

The Pains and Pleasures of Liberation

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It is a hundred years since Verdi died, and more of his operas are now in the repertory than at any other period, whether during his lifetime or after it. Such works as *Stiffelio* or *Alzira* or *Il corsaro*, which rather quickly disappeared from nineteenth-century stages, have now been revived, recorded more than once, been presented in elaborate critical editions, and been the object of a mass of other scholarly activity. While performance of any of these operas would have been prohibitively difficult fifty years ago (with non-existent or unreliable performing materials, a complete absence of a 'performing tradition', etc.), today they can be scheduled all round the world: there are conductors and singers who know the works; Casa Ricordi will—for a price—send you by courier reliable scores and orchestral parts; a stage director can scan the Verdi literature and construct a detailed background (which he or she will then feel entirely at liberty to disregard). And if this is now the case for the minor operas, how much more abundant is the material—human, practical, and documentary—that has accumulated round the most popular works. Imagine collecting together just the physical traces of a work like *La traviata*: all the records, scores, librettos, posters, books and articles and programme notes, entries in diaries, postcards, wrappings of chocolate bars . . .

Looked at from this perspective, we would seem to have fewer fundamental problems in performing Verdi's works than ever before. But perhaps it is this very familiarity that leads us to find the business of staging them ever more fraught. As those materials expand around us, the image they present somehow becomes ever more indistinct. To put this another way: we used to feel we knew just one *La traviata*; but now there are hundreds—thousands—

crowding for attention. The reasons for this sense of scary proliferation are of course complex, but they surely have to do with the fact that operas from the past are now in large part ‘the repertory’; contemporary operas are the rarities, in need of special pleading, frequently given no more than one run of performances.

It is in this sense surely no accident that the so-called ‘Verdi Renaissance’—the time when all those ‘forgotten’ operas began to be revived—started in Germany and Austria during the 1920s and 1930s and was clearly part of a deliberate attempt to renew a repertory now unrefreshed by a stream of new works. This revival culture (Handel, Gluck, and Mozart were also involved) had many large effects, one of which was to see the beginnings of our present uncertainty about performance. Singers and conductors and—most obviously and controversially—stage directors (a relatively new force on the operatic field) saw themselves confronted with difficult questions: how are we to make these works, which are both ‘old’ (written in a no-longer contemporary vein) and ‘new’ (unknown), relevant and alive to a modern audience? Should we try to re-create their original performance conditions, so encouraging audiences to time-travel? Or should we aggressively transport the works into our contemporary world, making *them* time-travel? By and large, it is these impossible questions that continue to occupy us, many decades after they were first posed. The present book is an attempt to suggest where we now stand in the debate and to outline the main levels on which the argument can take place.

We had, of course, to begin with staging, which since those early, experimental days of the 1920s and 1930s has always been the crucial battleground. As James Hepokoski is the first to make clear, present-day polemics—the stand-off between those who wish to see stagings that preserve ‘the composer’s intentions’ and those who see modernization as essential to communication—seem unable to move forward, and could surely benefit from a hard look at the historical situation. For one thing, ‘Verdi’s intentions’, so far as the staging of his operas is concerned, are in large part unknowable: most evidence we have is merely of his reactions to a particular set of local problems that can no longer be reconstructed. Even in the case of his last works, which carry elaborate and declaredly authoritative documentation about how each opera should be staged (the so-called *disposizioni sceniche* or stage-manuals), Verdi-as-director remains remarkably elusive. What is more, he can sometimes be seen upholding an idea of stage movement and acting

style that was already antiquated at the time of performance, in that sense working against the grain of the opera's 'authenticity', its being 'true to the period'. In the light of this, and much further historical evidence, Hepokoski's conclusion is unambiguous: we are probably fooling ourselves if we argue that in reviving an 'authentic' staging we have recaptured the long-forgotten aesthetic heart of a work. It would be wiser and more accurate to acknowledge that we can never experience these operas as they were originally experienced. Their former social and theatrical contexts are not recoverable, at least in any spontaneous way, and those spontaneous contexts were essential to their total effect.

In a sense, the responses to Hepokoski gathered here are themselves a kind of dialogue, a throwing back and forth of the implications of conclusions that, from an informed historical point of view, are hard to deny. David Rosen, for example, sees no principled reason for excluding 'authentic' staging manuals as part of the text of an opera, but then defends our right to ignore their precepts, simply because the result of slavish adherence would be Groundhog Day at the theatre—a never-varied repetition of visual gestures which we would find drearily unstimulating. However, both Rosen and Andrew Porter nevertheless want to insist that these manuals—though they should not be treated like a musical score or libretto—can sometimes make simple, practical sense, whether (in Porter's case) dealing with tenors in *La forza del destino* who must hurtle to their deaths but be there for the curtain call, or (in Rosen's) explaining visually some musical gestures in *Un ballo in maschera* that would otherwise be incomprehensible. Harold Powers takes up a similar theme in his discussion of *Ballo*, pointing out how the play of light and darkness called for in the libretto and staging instructions is intimately tied to the musical fabric.

