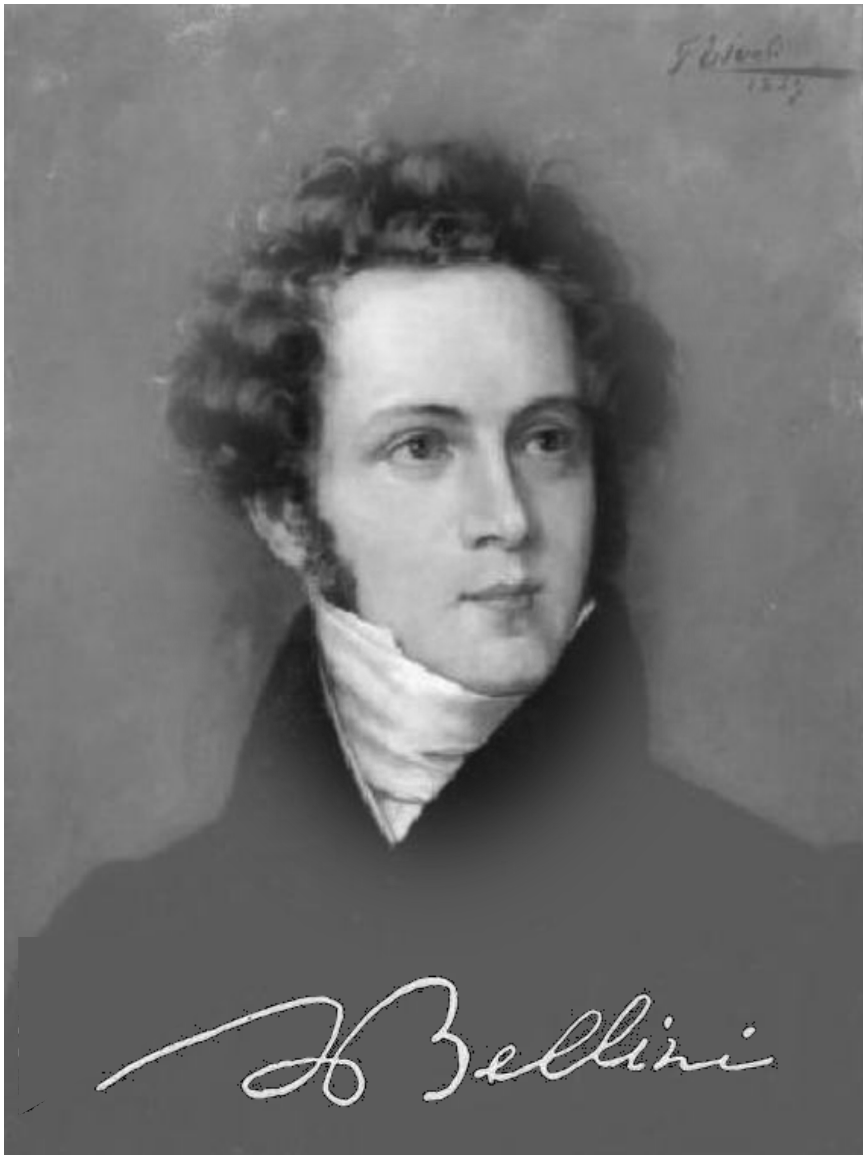


PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



6. NOT SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO

24 October, 2023

6. NOT SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO

VINCENZO BELLINI (1801–35) wrote *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* (The Capulets and the Montagues), his version of the *Romeo and Juliet* story, in a mere seven weeks in 1830, picking up a commission for the Venice Carnival that another composer had been unable to take on; it was one of his greatest successes. As time was short, he used a libretto by **Felice Romani** that had already been set by yet another composer, compressing it still further to save time. Other than the final scene, the opera is remarkably different from the Shakespeare version: it has only five characters; it is set entirely indoors; the content of Shakespeare's first three acts is either omitted or assumed as back-story; and it contains almost no action.

