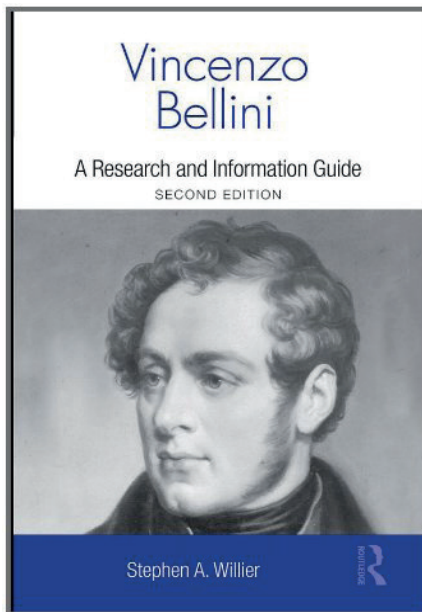




STEPHEN A. WILLIER, *Vincenzo Bellini. A Research and Information Guide*, New York and London, Routledge, 2009² (Routledge Music Bibliographies), xviii-273 p., ISBN: 978-0-415-99524-5.



Routledge Music Bibliographies – the series in which Stephen A. Willier's *Vincenzo Bellini: A Research and Information Guide* appears – produced its inaugural volume in the early 1990s, and more than sixty others in the years since, the most recent published in June 2014 (*Quincy Jones: A Research and Information Guide* by Clarence Bernard Henry). Collectively, these volumes have provided valuable resources for scholars, compiling comprehensive annotated bibliographies for many important composers, as well as for an array of genres (e.g. madrigal, musical, concerto, chamber music, choral music), broad subject areas (e.g. ethnomusicology, women and music, piano pedagogy, jazz research), and a slightly perplexing choice of instruments (recorder and violin). Indeed, Routledge continues to publish this series with striking momentum, no fewer than twenty-four new and revised editions having appeared since

2010. As I read through Willier's guide, however, the same troubling question kept recurring: Why, in this age of electronic databases and a general push toward developing projects within the so-called digital humanities, is Routledge still producing these bibliographies?

My handwringing does not stem directly from complaints specific to Willier's volume, although a few arise which I will summarize briefly below. In general, I enjoyed reading through this bibliography which deftly outlines the «directions Bellini research, performance, and criticism have taken and, more importantly, what lacunae need to be filled» (p. xvi). One of the volume's strong points is its highlighting of trends that have shaped Bellini research since the composer's death. Not surprisingly, scholarly reception of Bellini's music in his own time and beyond has paralleled its reputation with the general public: just as his operas were overshadowed at one time or another by those of Rossini and Verdi, so too have scholars occasionally disregarded his works. Thus, as Willier points out, few articles or books of real value were produced between 1890 and 1920, a time when Bellini's star in Italy and elsewhere had fallen to a low ebb.

To this day, surprisingly, still lacking is a satisfactory life-and-works study of the composer and his operas. Most interesting among the biographies from the first half of the twentieth century, however, are those that harbor an obsession with the composer's love life and in particular his affairs with two women: Maddalena Fumaroli and Giuditta Turina. Willier neglects to describe the precise nature of these relationships in his annotations, but does list a number of related sources including a monograph dedicated entirely to the subject: Giannina Ammirata's *Vita amorosa di Vincenzo Bellini* (Milan, Aurora, 1935). Similarly, a fascination with the composer's final days and, in particular, with the cause of his death permeates a number of studies published throughout the twentieth century, including one article amusingly titled

How Did He Die? (item 167). Outstanding among such peculiarities, moreover, are several sources that Willier deems «Fascist publications» published during the 1930s that concern Bellini's life and music. Unfortunately, Willier does not define what constitutes a «Fascist publication» or how this political stance shaped the reception of Bellini's music, but he does lead the reader to ten sources where these questions might be pursued.

