

During this essay, I will analyse I Capuleti e I Montecchi, an opera by Vincenzo Bellini with a libretto by Felice Romani, explicitly looking at Giulietta's Act 1 aria 'Eccomi in lieta vesta...Oh! Quante volte' in which "Romeo's proposed marriage to Giulietta, which would unite their rival houses, has been rejected, and Giulietta is betrothed to Tybalt. Giulietta is tortured by her love for Romeo and the certainty that responding to his advances will cause her and her family pain and tragedy." [1]

This is a fascinating and thrilling aria that I intend to perform in the future; as such, I am taking the opportunity to analyse the correct approach to such a vocally demanding coloratura piece. Only a genuinely expressive bel canto technique could do Vincenzo Bellini's soprano aria justice. I wish to explore what areas of the bel canto technique are most pertinent for a convincing portrayal of Giulietta. Bel Canto's literal translation is 'beautiful singing'; the true meaning, however, is much more perplexing. There are many varying depictions, but they all have the common thread: bel canto is singing with a smooth, melodious legato line with sufficient breath control. Many other features, such as rubato, portamento, word painting and ornamentations, have been associated with bel canto singing. "Bellini took the bel canto tradition, with its demands for technical prowess and its vertiginous coloratura, and placed it at the service of psychology, with deadly accurate, often unnerving results." [2] A true genius whose intricate techniques are evident in this piece.

The intro to this aria has many descending passages in the right hand, while the left-hand plays a series of repetitive chord progressions. As though the right hand indicates Giulietta's spiralling mental state, as she battles with the idea of being forced into a forsaken marriage with Tebaldo whilst desiring to be with Romeo, juxtaposed to the left hand desperately trying to grasp onto some stability, indicating Giulietta's attempts of self-calming, ultimately futile. The added element of fermatas in the right hand indicates the despairing sighs of Giulietta's cries. Bellini is notorious for writing "proto-feminist operas where the emotional weight of the bulk of the opera falls on a central female figure, whose psychological destruction is brought about by weak, unstable, or brutal men," [3] which can be explicitly observed during this instrumental introduction.

¹ Larsen, R. L. (2004) *Arias for soprano volume 2*, New York, G. Schirmer, Inc

² Ashley, T, 2001, 'Opera Must Make You Weep and Die', viewed 2nd December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/nov/02/arts.highereducation>

³ Ashley, T, 2001, 'Opera Must Make You Weep and Die', viewed 2nd December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/nov/02/arts.highereducation>



Figure 1 Eccomi in lieta vesta...Oh! Quante volte' from I Capuleti e I Montecchi

Bellini's first indication of bel canto technique in this piece arrives immediately, as Giulietta's first note of the recitative has a 'lunga' (an example of rubato) over it, meaning long pause and is often sung with a considerable swell from *p* to *mp* with a quick decrescendo back to *p*. This is over the words "eccomi/here I am" on the mediant of the C minor scale followed by three subtonics', broken up by one semiquaver rest, all the while being completely unaccompanied. The word painting and bel canto singing working in tandem in the entry bar of the singer is astonishing. The unaccompanied element gives a feeling of complete isolation as she is trapped in agony and has no sympathy around her. The lunga on 'eccomi' indicates hesitation and anxiety, with the rest being her sighs of hopelessness. This is obvious as a trained coloratura soprano would not need to breathe so soon in a phrase; Bellini has done this for optimal psychological effect.



Figure 2 Eccomi in lieta vesta...Oh! Quante volte' from I Capuleti e I Montecchi

The rest of the phrase continues unaccompanied with the following words' Eccomi in lieta vesta... Eccomi adorna... come vittima all'ara/ Here I am in happy dress... here I am adorned... as a victim of the altar'. There is a very uneven rhythm in this section with semiquaver rests and appoggiaturas, further breaking up the rhythm, symbolising the sorrowful confusion of her dismal fate, as she likens her wedding day to a funeral and thinks of herself as a victim, having to pay for the crimes of the weak men in her life. This is wholly juxtaposed with how most women view their wedding days. Most dream about the perfect wedding and adorning themselves in a beautiful white gown, but how can Giulietta be excited about this wedding when it means being parted from her true love Romeo forever?



Figure 3 Eccomi in lieta vesta...Oh! Quante volte' from I Capuleti e I Montecchi

The aria begins with a piano interlude modulating the key from C minor to G minor with an 'Andante sostenuto/ slower tempo' with repetitive triplets gradually changing the dynamic from p to pp before Giulietta's vocal entrance. These features combined create the transition from bewilderment to despondency. The descending scale represents Giulietta's heart sinking in her chest. The fermata rest signifies how she has previously worked herself up to peak exhaustion with her denial in the recitative to the point where she is left with nothing but silence and contemplation of being forced to accept her fate; this is supported by the change in dynamics becoming even more quiet and solemn combined with longer notes values, giving more weight to each thought. Bellini then goes on to expertly use word painting and strategic rests to portray Giulietta's sobbing; there is a descending scale on the word *piangendo* (tears), mimicking the tears falling from her cheeks and the rests in-between 'chiedo(beg)' and *ciel*(heaven) further mimic sobbing. [4]

⁴ Gray, A, 2016, *Re-discovering the art of bel canto*, viewed 4th December 2022, <https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1360&context=honors>



Figure 4 Eccomi in lieta veta...Oh! Quante volte' from I Capuleti e I Montecchi

The final page of the aria represents authentic bel canto singing. Once again, the voice is wholly exposed, having no accompaniment behind it. "No other composer than Bellini so relentlessly equates emotional probing with the naked exposure of the human voice, frequently underpinned by the sparest of accompaniments" [5] Giuletta sings an extended legato cadenza with 'a piacere' marking meaning at pleasure, allowing the singer to take liberties with both the dynamics and the tempo at reason. This cadenza is particularly challenging as it utilises so much of the singer's passaggio in such a fleeting time, forcing the singer to have a clear, balanced and supported timbre throughout the phrase. Bel canto must always remain smooth and melodious. Furthermore, the appearance of a fermata over 'tuo' followed by a glissando between a perfect cadenza gives a powerful ultimate ending whilst still having a very sombre feel, evoking the sentiment that Giuletta's fate is now sealed and that she may never be happy again.

⁵ Ashley, T, 2001, 'Opera Must Make You Weep and Die', viewed 2nd December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/nov/02/arts.highereducation>



Figure 5 Ecce mi in lieta veta...Oh! Quante volte' from I Capuleti e I Montecchi

In conclusion, Bellini's use of the bel canto tradition is formidable. It is no wonder that almost two hundred years on, this piece is still a spectacle in many opera houses worldwide. Bellini will always be considered one of the greatest geniuses of the bel canto era for his meticulous musical ear and astounding ability to convey an arrange of emotions through intricate bel canto techniques. 'Ecce mi in lieta veta...Oh! Quante volte' has been beneficial to analyse as it has allowed me to identify what sections of the bel canto tradition my young voice currently lacks and what areas I would need to improve before attempting this beautiful aria. For instance, I struggle to have a clear, balanced tone over my passaggio, so the final cadenza would be challenging for diction purposes. However, I am eager to improve and perform this aria in the future.

Bibliography:

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