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*Bellini: A Word in Season*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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## About this Title

### Source

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By Richard Wagner  
Translated by William Ashton Ellis

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This title contains 861 words.  
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[67]

## Bellini († 1835)

### A Word In Season

BELLINI'S music, i.e. Bellini's music for the voice, has latterly made such a stir and kindled such enthusiasm, even in highly-learned Germany, that the phenomenon itself perhaps is worth a closer scrutiny. That *Bellinian* Song enraptures Italy and France, is natural enough, for in Italy and France men hear with their ears,—whence our phrases such as "ear-tickling" (presumably in contrast to the "eye-ache" caused us by the reading of so many a score of our newer German operas);—but that even the German music-scholar should have taken the spectacles from his fagged-out eyes, and given himself for once to reckless delight in a lovely song, this opens us a deeper glimpse into the inner chamber of his heart,—and there we spy an ardent longing for a full and deep-drawn breath, to ease his being at one stroke, and throw off all the fumes of prejudice and pedantry which so long have forced him to be a German music-scholar; to become a Man instead at last, glad, free, and gifted with every glorious organ for perceiving beauty, no matter the form in which it shews itself.

How little we are really convinced by our pack of rules and prejudices! How often must it have happened that, after being transported by a French or Italian opera at the theatre, upon coming out we have scouted our emotion with a pitying jest, and, arrived safe home again, have read ourselves a lecture on the danger of giving way to transports. [68] Let us drop for once the jest, let us spare ourselves for once the sermon, and ponder what it was that so enchanted us; we then shall find, especially with *Bellini*, that it was the limpid Melody, the simple, noble, beauteous Song. To confess this and believe in it, is surely not a sin; 'twere no sin, perchance, if before we fell asleep we breathed a prayer that Heaven would one day give German composers such melodies and such a mode of handling Song.

Song, Song, and a third time Song, ye Germans! For Song is once for all the speech wherein Man should musically express himself; and if this language is not made and kept as self-dependent as any other cultivated Speech, then nobody will understand you. The rest of the matter, what is bad in Bellini, any of your village schoolmasters could better; we admit it. To make merry over these defects, is quite beside the question: had Bellini taken lessons from a German village-schoolmaster, presumably he would have learnt to do better; but that he perhaps would have unlearned his Song into the bargain, is certainly to be very much feared.

Let us therefore leave to this lucky Bellini the cut of his pieces, habitual with all the Italians, his crescendos, tutti and cadenzas that regularly succeed the theme, and all those other mannerisms which so disturb our spleen; they are the stable forms than which the Italians know no other, and by no means so dreadful in many respects. If we would only consider the boundless disorder, the jumble of forms, periods and modulations, of many a modern German opera-composer, distracting our enjoyment of the single beauties strewn between, we often might heartily wish this frayed-out tangle put in order by that stable Italian form. As a matter of fact the instantaneous apprehension of a whole dramatic passion is made far easier, when with all its allied feelings and emotions that passion is brought by one firm stroke into *one* clear and taking melody, than when it is patched with a hundred tiny commentaries, with this and that harmonic nuance, the interjection [69] of first one instrument and then another, till at last it is doctored out of sight.

How much the Italians are helped by their form and manner, especially with certain operatic subjects,—whatever that form's onesidedness and tawdriness in degeneration,—of this Bellini affords a proof in his *Norma*, beyond dispute his most successful composition. Here, where the poem itself soars up to the tragic height of the ancient Greeks, this form,

pronouncedly ennobled by Bellini, does but exalt the solemn, grandiose character of the whole; all the passions which his Song so notably transfigures, thereby obtain a majestic background, on which they hover not in vaguest outlines, but shape themselves to one vast and lucid picture, involuntarily recalling the creations of Gluck and Spontini.

Accepted with this free, untroubled self-abandonment, *Bellini's* operas have found applause in Italy, in France and Germany; why should they not find the like in Lithuania? (1)

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## Notes

### Note 1 on page 6

For his benefit at the Riga theatre (Dec. 1837) the author had chosen the production of *Norma*; the above article was intended as its avant-courière.—Tr.



[399]

## Summary

"Ear-tickling" v. "eye-ache". Music-scholars should remove their spectacles, and listen for once; give up their sermonising and learn the lesson of a noble melody. Dramatic passion and its expression: *Norma* and Greek Tragedy (69).