Despite the high quality of Bellini's music, *I Capuleti* pretty much dropped out of the repertoire for 100 years; it is not difficult to see that a claustrophobic opera with little to offer in the way of action or spectacle would not be to the taste of audiences craving grand opera or *verismo*. And it has a mezzo-soprano hero to boot! Revivals have been more frequent in the last 50 years, yet directors still have to come to terms with its inherent problems. Most do so by grafting on Shakespearean action or scenic effects. But **Christof Loy**, the director of the 2015 Zurich production we are going to sample today, does just the opposite, turning these apparent weaknesses into strengths.

Bellini: *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*. Zurich 2015 (DVD).

Olga Kulchynska (Giulietta), Joyce DiDonato (Romeo), Benjamin Bernheim (Tebaldo), Roberto Lorenzi (Lorenzo), Alexei Botnarciuk (Capellio), Giorgij Puchalski (the companion); Fabio Luisi (c), Christof Loy (d)

A. PRELUDES

We examine some of the differences between Bellini's opera and the familiar Shakespeare story, and then watch how director **Christof Loy** sets up his vision of the piece by combining time periods in various rooms of a modern house on a rotating stage.

Overture and part of opening chorus (1)

B. SCENAS

[*The Capulet retainers have been summoned to Capellio's house. **Tebaldo** tells them that their enemies, the Montagues, have regrouped under a fearsome leader, **Romeo**, who has already killed Capellio's son. But if Tebaldo can marry Giulietta, he will take his place as the son of the family and exact vengeance on Romeo. **Capellio** approves.*] None of them have actually seen Romeo, however, and do not realize he is so young. So when a young man appears as a messenger, they assume he is merely a page. His message is one of peace, if Romeo can marry Giulietta himself. When Capellio refuses, he threatens bloodshed.

3. Scena and Aria (Romeo)

Giulietta is being prepared for her marriage to Tebaldo that evening. She describes herself "adorned like a victim for the altar," and longs for Romeo, singing an aria to him on the night air.

4. Cavatina (Giulietta)

Romeo now appears, smuggled in by **Lorenzo** (who in this version is the family doctor and not a priest). He urges Giulietta to flee with him, but she is torn, saying that the house has been her entire world up to now, and she also owes duty to her father. (Christof Loy's theory about the father-daughter relationship is key to his concept.)

5. Scena and Duet (Romeo, Giulietta)

[*Chorus: the Capulet retainers assemble for the wedding festivities that evening.*]

C. FINALES

Lorenzo tries to persuade Romeo to leave, but he is still trying to persuade Giulietta to come with him. When Capellio and Tebaldo catch them together, he abandons the messenger disguise and reveals himself as Romeo; Bellini expands the moment of tension that results into a slow quintet. Voices are heard, and Romeo's followers break into the house; the curtain falls just before fighting breaks out.

7. Quintet and Finale primo

[*The two sides do fight, but offstage during the intermission, and none of the principal characters is hurt. But Giulietta still has to marry Tebaldo, so Lorenzo gives her the potion at the start of **Act Two**. While it is taking effect, she has a long farewell scene with her father; but he thinks she is just playacting, so he throws her onto her bed and locks the door. We then get a scene between Romeo and Tebaldo. They look as though they are going to fight, but just as they raise their weapons the chorus is heard offstage lamenting Giulietta's death. The tomb scene follows immediately, again after a long orchestral introduction. Romeo arrives with a chorus of his supporters, but he sends them away to be alone with Giulietta's body.*] Thinking her dead, he sings a beautiful farewell to her, then takes poison. But she wakes, and the rest of the drama plays out in a very free mixture of recitative, anguished action music, and short passages of heartbreaking *arioso*. In this production, however, the ending is *not* as one might have expected.

10. Duet (Romeo, Giulietta) and Finale ultimo

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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