

The libretto in brief

Act one

The oak-tree and altar of Irmisul in the sacred forest of the Druids.

The Gauls are bearing the yoke of Roman occupation with indomitable pride. The warriors and Druid priests gather together at night with their chief, Oroveso. He announces that at moonrise his daughter, Norma, will come to gather the sacred mistletoe and ask the god for some portent of war against the hated invaders. The plotters disperse into the forest. Meanwhile the Roman proconsul Pollione, who is Norma's lover and father of her two children, confides in his friend, Flavius, that he has fallen madly in love with another young priestess of Irmisul, Adalgisa, and that he has decided to lure her away from the temple, even though he knows he will have to face Norma's implacable revenge if he does. The two Romans quickly take themselves off at the sudden clang of the temple bell, and the warriors, Druids, and priestesses gather round the oak for the solemn rite. With her hair flowing free, her forehead crowned with verbena, and surrounded by an air of august authority, Norma commands the Gauls to give up any hope of war and to resign themselves to watching and waiting, because the time is not yet ripe for an uprising, according to the will of the god. Then, grasping the golden sickle in her hand, she cuts off some of the sacred mistletoe and prays to the moon, the "casta diva" that shines from the sky and turns the woods silver. The ritual comes to an end and everyone departs. Only Adalgisa is left. She kneels at the altar, begging the god for forgiveness

and for protection from the sacrilegious love for Pollione which has overcome her. The proconsul arrives and passionately asks her to abandon her religion and follow him to Rome, where he has been recalled and where they could live happily together, united in wedlock. For a little while Adalgisa resists, but then she contents to meet him the following night at the same place, in order to run away with him.

Norma's dwelling.

Norma knows that Pollione has been recalled to Rome, and is frightened that she will be abandoned with the two little children. She tenderly caresses them, but hearing someone approach, entrusts them as usual to the faithful Clotilde, who keeps them hidden. It is Adalgisa, come to confess her guilty love and to ask Norma for advice and understanding. In the duet that follows the girl tells of how she was irresistibly seduced in the god's temple. Norma listens enthralled and deeply moved, remembering how she too, one day, was won over by the same words of love. Already disposed to pardon the girl and free her from her vows, Norma asks for the name of the seducer. Adalgisa replies pointing to Pollione who is entering at that moment. Norma flares up into a terrible rage and utters dark threats against her faithless lover and even against his children. Instead of showing sorrow and regret, the Roman attempts to drag Adalgisa away with him, but she indignantly refuses to follow him and scornfully rejects his advances.

Act two

Inside Norma's dwelling.

With a dagger in her hand, the priestess approaches the couch where her two little sons are sleeping. She has decided to commit suicide, but intends to kill the children first, so as to save them from ending up as slaves in Rome, and to make Pollione suffer an eternal horrible remorse. But as she stands with the knife poised for the blow, the little ones wake up and Norma recoils, uttering a cry of horror. She sends for Adalgisa and implores her to take them with her to the Roman camp. She must marry Pollione and look after the children as if they were her own. Adalgisa refuses to go after Pollione. She no longer feels any love for him. Offering Norma her devotion, she says that she will only go to the Roman camp in order to appeal to the proconsul's better feelings and convince him to return to Norma.

The Druids' wood.

The Gauls are worried because the Romans show no signs of leaving the camp. Oroveso announces that Pollione is being replaced by an even more terrible and warlike Roman proconsul at the head of tough and battle-seasoned legions. Nevertheless, as Norma, interpreting the god's will, still advises peace, the chief of the Druids urges the warriors to pretend to be resigned but proudly wait for the moment of rebellion.

The temple of Irmisul.

Norma waits, believing that Pollione will be convinced by Adalgisa and

will come back penitent and once more in love with her. But Clotilde confesses that Adalgisa's compassionate mission has failed. The proconsul is determined not to give up the girl, and plans to abduct her from the very altar where she has gone to present her sacred vows. Inflamed by overwhelming wrath, Norma strikes the bell of Irminsul to summon the people, announcing that at last the god has decreed war, and death and destruction to the invaders. Meanwhile Clotilde rushes up with news that a Roman has been caught committing a grave act of sacrilege by entering the cloister reserved for the priestesses. The prisoner is Pollione. Norma wants to stab him with her dagger so that justice is done in front of all, but overcome by her old feelings of love, she makes one last attempt to win back her faithless lover. She sends the Gauls away, saying that she wishes to interrogate the profane Roman alone, and find out the name of the priestess who was his accomplice in the sacrilegious act. She then urges Pollione to renounce Adalgisa for ever, promising him his life in return. If he refuses, she herself will kill their children and have the girl burnt to death. Pollione is inflexible. Norma can contain her wrath and desperate jealousy no longer. She calls the crowd of Druids and warriors back again to announce the name of the false priestess and demand the extreme penalty. But just as she is going to name Adalgisa, a noble impulse stirs her heart and she accuses herself. Confronted with such self-sacrifice, Pollione is deeply moved and feels

all his love for her return. The two lovers will be united in death. Before mounting the pyre with Pollione, Norma receives from the father Oroveso the promise that her children will not be made the innocent victims of her guilt, and will be saved from an unhappy fate.