In very different ways, the last two responses attempt to suggest ways in which Verdi's particular brand of theatre may require special treatment so far as staging is concerned. John Rosselli argued that Verdi's consistent focus on the human world—his general lack of interest in the mythic or the abstract—places a special burden and responsibility on those who interpret him. Having no time for the possibilities of 'subversive' productions—ones that consciously try to expose and possibly invert existing power relationships—he insists that, in Verdi's world, no one must sit while the king is standing, and that Gilda must be presented as physically enclosed (imprisoned, even) in her walled garden in

the first act of *Rigoletto*. Mike Ashman, from his experience as a stage director, argues that our knowledge of Verdi, and the reasons we cannot tolerate the experimentation that habitually occurs in Wagner, have to do rather with a vanished generic context, particularly in his middle-period works: the fact that they alone, from the most influential operatic genre of the nineteenth century—that of Grand Opéra—remain in the repertory. The conclusion to all these papers may seem banal but it is nevertheless worth reiterating: even though we can never re-create it, awareness of what a ‘period’ staging might involve can be important, whatever path a director might eventually take.

The business of what constitutes ‘correct’ vocal and instrumental performance leads us immediately into calmer waters, partly because the battles over ‘authenticity’ have been fought elsewhere and have rarely reached into Verdian territory. David Lawton’s paper tackles the issue of vocal ornamentation and is the first to point out that there can be no single, ‘Verdian’ style, if only because the composer’s long lifetime saw enormous changes in this area. What is more, even within more restricted periods, the possibilities seem to change quite radically depending on the individual singers for whom Verdi was writing. In the earliest of his operas, for example, the question of whether one should ornament the literal repeats of cabalettas cannot be answered categorically. When Verdi was writing for Sophie Loewe (Elvira in *Ernani* and Odabella in *Attila*), the possibilities are very few: directness of vocal gesture suited this particular singer, and such ornamentation as exists is strictly harnessed to an aria’s rigidly determined overall direction. But when Verdi wrote for Erminia Frezzolini (Giselda in *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* and Giovanna in *Giovanna d’Arco*), still less for Jenny Lind (Amalia in *I masnadieri*), the whole shape of arias is different, their relatively ‘open’ structure fully allowing for a free addition of further embellishment. As both Lawton and Clive Brown make clear, however, the question of ‘correct’ musical performance goes much further—much deeper even—than that of added ornaments. As Brown stresses, that frequently heard mantra ‘simply follow what’s in the score’ ignores the rapidly changing nature of musical notation during Verdi’s lifetime—the manner in which aspects of performance that at the start of the nineteenth century had been tacitly understood gradually came to be notated with ever greater precision. Matters as basic as how one might articulate a simple musical phrase (say a succession of three or four notes) are at stake. No one knows this better at the practical level than Mark Elder, whose

performances of *Alzira* and the first version of *Simon Boccanegra*, both with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, were for many the Verdian revelations of the 1990s, showing that an orchestra and cast with experience primarily in earlier styles of performance could bring important new insights.

One thing seems certain: as all three contributors to this session underline, the continuous performing tradition enjoyed by a few of Verdi's operas has encouraged a certain rigidity about what constitutes true 'Verdian' singing and playing, an idea fuelled by recordings. And so we are still dogged by a narrow conception of, for example, a true 'Verdian' tenor, with his 1920s-vintage, sustained high notes, or a 'Verdian' brass section, with its slide trombones and plummy tuba. Perhaps there are already signs that that period is finally reaching an end. Certainly, what Lawton calls the 'canto sportivo' approach to high notes (Elder talks of singers going into roles 'like Roman centurions in a battle') is now indulged more often—appropriately enough—in sports stadia than in opera houses.

The most unfamiliar ground covered in the book, but possibly also where the most radical claims are made, comes in the third section, devoted to Verdi and the ballet. Knud Arne Jürgensen makes a convincing plea for the reinstatement of Verdi's most important ballet scores, arguing that they are often an integral part of the operatic experience; he also has interesting—and provocative—things to say about what he calls 'dance arias' and the extent to which the rhythms of dance may communicate on broader levels within Verdi's musical style. Perhaps what is primarily needed before true appreciation can take place is a change in the way we evaluate ballet music, a genre in which elements of central importance, such as variation of orchestral colour, may too easily be dismissed as merely 'surface' features.

Again, a historical perspective on the subject may prove an important point of departure. Kathleen Hansell, Gunhild Oberzaucher-Schüller, and José Sasportes all supply aspects of the necessary background, and all stress the crucial distinction we need to make between an 'Italian' and a 'French' balletic tradition. The former, in which of course Verdi grew up, kept opera and ballet firmly separated (though subject matter was freely shared), while the latter (within which nearly all of Verdi's ballet music was written) thought of the two forms as in a constant and lively state of exchange, inhabiting the same plot spaces and dramatic effects. This difference manifests itself most obviously in the fact that nineteenth-century French ballets

took place within the plots of opera, while Italian ones were almost always a separate entertainment; but it also carries with it a broader aesthetic dimension in which balletic movement, and thus balletic music, could mingle freely with song.

