



## ***La solita forma*: Examining the Musical and Dramatic Structure of Bel Canto Arias**

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Historically, classical voice pedagogy has been rooted in the principles of bel canto technique. As teachers and performers of bel canto repertoire, in addition to expressivity or dramatic interpretation of a song, aria or operatic role, we focus on the singing technique itself. However, we often overlook the critical aspect of the musical and dramatic structure of the repertoire which demanded this technique. This article will explore the musico-dramatic form which embodied the principles of bel canto style: *la solita forma*.

In Italian opera of the *primo ottocento*, one encounters arias written in a variety of musical forms. One common form begins with a recitative followed by two arias (the first slower, and the second faster) which are separated by a bridge section. This aria form may be referred to as the double aria, *cavatina/cabaletta*, *scena ed aria* or an aria in *la solita forma*.

The aria in *la solita forma* showcases the two most important aspects of *bel canto* vocalism, what Richard Miller called, “The Two Poles of Bel Canto”: *sostenuto* and *agility*.<sup>1</sup> In the *adagio* (or first aria) the singer displays beauty of tone via long, legato lines in a slower tempo. Then, in the *cabaletta* she presents dazzling feats of agility via *coloratura* passages in a faster tempo. An aria in *la solita forma* is constructed to display these two indispensable and inextricable facets of bel canto singing.

The term *la solita forma* was coined by Abramo Basevi (1818-1885), a composer and one of Verdi’s early biographers to describe “the usual way” or normative approach to organizing musical and dramatic materials in many Italian operatic arias and other kinds of numbers. He also identified structural approaches that were outside the normative process which he called *insolita forma*. The musicologist Harold Powers re-introduced these terms in his article, “La solita forma” and “The Uses of Convention.”<sup>2</sup> Other kinds of musical numbers that could be structured using *la solita forma* include the *introduzione* (the first scene of an opera), the grand duet, and the internal finale (a finale that ends an act, but not an opera).

An aria in *la solita forma* has four parts: The first is called the *scena*, the recitative section that sets up the given circumstances of a scene, unfolds the plot, or presents a dramatic conflict. The *scena* must also provide dramatic justification for the main character to sing the next section, the *adagio*. A composer might indicate this section as the *cavatina*, *cantabile*, *larghetto* or another term. However, Harold Powers adopts *adagio* as a generic term clarifying that this second section, however the composer labels it, expresses a shift from a dramatic focus to a musical one.<sup>3</sup> This musical focus is epitomized by the singer’s display of beauty of tone and legato in a slower tempo. Here, the drama pauses while the music takes prominence. Once the

*adagio* is complete, the *tempo di mezzo* or “middle movement” begins. This third section is signaled by a dramatic interruption and new information coming to light. As in the *scena*, this information motivates the main character to another moment of reflection in the final section, the *cabaletta*. This time, rather than *sostenuto*, the singer displays her agility by singing coloratura passages in a relatively fast tempo. Like in the *adagio*, the drama comes to a halt and the music takes prominence.

The alternation of dramatic and musical emphases is an integral aspect of *la solita forma*. In the first and third sections, the drama is most prominent. In the second and fourth movements, the drama is static while the music is most prominent.

	1. <i>Scena</i>	2. <i>Adagio</i>	3. <i>Tempo di mezzo</i>	4. <i>Cabaletta</i>
Focus	drama	music	drama	music
Text	versi sciolti	versi lirici	versi lirici (v.s. possible)	versi lirici
Melody	recitative	lyrical/ <i>sostenuto</i>	recitative/ <i>sustained</i>	lyrical/ agility
Harmony	modulatory	stable	modulatory	stable
Orchestra	punctuating	pulsed/ supportive	Punctuating/ supportive	pulsed/ supportive

Why would a composer use *la solita forma*? Today, we venerate composers like Rossini and Verdi. However, *primo ottocento* operatic composers were under tremendous pressure to write quickly. Rossini wrote *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in as little as three weeks. Verdi famously referred to the early part of his career in which he composed seventeen operas in just eleven years as his “galley years.” *La solita forma* was a procedure which allowed composers to write quickly. It could be used in a variety of different musical numbers and had a proven record of audience approval.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Miller’s “Two Poles of Bel Canto,” *sostenuto* and coloratura, were just as important to Italian audiences as the plot. *La solita forma* furnished opportunities for singers to display these two essential facets of bel canto singing. Finally, since the dawn of opera composers and librettists have struggled to balance the competing needs of drama and music. In *opera seria* of the 18th century, the recitatives moved the plot along and the arias provided musical interest. There was relatively little integration of the two. While *La solita forma* maintained an alternation of dramatic and musical emphases, it provided for a more flexible, balanced, and at times, integrated approach.

