

VERDI AND WAGNER IN EARLY VICTORIAN LONDON: THE VIEWPOINT OF *THE MUSICAL WORLD*

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SUMMARY. As early as 1844, Henry Fothergill Chorley, one of the most authoritative figures of Victorian journalism, drew attention to two young composers, Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner, whose recent success could not escape the critic's attention. However, while Verdi's operas made their regular appearance in London over the decades following *Ernani's* premier at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1845, it was not until 1870 (with *L'Olandese Dannato*, alias *Der Fliegende Holländer*) that the first full performance of a dramatic work by Wagner was given in the English capital city. Notwithstanding this disparity, a first glance at the reviews that appeared in *The Times*, *The Musical World*, *The Athenaeum*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Spectator*, and that were then reproduced in the columns of *The Musical World*, shows the extent to which, between 1845 and 1855, both composers became object of severe critical scrutiny. By the mid-1850s Wagner's figure was conceptualized on the basis of factors that only in part depended on the quality of his music; yet, the manner in which his controversial writings impinged on the Victorian musical milieu benefited Verdi's image, which came to be understood as a more reassuring popular composer.

Keywords: Verdi, Wagner, opera reception, victorian journalism

With my contribution I will try and shed some light on the way Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner were received in Victorian London in the decade between 1844 and 1855. My analysis will especially focus on those reviews that, having made their appearance in the columns of *The Times*, *The Athenaeum*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Spectator* and *The Musical World*, were selected by James William Davison, the editor of *The Musical World*, and reproduced in the columns of the journal he edited. This, in a way, will provide the reader with a perspective on the critical debate taking place over those years, as it was reflected in the columns of

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what was considered as one of the most influential music periodicals in Victorian London. My analysis will consist of three moments: a) I will show that the chronology of Verdi's and Wagner's performances in London before 1870 does not support the idea of an antagonistic position; b) I will suggest that, in the mid-1850s Verdi's image in London even benefited from the manner in which Wagner's controversial writings impinged on the Victorian musical milieu; c) I will draw attention to the way in which, in 1855, Wagner's figure was conceptualized on the basis of factors that only in part depended on the quality of his music.

As early as 1844, perhaps for the first time both Verdi and Wagner were explicitly mentioned by Henry Fothergill Chorley, one of the most authoritative figures of Victorian journalism, in his "Music and the Drama: Contemporary musical composers - Giuseppe Verdi," which made its appearance in the columns of *The Athenaeum* on 31 August. While drawing attention to the figure of Verdi, the critic described the sad state of music composition in the continent and mentioned Richard Wagner among those composers who were gaining in international notoriety. Chorley was a conservative critic²; he showed himself to be adverse to the younger generation and he maintained that the fancy of the modern European school consisted in throwing overboard what was essential for the sake of the accidental; since invention seemed to be at the lowest ebb of exhaustion, musicians denounced the old manner of satisfying the ear as mere excitement *ad captandum*. With regard to Italian opera Chorley drew attention to the prevailing tendency to dramatize the style at the expense of true melody, "so that the singer has a *spianato* passage to bawl or to sigh out, either *solus* or in unison with his comrades, a semblance of intensity and contrivance being given by a use of the orchestra, licentious enough to make Cimarosa and Paisiello [...] turn in their graves."³

Since it included no trace of true melody, the music of Verdi's *Ernani* fully reflected the state of decadence described by the critic. Furthermore, judging from the crudity of Verdi's harmonies and progressions, the composer belonged to the class of those who "think they are thinking." Nor did Chorley show any sign of appreciation towards Wagner, who shared with Verdi a distasteful inclination towards declamation, for which proper melodiousness was sacrificed.

² See Bledsoe, Robert Terrell, 'Henry Fothergill Chorley and the Reception of Verdi's Early Operas in England', in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1985), pp. 631-655; Massimo Zicari, "La prima ricezione di Giuseppe Verdi a Londra: Henry Fothergill Chorley e l'*Athenaeum*", *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* (Bern: Lang, 2011) p. 27-60.

³ "Music and the Drama: Contemporary musical composers - Giuseppe Verdi", *The Athenaeum*, 31 Aug. 1844, n. 879, p. 797.