Marian Smith begins by raising an even broader issue: the manner in which 'social' dance and 'theatrical' dance were interdependent during Verdi's time, a subject that could have extremely rich implications for the whole, largely unexplored, question of who exactly was Verdi's audience, and on what levels of communication he could rely. But the main part of Smith's paper returns to Jürgensen's point about 'dance arias' and leads her to a series of questions about some fundamental means of theatrical expression. Not least among these is the business of 'bodily means of communication', and of how Verdi's music, whether balletic or otherwise, articulates or depicts bodily movement. Looked at this way, his music for the ballet, traditionally regarded as a distinctly peripheral aspect of his art, might prove an important means to begin investigation of a level of communication which our past century of Verdi literature has almost entirely ignored.

But how to begin such an investigation? One avenue is suggested by Marian Smith, who reminds us that the nineteenth century saw a gradual feminization of the art of dance, an increasing tendency to make the erotic female body the focus of attention. Are there answers here that will have broader implications? Perhaps it will be just one further manner in which we might train ourselves in what Rebecca Harris-Warrick calls 'reading' ballet, in particular by 'reconceptualizing the impact dance has on dramatic continuity'. Who, for example, is permitted to indulge in 'dance arias' in Verdi's operas, and what is such indulgence supposed to tell us about them? Is it always a sign of being in some way 'other'—female, exotic, non-adult, lower-class, racially different? Again, such questions have rarely been formulated, let alone addressed, in Verdian criticism.

The final part of the book discusses critical editions, in particular the ongoing Verdi edition, and, strangely enough, turns out to be more lively than such a topic usually bodes. As all the contributors make clear, the central necessity here is to distinguish between an edition, which is fixed on paper and can be used over and over again, and a performance, which can be reproduced only partially and can never be repeated. A good critical edition, as Philip Gossett makes clear, is a set of possibilities, a series of guidelines from which an indi-

vidual performance can be constructed: it is 'critical' precisely because it offers possibilities, can show us the limitations of what is left to us on paper as the 'text' of the work. Perhaps that much is (or should be) uncontroversial. But of course that is not the whole story. Gabriele Dotto points out that the edition of an opera, whether critical or not, is only one part of what is needed to effect a performance: we also need singers and other performers who understand what the notation does and does not say; and, for that matter, we also need audiences who know how to listen and react. In other words, we must also rely on 'tradition', a word few want to define but (perhaps in part for that reason) many will use as a stick with which to beat their opponents.

As Gossett and Stefano Castelvechi mention, those who glorify 'tradition' as a bulwark against the rising tide of 'merely scholarly' editions need to have their sacred term interrogated—examined with a certain historical rigour: where does any given 'tradition' come from? How old is it and what were the motivations behind its creation? Perhaps we can document one 'traditional' gesture (let us say one of those interpolated high notes for the tenor) as going back to the time of the composer and tolerated or even approved by him. But perhaps another can be traced only to the 1930s, originating in some Fascist production that had the local militia up and saluting. Both are (have now become) 'traditions'; and both (or neither) might legitimately be used in a performance; most of us, however, will feel it is significant to know which is which.

So: as with a revival of knowledge about those old staging manuals mentioned earlier, finding out precisely what Verdi set down (and its limitations) can hardly in itself be a sinister operation. But again, as with the staging debate, it is at the next stage that the arguments begin. Possession of such knowledge could, for example, be seen by some as an invitation (knowingly) to disregard the composer's authority. On this topic our respondents would probably differ. Francesco Degrada admits that 'it can be interesting to visit a Gothic church with Baroque additions, . . . but we will always want to come back to the originals, which contain a cultural value that is historically and aesthetically more significant than an anonymous episode in the history of their reception'. It is surely not simplistically iconoclastic to respond to this with the simple question: why? What if it is the Gothic original that is anonymous (more likely, after all), and the Baroque additions are signed by a famous figure? Could we not, under those circumstances, plausibly reverse the terms of Degrada's sentence?

What will be the future of Verdian performance? Will the great wave of 'historically informed' performances continue onwards through and past Verdi, encompassing visual as well as musical aspects until all his operas are staged and performed with recuperative zeal, critical editions and *disposizioni sceniche* being treated as ever more prescriptive documents? Will we have Groundhog Day at the opera? Or will (the alternative nightmare) the present licence that stage directors see as their right spread to the verbal and musical texts, encouraging conductors and singers to substitute or recompose musical extracts when the mood takes them, and freely adapt the librettos to suit current political or moral standards?

Whatever the path, the presence of more information and debate about performing and editing Verdi will surely be beneficial as we enter our third Verdian century.

FURTHER READING

For an authoritative recent account of the German 'Verdi Renaissance', see Gundula Kreuzer, 'Zurück zu Verdi', *Studi verdiani*, 13 (2000), 117–54. On the subject of 'authenticity' as it has (mostly) been applied to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music, see Nicholas Kenyon (ed.), *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford, 1988), and Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act* (Oxford, 1996).