Norma’s act one aria from the eponymously titled opera by Vincenzo Bellini serves as an excellent example of the aria in *la solita forma*. The focus of the *scena* is plot unfoldment and the introduction of a dramatic conflict: Norma’s father, Oroveso, leader of the Druids, wants to

battle their Roman enemy, led by Pollione. Norma, the high priestess of the Druids, secretly loves Pollione and has borne him two children and therefore wants to avoid military entanglements that could risk the life of her children's father.

The text of the *scena* is in a prose-like poetic form called *versi sciolti*. The melody is presented in recitative texture, often unaccompanied, declamatory, and syllabically set (ex. 1). The orchestra emphasizes the text by remaining silent, punctuating with brief chords or motives, or by underscoring with tremolo. The harmony of this section reflects the uncertainty of the drama (will Norma succeed in quelling the Druids' bloodlust?) by not settling in one key. It is modulatory, ending in a different key than it began.

The image displays a musical score for the opera *Norma*. The top system features the vocal line for Norma, labeled 'NORMA' and 'Recitativo'. The lyrics are 'Se di zio se vo ci, vo ci di guerra avvichialzarsiat.' The bottom system shows the piano accompaniment, also labeled 'Recitativo' and 'Largo maestoso'. The piano part includes dynamic markings 'ff' and 'pp'. The score is in a key with two flats and a common time signature.

Example 1: Vincenzo Bellini, *Norma*, Act I, Scena e cavatina “Casta diva”

While the *scena* largely serves a dramatic purpose, it must also move the main character to express a lyrical response in the next section.

In the *adagio*, the plot becomes static and the music takes over. Now, Norma can unveil her *sostenuto* – one of Miller's poles of *bel canto*. The melody becomes tuneful, periodic, and is arguably the most important element of the *adagio* section. The text, which changes from the prose-like *versi sciolti* to a more poetic *versi lirici* also contributes to the more lyrical quality. The orchestra provides a pulsed and supportive accompaniment to the lyrical vocal melody. This accompaniment often takes the shape of broken chords (ex. 2). The stable harmony reflects the dramatic stasis by beginning and ending in the same key. The form of the *adagio* is two-verse

strophic with one poetic stanza per verse. It often begins with an orchestral introduction and features a cadenza on the final dominant harmony.

Example 2: Vincenzo Bellini, Act 1, Andante sostenuto assai, “Casta diva”

Let’s take a moment to compare *versi sciolti* and *versi lirici*. *Versi sciolti* is found primarily in *scena* sections, but may also appear in a *tempo di mezzo*. It is prose-like and comprised of 7- and 11-syllable lines (*settenario* and *endecasillabo*) which can be freely alternated and freely rhymed. The first line of Norma’s recitative, “Sediziose voci,” (ex. 3) has seven syllables and the subsequent lines have eleven. Only the last two lines rhyme (in bold below). The sense of metric feet is irregular and therefore lends itself to flexibility and irregular phrase structures when set musically.

	<u>Syllable Count</u>	<u>Rhyme Scheme</u>
Sediziose <sup>5</sup> voci,	7	-
voci di guerra avvi chi alzar si attenta	11	-
presso all’ara del dio? V’ha chi presume	11	-
dettar responsi alla veggente Norma,	11	-
e di Roma affrettar il fato <b>arcano</b> ?...	11	Yes
ei non dipende da potere <b>umano</b> .	11	Yes

Example 3: Felice Romani, *Norma*, Act 1 scena, “Sediziose voci”

*Versi lirici* is found in the *adagio*, *tempo di mezzo*, and *cabaletta* sections. It is a more poetic verse form which features more regular metric feet and rhyme scheme (ex. 4). Norma’s “Casta diva” is grouped into two quatrains. The first three lines of each quatrain are eight syllables (*ottonario*) with the final stress of each line occurring on the penultimate syllable. This is called *verso piano*. The fourth line of each quatrain has only seven syllables since the “o” of *velo* and *cielo* have been apocopated or omitted. This is an example of *verso tronco* or truncated verse and lends the end of each quatrain a sense of finality or coming to rest because it ends on a stressed syllable, rather than the unstressed eighth syllable. The rhyme scheme (ABBC ADDC), trochaic meter (LONG-short, LONG-short), and eight-syllable lines make the text ideal for a lyrical musical setting.

