris. Their sequence is not unfamiliar to psychologists; from dutiful family correspondence to the establishment of major themes in repeated letters to friends - money, *nemici*, status and other *idées fixe*, becoming ever more perseverating and paranoid, huge success merely undermining his fragile security. They are a fugue of poisonous libels against his rivals in the theatre, replete with wishful thinking and unreal aspirations, the whole volume given light relief by oily communications to people in authority, brusque notes to the unfortunate females in his life, and sweet messages to those it was expedient to keep sweet. Other composer's letters are no less relentless and bloody-minded, Verdi's for example, but his correspondence is always redeemed by a ferocious intelligence and a passing warmth of which Bellini was adolescently incapable. In this volume are printed all that Dr Neri has been able to trace and authenticate and he should be congratulated by all those who cherish candour. There are a few very slight factual errors, mostly in the copious notes accompanying each item, but the book is well printed and admirably laid out. Highly recommended for the addicts of deconstruction; read the letters but you are unlikely to find any trace of the author of the irresistible *Pirata*, *Straniera*, *Norma*, *Beatrice* and the like, so much loved and admired. He is elsewhere.

Various authors *Vincenzo Bellini. Critica storia tradizione*. Ed Salvatore Enrico Failla. Giuseppe Maimone, Catania 1991, 295pp.

A magnificently illustrated publication from Bellini's ultra-faithful home town. Much more than "coffee-table" though this might well be the first impression, with fourteen discrete chapters all of very considerable merit and some fascinating appendices of varying usefulness, but imposing statistics. Though the hagiographic impulse is no less in this volume it is mitigated by a certain worm of dispassion, but not consistently.

