

Bel Canto

Instrumentation

- 3 Flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling Piccolo), 3 Oboes (3rd doubling English Horn), 3 Clarinets in Bb (2nd doubling Eb Clarinet; 3rd doubling Bass Clarinet), 3 Bassoons (3rd doubling Contrabassoon)
- 4 Horns in F, 3 Trumpets in Bb (1st doubling on Trumpet in C; 2nd doubling on Pututo in Eb, Pututo in Ab, and Tpt. in C; 3rd doubling on Picc. Tpt. in Ab), 3 Trombones, 1 Tuba
- Timpani; Perc. 1: Glockenspiel, Triangle (medium size), Mark tree, 3 Tom-toms, 3 Cowbells, 3 Woodblocks, Tambourine, Thunder sheet, Ratchet (medium size), Tubular bells, Suspended Cymbal, Snare drum, Whip, Güiro, Whistling tube, Waterphone, Rainstick, Tam tam; Perc. 2: Glockenspiel, Triangle (medium size), Mark tree, 3 Tom-toms, 3 Cowbells, 3 Woodblocks, Tambourine, Thunder sheet, Ratchet (medium size), Tubular bells, Suspended Cymbal, Snare drum, Whip, Güiro, Whistling tube, Waterphone, Rainstick, Tam tam; Perc. 3 Bass drum, Triangle (medium size), Tambourine, Mark tree, Tam tam, Pea whistle, Ratchet (medium size), Snare drum, Small triangle, Suspended Cymbal, Crash Cymbals, Shell shaker, Congas, Tubular bells, Cuíca, Maracas, Rainstick, Lion's roar.
- Harp, Piano (on stage)
- Strings

Bel Canto, opera in two acts. Published by Filarmonika.

Duration: 2 hours and 30 minutes

When the Lima Crisis began on December 17, 1996, few would have thought that 19 years later it would become the subject of an opera. In 2001 author Ann Patchett published "Bel Canto", a fictional novel loosely based on those events which went on to become a number one best seller. A little over a decade after its publication, on February 28, 2012, the Lyric Opera of Chicago announced that "Bel Canto" would become an opera slated to open during their 2015-2016 season. Many years in the making, expectations run high, and the creative team has spared no effort in ensuring the quality of this world premiere.

When I accepted this commission I knew it came with a huge responsibility, not only because of the scale of the project but also because it touched upon a very sensitive and controversial subject. This is why I was determined to find a librettist who could understand the complexities of South America's sociopolitical landscape. Nilo Cruz has been the bridge between Ann Patchett and myself; he has successfully tackled the daunting task of translating her novel into the stage, not an easy thing to do considering that most narrative and descriptive passages –which work so well in the novel- had to be reinvented as dialogue and action. This, in turn, proved the perfect opportunity for Nilo to shape the characters in more detail.

Lyric Opera of Chicago has nurtured this project right from the start; we've had ample opportunities for rewrites, revisions, cuts, and extensions. We even held a workshop in the summer of 2014 where we worked on four out of a total of six scenes. We also held a technical rehearsal this summer, several months before the premiere. What the audience will experience on opening night is a finished product, not a work in progress.

The opera is divided into two acts of approximately equal duration, each one consisting of three scenes. Before writing the first note I underwent a period of preparation where I established the harmonic language of the piece, mapped every scene, and drafted the music materials that would be associated to each character. My thinking tends to be architectural (perhaps influenced by my father, who is an architect) so after I had established a solid base on which to work upon, I decided to compose the arias, which serve as pillars and support the whole structure. I don't work chronologically and "Bel Canto" was no exception. Writing the main arias helped me imbue each character with a particular sound world, and that was crucial if I wanted to be consistent all throughout the opera. Also, I decided early on that instead of writing a piano "reduction" I very much preferred to write straight to the orchestral score. My thinking is very timbre-oriented, so I had to establish the colors of the orchestra from the beginning in order to give unity to the piece. For example Messner, the Red Cross envoy, is strongly associated to metal percussion instruments such as glockenspiel, triangle, and vibraphone, which coupled with a melismatic writing for the voice results in an unmistakable sound world directly associated to Messner. In the case of Roxane, our main character, her arias tend to be grand and make generous use of brass instruments, so her sound world is also clearly defined.

After I had finished drafting the main arias I proceeded to work on the sections in between them. Arias stand out because they are the moments when time and action stop, and it is then that we have an opportunity to explore a character's inner thoughts and feelings, and exploit the singer's virtuosity. Recitativos, on the other hand, go through text at a much faster pace, allowing us to move forward in the story. But the moments that make up most of a through-composed opera are the sections where the characters interact constantly, and where the plot has a moment to shine. I left those for the end because they proved to be the most challenging. Another consideration to take into account is that during the course of the two and a half years that it's taken me to write this opera I have evolved quite a lot as a composer. Writing in chronological order would have risked the stylistic unity of the piece, so writing the way I did ensured that the quality would remain uniform throughout the whole opera and it also allowed me to have more control over the dramatic pacing and development over the course of the whole show.

Throughout the opera the audience will accompany the characters in a journey of transformation. In the end what we are trying to tell is a human

story about how love can flourish under the most strenuous circumstances, and how people who apparently share nothing in common can find a common language and even fall in love with each other. Nilo's poetic libretto is able to convey this masterfully, and even though it is true of every character, no one leaves the mansion more transformed than Roxane, who arrives at the party as a self-entitled, hard-to-please diva and leaves the house compassionate and humble; changed forever by the discovery and subsequent loss of her loved one.

I am sure that every composer who writes a new opera hopes that it will remain in the repertoire for years to come. This, however, is out of my control. What I'm sure of is that everyone involved in the creation of this opera has made every possible effort to attain this goal, not for its own sake, but because we believe that creating new opera is the only way to keep the genre alive. We have prepared a show that is innovative and fresh. Look out for the first scene of Act II, which consists of a 40-minute tour de force where we fast forward time from two weeks into the crisis to many months into it. We do this through a series of short vignettes that put the spotlight on different situations and characters -all interspersed by instrumental interludes that depict the passage of time. Director Kevin Newbury cleverly depicts this on stage through the use of lighting and hash marks written on the walls of the mansion. All in all, it is a show that is based on a contemporary subject and is aimed at a contemporary audience.

"Bel Canto" is dedicated to Renée Fleming, whose vision and determination have been a continuous source of inspiration to everyone involved in the creation of this work. The premiere will take place on December 7, 2015 at the Civic Opera Theater, home of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, by a brilliant cast led by soprano Danielle de Niese, conducted by Sir Andrew Davis and directed by Kevin Newbury.

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