Vincenzo Bellini, born Vincenzo Salvatore Carmelo Francesco Bellini, on November 3 1801 in Catania, Sicily, was one of the most prominent composers of bel canto opera. His seemingly endless, mellifluous, melodic lines earned him the title “the Swan of Catania.” He is now most remembered for his operas, the most often performed of which include I Capuleti ed i Montecchi (1830), La sonnambula (1831), Norma (1831), Beatrice di Tenda (1833), and I puritani (1835), along with numerous art songs set to texts in Italian. Interestingly, like many of his contemporaries, Bellini often recycled melodies he enjoyed, employing them in multiple works. Bellini showed great musical promise from a young age. Taking various lessons and composing from infancy, Bellini was a veritable child prodigy. At the age of 17, Bellini left provincial Sicily to study at a conservatory in Naples. Upon graduation, he had already composed his first opera, Adelson e Salvini, which was met with moderate success. Soon after this musical beginning, Bellini rose to stardom, composing operas for grand theaters across Europe. The last five years of Bellini’s life were concentrated with financial success, as Bellini watched La sonnambula, Norma, and I puritani enthrall audiences. Unfortunately, Bellini died on September 23, 1835 at the tragically young age of 33. His life ended in the Parisian suburb of Puteaux while returning from London to Milan. Throughout his life, Bellini maintained a mysterious relationship with fellow musician Francesco Florimo. Although scholars contest whether the relationship was homosexual in nature, most agree that there was an incredibly deep friendship between the men resembling love. Such an intense relationship most definitely shaped Bellini’s arias and songs, and probably directly influenced his perspective on the Romeo and Juliet story, the quintessential tale of forbidden love.

One of Bellini’s most loved songs today is “Ma rendi pur contento,” made popular by Luciano Pavarotti in a 1988 recital with James Levine. Composed in 1829, “Ma rendi pur content” is now usually published as the final song of Sei Ariette, a set of six songs written by Bellini. These songs, including “Malinconia, ninfa gentile,” “Vanne, o rosa fortunata,” “Bella nice, che d’amore,” “Almen se non poss’io,” and “Per pietà, bell’idol mio” make up a larger collection of 15 Bellini songs entitled Composizioni da Camera, or Songs of the Room. Italian music publisher Ricordi published this compilation of songs, all written for voice and piano, in 1935. Bellini probably did not originally intend for all of the songs to be included as one large group, but they do share an inherent similarity in folk-like qualities, romantic themes, and vivid imagery. “Ma Rendi pur contento” is set to a text by the prominent Italian poet and librettist Metastasio, born Pietro Antonio Domenico Trapassi on January 3, 1698. A literary prodigy, Metastasio wrote popular libretti throughout his life, supported by a great fortune he inherited in youth from a patron. The text of “Ma rendi pur contento” comes from a scene in Metastasio’s 1744 drama, Ipermestra. In the scene, Plistine declares that his lover’s happiness is more important than his own and asks Cupid to make his lover, Elpinice, happy. Beneath the sung line of the piece, there are constant arpeggiated chords in the piano part, suggesting Plistine’s constant commitment to Elpinice. Unlike the steady accompaniment, the piece’s vocal line begins with subdued ascending and
descending lines and ends with dramatic leaps and increasing chromaticism, which indicates Plistine’s escalating desperation. In 1829, when Bellini wrote this song, his opera *Zaira* had recently failed miserably. After composing his *Sei Ariette*, Bellini penned the now beloved opera *I Capuleti ed I Montecchi*. Arias in both *Zaira* and *I Capuleti ed I Montecchi* bare uncanny similarity to the melody of “Ma rendi pur contento.”

Although less popular than “Ma rendi pur contento,” Bellini’s “L’allegro marinaro,” “The happy sailor” in English, still captivates audiences with its enticing melody and bold climaxes. Like “Ma rendi pur contento,” “L’allegro marinaro” is from *Composizioni da Camera*, but it is from another set entitled “Six Early Songs.” The five other songs in the set include “La farfalletta,” “Quando incise su quel marmo,” “Sogno d’infanzia,” “L’abbandono,” and “Torna, vezzosa fillide.” The composition date of “L’allegro” is unknown, although most scholars believe it was written in a crude form when Bellini was young then revised later in Bellini’s life. The exact composition date is either between 1824 and 1827 or 1833 and 1834. Originally published with a French text, “L’allegro” is now usually performed with Italian text because the prevalent academic view is that Bellini composed the song in his youth, when he only spoke Italian. Additionally, according to various sources, Bellini spoke French horrifically, which would hinder him setting the language. The author of the text of “L’allegro marinar” is anonymous. In terms of form, the song’s poem consists of four stanzas and is told with the first person pronoun “we.” It is from the perspective of a sailor’s lover who is wishing the sailor good fortune on the sea and pleading for the sailor to return. The first stanza sets a rather idyllic scene of the ocean, ending with an optimistic declaration that “we will challenge the wave and the thunder.” The second stanza discusses hope as well as the capricious nature of fate. The third stanza dramatically transitions to a storm scene and builds upon the theme of fate, stating that one day fate may bring us songs and the next it may bring us storms. In the final stanza, the narrator confidently declares, “we will return home.” In a way, the poem is a character study of someone who is so deeply in love with a sailor and so profoundly hopeful that the sailor will return that the person becomes one with the distant sailor. Throughout the song, Bellini constantly shifts from major tonality to minor tonality, heightening the uncertainty felt by the narrator. Also, there are certain moments where the mood of the music does not match the mood of the text, suggesting that the narrator feels uncertain about his words. While the sung line ends on a D minor chord, the piece itself concludes with a pianissimo D major chord, declaring that the two lovers will one day be reunited.

Another well-known Bellini song is “La ricordanza,” or “The memory.” It was completed on April 15, 1834 while Bellini was in Paris. Bellini dedicated the piece to “Signor Count Demidoff,” a possible benefactor of Bellini’s work. The text of “La Ricordanza” is usually attributed to Carlo Pepoli, a nineteenth century Italian politician and writer. Pepoli, who was born July 22, 1796 and died December 7, 1881, had a significant career in the ever-shifting political arena of 1800’s Italy. When he was exiled to Paris as a young adult, Pepoli met Bellini and the two collaborated on Bellini’s final opera *I Puritani*, which premiered on January 24, 1835. Pepoli wrote the libretto for the successful opera. Interestingly, the melody of “La ricordanza” is nearly identical to that of Elvira’s aria during her mad scene in *I Puritani*. In addition to “La ricordanza,” Pepoli wrote the texts for five other Bellini songs, “Amore,” “Malinconia,” “La speranza,” and
“Alla luna.” Only “La Ricordanza” has survived and the rest of the songs remain lost. “La Ricordanza” is a sonnet, a poetic form that Bellini adored, as he was fascinated with ancient forms and Arcadian imagery. In the poem, a first person narrator recounts a night during which he confessed his love to a beautiful woman, who then admits she loves him as well. In concluding the poem, the narrator declares that he would have desired death had she not returned his sentiment. Bellini employs finessed text painting throughout the song, using the melody and accompaniment to reflect the narrator’s emotions. The climax of the song occurs on the final word of the song, “caro,” which is sustained for six beats, suggesting the narrator’s conviction that death would be truly “dear” if his love were unrequited.