In total, the book contains 1019 entries divided among twelve chapters entitled «Biographical Studies», «Letters and Documents», «Studies of Individual Operas and Bellini's Non-Operatic Works», and so on. In addition, Willier opens the book with an outline of the key events of Bellini's life and concludes with a glossary of people associated with Bellini. The volume is rounded out by two indexes: «authors, editors, translators, and reviewers» and «names and subjects». Individual bibliographic entries are varied in scope and content. Some are long, providing detailed summaries and other useful information, but the strategy driving Willier's choices is not always clear. The entry for Simon Maguire's *Vincenzo Bellini and the Aesthetics of Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (item 456), for example, is among the lengthiest. It includes three descriptive paragraphs, a fourth listing individual chapters, and a final one that cites reviews of the book. While there are a number of entries that deliver as much detail, many others are notably sparse, providing only bibliographic information and little or nothing else. Brevity is undoubtedly warranted in some instances, but seems inconsistent in others. For example, the description that follows the citation for Lettorio Stagno's *Elogio in morte di Vincenzo Bellini* (item 194) is appropriately short: «Poetic elegy honoring the deceased composer.» But why does Willier leave out a summary of Pasquale Francesconi's *In morte del cavalier Vincenzo Bellini* (item 186), a similar source? Almost every chapter and chapter subsection, moreover, concludes with a list of citations for 'other' sources (occasionally labeled «rarities»), but again Willier does not define what he means by «rarities», or «other», where or if he located copies, and what they might contain. Without further explanation, it is possible to conclude that he was not able to consult these sources, which is understandable given the far-flung nature of some of the materials, but some clarification in the preface would have been helpful.

My greatest concern, however, stems not from Willier's work but from the nature of the medium in which he and others continue to operate: specifically, Routledge Music Bibliographies imposes a static structure over a naturally kinetic enterprise. It goes without saying that publishing a bibliography in hard copy freezes the growing body of scholarship in one moment in time. Revised and updated editions can be prepared, of course, but doing so delivers only a fleeting sense of relief. Willier's volume, after all, is the second printing of the Bellini guide, the first having appeared in 2001. During the eight years in between, Willier collected citations for 180 new entries, a cause for celebration as it reflects the healthy status of Bellini research. This optimistic state of affairs, however, is simultaneously responsible for the inevitable failing embedded within all of these bibliographies – if their subject is a matter of great interest both in – and outside of academe, as is usually the case, a fixed account of resources simply cannot remain current for very long. The Bellini guide provides a poignant example, for in the very same year that the second edition emerged, so too did Philip Gossett's *Divas and Scholars* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2009), Susan Rutherford's *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), Emanuele Senici's *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini*

to Puccini (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Melina Esse's article *Speaking and Sighing: Bellini's canto declamato and the Poetics of Restraint* («Current Musicology», 87, 2009, pp. 7-45). All of these publications are required reading for anyone interested in Bellini, but none is cited in Willier's guide. There was a time when omissions of this sort represented a necessary evil, but that time has long passed. If Routledge wants its series to remain viable, it must reconsider its format.

The publisher has begun to offer the bibliographies as eBooks, but unfortunately, these versions are as inadequate as the hard copies since their content is just as static and the price tags remain equally high. Instead, I recommend a rethinking of how the bibliographies in this series are conceived and delivered, something along the lines of what is being done in a similar series: Oxford Bibliographies Online. Routledge should also move its bibliographies online, providing an electronic version that both duplicates the positive aspects of the hard copies and enhances what they are able to offer. The prefaces, for instance, which contain compelling overviews of the historiography of a composer, genre, or instrument, are valuable and might serve as material appearing on a bibliography's home page. Similarly, outlines of composers' lives, glossaries of key figures, and keywords that mirror the chapter and subsection titles could all be maintained. Placing these bibliographies online would open up new possibilities as well, allowing readers to search for and organize entries in a manner that best reflects the nature of their research. It would permit the author or authors to offer timely updates, adding citations for new publications and making corrections when necessary. And, most significantly, it would allow for the inclusion of new types of content. To take one example from the world of Bellini, YouTube videos featuring singers from the past and present performing individual arias are legion, but guidance concerning their context, content, or value is completely lacking, even on the YouTube website itself. An online version of this bibliography could fill in this lacuna, incorporating links to the best of these videos and providing helpful critical commentary.

None of what I am proposing is radical and it is possible that Routledge has already begun planning an electronic version of their bibliographies. I hope so because the value of these resources cannot be denied. A successful transformation from print to electronic media would have vast potential that could expand the amount of information covered, lower costs, and ultimately allow a much larger number of people access to overviews of the literature surrounding Bellini, Quincy Jones, the recorder, and a plethora of other musical subjects.

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