

Soul sisters: Cecilia Bartoli and Maria Malibran

The soprano Cecilia Bartoli is so passionate about Maria Malibran that she's taking her music on the road. Jessica Duchen reports

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Frédéric Chopin had never seen anyone like Maria Malibran. "The queen of Europe. What a marvel," the composer declared. He was right. Malibran was the very first diva, the original female superstar of the music world. She travelled the globe before the invention of trains, never mind planes. She inspired composers to heights of inspiration that flowered into the Romantic movement. Her life changed the way society perceived artists. And though she died at only 28, her legacy is alive and well today.

Not least in the guise of the mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli, whose new CD, *Maria*, is devoted to music written for and by the 19th-century singer. For Bartoli, "La Malibran" borders on an obsession. She's in the middle of an international tour of the CD's repertoire – her London performance on 19 December sold out so fast that the Barbican has scheduled a repeat two days later.

I caught up with her in the "Malibran Bus", parked in the Place de la Sorbonne in Paris. It's a juggernaut that has been converted into a bijou museum, displaying Bartoli's collection of Malibran memorabilia: stage jewellery, portraits, letters from her associates including Bellini, Rossini and Malibran's sister, the singer Pauline Viardot, as well as 19th-century souvenirs such as a porcelain pipe bearing her picture. "Nutty collectors are everywhere," Bartoli laughs, "and one is right here in this lorry!"

What attracted Bartoli to Malibran? "My record producer, Christopher Raeburn, gave me a portrait of Malibran as a good luck present when I was starting my career," she says. "I was making my debut as Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*, and Malibran, too, started her career with Rossini roles. Then I learnt that both her parents were singers, as were mine. All sorts of parallels seemed to be

emerging. I was fascinated by her as a musician, but also as an anti-conventional woman who fought for her freedom and independence."

Malibran was born in Paris in 1808, the eldest daughter of the Spanish tenor, composer and teacher Manuel Garcia. Her brother, also named Manuel, became one of the most important singing teachers of the 19th century. Pauline, 13 years younger than Maria, herself later inspired Meyerbeer and Fauré and became the muse of Ivan Turgenev.

Garcia taught Malibran everything she knew. "She had an amazing vocal technique and this she learnt from him," Bartoli explains. "Playing three instruments, she could also improvise and compose music. She was able to develop all these talents thanks to her father."

Nevertheless, Malibran, independent, restless and passionate, had a stormy relationship with Garcia – a battle for control of her talent and temperament that sometimes resulted in physical violence. Rumours in the gossip columns of the day even hinted at sexual abuse.

By the age of 17, Malibran was an international superstar. The family travelled extensively, and not only in Europe. During Malibran's second season, they sailed to the US, where they met Mozart's librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, and gave the US premiere of Don Giovanni. But in New York, Malibran seized her chance to escape. She met a businessman 28 years her senior, Eugène Malibran, and promptly married him. But it soon turned sour. "Afterwards," Bartoli says, "she realised this man was in trouble – almost bankrupt. She had to sing in order to pay his debts."

Returning alone to Europe in 1827, leaving her husband in the US, she re-established her hectic career. Fireworks ensued when she found her soulmate in the Belgian violinist Charles de Bériot, with whom she set up home and had a child. The ensuing scandal split the French capital. For youthful romantics, Malibran had become a true symbol of emancipation. High society, however, promptly snubbed her. The couple were forced to leave the country; Malibran did not sing in Paris after 1832. Her father never spoke to her again.

When her marriage to Eugène Malibran was annulled in 1836, Malibran and De Bériot were married. But their happiness came to a tragic end when the pregnant Malibran fell from her horse. Wilful as ever, she refused to see a doctor; she died from her injuries a few months later.

Malibran's voice, Bartoli explains, was a deep, rich mezzo-soprano, almost a contralto. Bellini reworked one of his bel canto masterpieces, *I Puritani*, for her, three tones lower than its original. And roles that have been sung by sopranos – notably Bellini's *Norma* – would originally have been heard in Malibran's dusky timbre. Restoring the early romantic and bel canto repertoire to its original guise

is part of the raison d'être for Bartoli's CD. "Bel canto is not part of the operatic movements of melodrama or verismo," Bartoli says. "Instead, it's the next step after the classical era. We have tried to bring out this dimension of the music." For instance, although "Casta Diva" from Norma is familiar in performances by sopranos such as Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland and Montserrat Caballé, accompanied by sizeable orchestras, Bartoli went back to the manuscript for her recording and discovered that almost the entire aria is marked pianissimo. "We really wanted to perform the way the music is composed, not the way the 'tradition' tells us," she says.

Besides the bel canto classics, there are songs by Malibran herself, notably "Rataplan", a vocal showpiece full of wildly rolled "r"s. Most touching of all, perhaps, is the first recording of a long-lost concert aria by Mendelssohn, "Infelice". A miniature masterpiece in three sections, it features a substantial violin solo, played here by Maxim Vengerov. It was written, of course, for Malibran and De Bériot to perform together – but she died before they could do so. Resurrected in such capable hands, it carries a taste of the magical aura that surrounded Malibran and her story in the romantic era. Malibran's ferocious brilliance disappeared all too quickly. Now, thanks to Bartoli, she can shine again.

Cecilia Bartoli's 'Maria' is out now on Decca