

# **“Casta Diva” from Bellini's “Norma”--Rosa Ponselle; accompanied by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Giulio Setti (December 31, 1928 and January 30, 1929)**

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Essay by Judy Tsou (guest post)\*



*Rosa Ponselle*

“Casta Diva” is the most famous aria of Vincenzo Bellini’s “Norma” (1831). It is sung by the title character, a Druidess or priestess of the Gauls, in the first act. The opera takes place in Gaul between 100 and 50 BCE when the Romans were occupiers. The Gauls want Norma to declare war on the Romans, who have been oppressing them. Norma is hesitant to do so because she is secretly in love with Pollione, the Roman proconsul, and with whom she has borne two children. She assuages the people’s anger and convinces them that this is not the right time to revolt. She asserts that the Romans will eventually fall by their own doing, and the Gauls do not need to rise up now. It is at this point that Norma sings “Casta Diva,” a prayer to the moon goddess for peace, and eventually, conquering the Romans. When things between her and Pollione go sour, Norma tries to kill their children but ultimately cannot bring herself to do so. Eventually, she confesses her relationship with Pollione and sacrifices herself on the funeral pyre of her lover.

“Norma” was the first of two operas commissioned in 1830 for which Bellini was paid an unprecedented 12,000 lire. “Norma” premiered on December 26, 1831 at La Scala, and the second opera, “Beatrice di Tenda,” premiered in 1833, but in Venice (La Fenice). Bellini collaborated with his long-time librettist and famous poet, Felice Romani, for “Norma.” Romani based his story on Alexandre Soumet’s verse tragedy “Norma ossia L’infanticidio” (“Norma, or The Infanticide”). However, he used a variety of sources as well, drawing on Étienne de Jouy’s libretto for “La Vestale” (Gaspard Spontini), François-René de Chateaubriand’s novel “Les

Martyrs,” and Romani’s own earlier libretti “Medea in Corinto” (for Giovanni Simone Mayr) and “La sacerdotessa d’Irmisul” (for Giovanni Pacini). Bellini was hands-on in Romani’s creative process and contributed much to the shape of the libretto. He also made many alterations during Romani’s writing of the libretto; the text of “Diva Casta” alone went through eight revisions.

The role of Norma is one of the most taxing and wide-ranging parts in the repertory of *bel canto* opera. The role was written for the famed soprano Giuditta Pasta, who reportedly balked at the difficulty of “Casta Diva.” Bellini’s music is typified by melodic and rhythmic symmetry, and “Casta Diva” is no exception. This aria, as in the rest of the opera, is full of long melodic lines and difficult ornamentation (roulades and melismas). The melody systematically rises and climaxes at the end--a new technique in 1831. In other words, the aria is both technically difficult and unconventional, making it doubly hard to sing.

Only the best sopranos can master the role. Rosa Ponselle was one of those sopranos. She sang her first Norma at the Metropolitan Opera (New York) on November 16, 1927 under the baton of Tullio Serafin. Her “Casta Diva” was met with long thunderous applause from the audience. Contemporary reviews universally praised Ponselle for her technique, interpretation, and the quality of her voice. James Drake’s chapter on Ponselle said that Ponselle’s “depiction of the tragic Druid priestess, both in the opera house and on recordings, set a standard by which all subsequent Normas have been measured. Few have even come close to her.” She reprised the role many times, and Norma became her most celebrated portrayal. In addition to the Metropolitan Opera, she debuted with “Norma” at the Covent Garden (London) in 1929.

Ponselle was born Rosa Melba Ponzillo in Meriden, Connecticut, on January 22, 1897 of immigrant Neapolitan parents. She had little formal instruction in voice. She first studied with her mother and then with a local teacher, Anna Ryan. She started her singing career in film theaters and vaudeville with her sister, Carmella, where she gained a lot of knowledge and experience. Later, at the Metropolitan Opera, famed tenor Enrico Caruso taught and mentored her. William Thorner, who was the sisters’ manager, introduced Rosa to Caruso and Giulio Gatti-Cassaza, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. This led to her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1918, at age 21. Her debut role was Leonora in Giuseppe Verdi’s “La Forza del Destino,” opposite Enrico Caruso’s Don Alvaro. This was her first public opera performance, and it was a big success despite her ample nervousness. She performed for 19 more seasons at the Metropolitan Opera, singing 22 roles. She ended her career at the Metropolitan Opera with the role of “Carmen” in 1937, garnering mixed reviews. In addition to “Norma,” she also sang many roles at the Covent Garden, including Violetta (“La Traviata”), Leonora (“La Forza del Destino”), and the title role of Romano Romani’s “Fedra.” Even though she sang many roles in different styles, she never sang Puccini or Wagner, which she later regretted.

The “New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians” says that:

Ponselle’s voice is generally regarded as one of the most beautiful of the century. She was universally lauded for opulence of tone, evenness of scale, breadth of range, perfection of technique and communicative warmth. Many of these attributes are convincingly documented on recordings. In 1954, she made a few private song

recordings, later released commercially, revealing a still opulent voice of darkened timbre and more limited range.

After her retirement from the stage, Ponselle became the opera director at the Baltimore Opera Company. She remained in Baltimore the rest of her life and died there on May 25, 1981.

This Registry recording was made on December 31, 1928 and January 30, 1929 for the Victor Label (12-inch double-faced Red Seal: Matrix CVE 49031, take 3 and CVE 49032, take 2. Victor Cat: 8125 A/B), a year after her first Norma role with The Metropolitan Opera. She also recorded the aria for the Columbia label almost ten years earlier, on December 10, 1919 (Columbia 49720).

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.