	<u>Syllable Count</u>	<u>Rhyme Scheme</u>
Casta diva, che inargenti	8	A
queste sacre antiche piante,	8	B
a noi volgi il bel sembiante,	8	B
senza nube e senza vel.	7	C
Tempra tu de' cori ardenti,	8	A
tempra ancor lo zelo audace,	8	D
spargi in terra quella pace	8	D
che regnar tu fai nel ciel.	7	C

Example 4: Felice Romani, *Norma*, Act 1, adagio, “Casta diva”

After Norma displays her *sostenuto* in the *adagio*, the audience awaits the fiery *cabaletta*. But, how should Bellini and Romani motivate her to this change of attitude? That is the *raison d'être* of the third section: the *tempo di mezzo* or “middle movement.” It is signaled by a dramatic interruption (often the entrance of another character or chorus introducing new information) which prompts a shift in attitude in the main character.

The text of the *tempo di mezzo* is *versi lirici*. Norma’s melody is initially recitative-like (ex. 5) as it was in the *scena*, but also includes more sustained singing. The orchestra punctuates in the recitative-like passages, but also supports the singer when she sings in a more sustained manner. This section usually ends in a different key than it began as it prepares for the upcoming *cabaletta*. Like the *scena*, the *tempo di mezzo* must motivate the main character to another moment of reflection based on the new information revealed. In the case of Norma’s aria, there is no interruption *per se*, but the chorus of Druids declares that when the time is right for battle, the first to be killed will be Pollione. This is the new information that compels Norma to continue to the *cabaletta*.

NORMA

All'assai maestoso

Fi . neal ri . to; e il sa . cro

All'assai maestoso

(ORCHESTRA) *ff* *p e marcate*

bo - sco sia di . sgom . bro - dai - pro - fa - ni.

Quan . do il Nu - me, quan do il Nu - mei - ra - toe -

x  
44001

Example 5: Vincenzo Bellini, Norma, Act 1. Tempo di mezzo, “Fine al rito”

The *cabaletta* acts as the finale and an emotional release to the entire scene. The focus is back on the music, while the drama is static. In response to the information revealed in the *tempo di mezzo*, the main character sings two stanzas of *versi lirici*, displaying agility through coloratura passages (Miller’s second pole of bel canto) or a more energetic vocalism (ex. 6). The orchestra functions as it did in the *adagio*, providing a harmonic and rhythmic background, pulsed and supportive, but this time in a faster tempo with a driving rhythm to propel the aria to its climax. The form of the *cabaletta*, like the *adagio*, includes an orchestral introduction and two strophes. Here, both stanzas of text are sung in each of the two musical strophes and the piece ends with an exciting *più mosso* coda.

Example 6: Vincenzo Bellini, *Norma*, Act 1, Cabaletta, “(Ah, bello a me ritorna)”

Taken as a whole, Norma’s act one aria checks most if not all the boxes for *la solita forma*. The *scena* provides the plot set up. The *adagio* allows the soprano to contemplate the information revealed in the *scena* and to display her *sostenuto* in long lines. While there is no dramatic interruption in Norma’s *tempo di mezzo*, new information is introduced that prompts her *cabaletta* in which she presents her agility via virtuosic coloratura passagework while again reflecting on the new information.

*La solita forma* was a procedure by which *primo ottocento* composers balanced the needs of drama and music, and was an improvement over the recitative and aria formula of the eighteenth century. It gave singers the opportunity to display the two requisite aspects of elite singing in the early nineteenth century, what Richard Miller called, “The Poles of Bel Canto,” *sostenuto* and agility. It was adaptable to a number of dramatic situations. In the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century or *secondo ottocento*, it faded from fashion as composers, including Verdi in his late operas, broke down formal building blocks, preferring a more formless, through-composed style which more intimately wedded words and music.<sup>6</sup>

Understanding the framework of *la solita forma* arias offers modern singers, teachers, and opera lovers a window into the conventions of *primo ottocento* opera. The author hopes readers will be inspired to re-examine these works that seem so well-known and appreciate the craft that went into their creation.

N.B. The presentation given at ICVT 2022 was based on an article that was accepted for publication by the NATS Journal of Singing in February 2022. What follows is excerpted from the full article scheduled for publication in the fall of 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Miller, *On the Art of Singing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1996): 101.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Powers, "'La solita forma' and 'The Uses of Convention,'" *Actis Musicologica* (Jan.-April, 1987): 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: From Oberto to Rigoletto*, New York: Praediger Press (1973): 12.

<sup>5</sup> The dieresis (¨) in the word "sediziose" separates the two vowels (i) and (o) into two syllables, when ordinarily without the dieresis they would form a one-syllable glide.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Taruskin, "Artist, Politician, Farmer (Class of 1813, II)," in *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press. Retrieved 2 Nov. 2021, from <https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-s011007.xml>