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Vincenzo Bellini and the Art of Nineteenth Century Counterpoint: An Analytical Approach

ABSTRACT

Background

An increasing interest in the study of the role of music analysis with different forms such as has resulted in a great deal of recent research on music repertoires and issues related to music analysis.

Although the complex and vastly widespread relations between dramaturgy context and compositional practice, a controversial but very necessary problem is becoming apparent: whether opera can and should be seen and analysed in the same framework as all other music genres.

Understanding the basis of nineteenth century compositional practice can help break down the historical barriers built around it. This will lay the foundations for an accessible analytical approach towards this musical form and allows us to better understand the role of the analysis, the history of music theory, and the analytical approach itself.

This study explores the idea that this analytical approach, which considers real compositional and pedagogic legacies such as the art of *partimento* and the traditional compositional practice, can reveal how these century-old traditions were essential parts of the drama.

This study focuses on some examples of music analysis from the opera composer Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1834) and the relationship between his compositional practice and the tonal music language of the nineteenth century. The analytical work is based upon the voice-leading of Bellini's music contrapuntal patterns and the voice-leading from *Norma* and *Puritani*. The study suggests several correlations between the analytical results and the dramaturgical context.

The paper argues that analysing the tonal language of Vincenzo Bellini's masterpieces could lead us to understand the role of opera analysis and the legacy of compositional theory and practice in the nineteenth century opera.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This study aims to understand the elaboration on the compositional elementary structures, which early nineteenth century Italian opera composers such as Vincenzo Bellini, learnt when they were students and the significance of this legacy on their compositional ideas.

Methods

This study aims to understand the elaboration on the compositional elementary structures, which early nineteenth century Italian opera composers such as Vincenzo Bellini, learnt when they were students and the significance of this legacy on their compositional ideas.

This research suggests an analytical approach highlighting the influence of pedagogic and theoretical traditions which were alive in the training of early nineteenth-century opera composers such as Bellini as a specific case study.

My approach will refer to analytical approaches¹ which are still used by modern theorists but will especially consider the elements still seen as fundamental to study the compositions by opera composers at the end of the nineteenth century.² These elements include the *partimento* tradition. The analytical approach will also consider the schemata theory which integrates the analysis of the compositional processes of Vincenzo Bellini. Thus, my analysis highlights the primary techniques that elaborate certain fundamental compositional structures in Bellini operatic sections.

Implications

An analytical approach that considers the actual compositional legacies evident in pedagogies will reveal how these century-old traditions were essential parts of drama as well as music. In doing so, it lays the foundations for accessibility to properly comprehending the early nineteenth century Italian opera tradition. Music theorists who are concerned with analytical studies are aware of the modesty of the achievements in this area, especially through a comparison with the excellent results obtained in the field of instrumental music. Thus, this work aims to contribute to the uncovering of those aspects of opera analysis which have remained in the shadows, such as the *partimento* tradition legacy in Vincenzo Bellini's compositional practice.

Keywords

Opera, Vincenzo Bellini, Partimento Tradition, Nineteenth Century Music Analysis, Schema Theory.

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¹ Amongst other works, see also: Dunsby, Jonathan, and Whittall, Arnold, 1988. *Music Analysis in Theory and Practice*. London: Faber Music Ltd.

² See also the excellent guide: Damschroder, David, and Williams, David Russell, 1990. *Music Theory from Zarlino to Schenker: A Bibliography and Guide*. New York (NY): Pendragon Press.

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