*Then there is Herr Wagner, the young Dresden composer, whose operas we have heard rapturously be praised, because they contain no tunes which any one can carry away. Yet we do not hear that in declamatory propriety and dramatic fashion he has improved upon Weber, the deepest of German vocal composers, and still the most sympathetically melodious and fascinating.*⁴

In the critic's eye Verdi and Wagner shared two negative qualities: a complete lack of melodious inventiveness and a distasteful preference for noisy orchestration. Still, the article published in 1844 suggests that neither Verdi's nor Wagner's early success had escaped the critic's attention. Although Chorley understood Verdi's and Wagner's compositional development as a threat to the established tradition that it was the critic's duty to oppose, the degree of novelty introduced by these two composers represented a turning point between the past and the future in music dramatic matters, a turning point that could not pass unnoticed.

However, once we compare the chronology of either composers' performances in London between 1844 and 1894 we get a sense of how differently they were to impinge on the Victorian musical milieu; while Verdi's operas made their regular appearance in London from 1845 onwards, it was not until 1870 that the first full dramatic work by Wagner was performed in London, *L'Olandese Dannato*, alias *Der Fliegende Holländer*.

Table 1.

Year	Verdi's Premieres	Wagner
1845	<i>Ernani</i> at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1846	<i>Nabucco</i> , <i>I Lombardi</i> at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1847	<i>I due Foscari</i> , <i>I masnadieri</i> , at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1848	<i>Attila</i> at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1853	<i>Rigoletto</i> at Covent Garden	
1855	<i>Il trovatore</i> at Covent Garden	Wagner is appointed Conductor of the London Philharmonic Society.
1856	<i>La Traviata</i> at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1858	<i>Luisa Miller</i> at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1859	<i>I vespri siciliani</i> at Drury Lane	

⁴ Ibidem.

Year	Verdi's Premieres	Wagner
1861	<i>Un ballo in maschera</i> at the Royal Lyceum	
1867	<i>Don Carlos</i> , at Covent Garden; <i>La forza del destino</i> , at Her Majesty's Theatre	
1870		<i>Der Fliegende Holländer</i> in Italian as <i>L'Olandese Dannato</i> at Drury Lane
1875	<i>Requiem</i> , Royal Albert Hall	<i>Lohengrin</i> (also in Italian) at Covent Garden
1876	<i>Aida</i> at Covent Garden	<i>Tannhäuser</i> (in Italian) at Covent Garden
1877		Wagner conducted the Wagner Festival held at the Royal Albert Hall, from 7 to 19 May, together with Hans Richter.
1879		<i>Rienzi</i> at Her Majesty's Theatre
1882		<i>Der Ring der Nibelungen</i> , at Her Majesty's Theatre <i>Die Meistersinger</i> , and <i>Tristan und Isolde</i> in (in German) at Drury Lane. ⁵
1889	<i>Otello</i> at Royal Lyceum	
1894	<i>Falstaff</i> at Covent Garden	

When we look at Verdi's works in London we see a line of continuity that spans the decades from 1845 to 1894, with new operas being premiered quite regularly and quickly entering the standard repertoire. Instead, Wagner's first full dramatic work represented in London was *Der Fliegende Holländer*, given at Drury Lane in Italian as *L'Olandese Dannato* in 1870, before which only one sporadic presence in London in 1855 is to be considered, when he was appointed Conductor of the London Philharmonic Society⁶. In the meantime, the name of the German composer recurred quite significantly in 1861, when the Paris premiere of *Tannhäuser* had strong resonance also in London, and later on when reviews of his operas being performed in Germany were translated and reproduced in the London press.

⁵ F.G.E. "Wagner's Music in England," *The Musical Times*, Vol. 47, No. 763 (Sep. 1, 1906), pp. 589-593.

⁶ Although Wagner first visited London in 1839, that episode does not seem to represent a precedent in establishing a meaningful relationship between the composer and the English audience and critics. The same can be said about the earliest mention of Wagner in the British press, which seems to have occurred in *The Harmonium* of May 1833. See Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979) p. 16.

Based on this chronology it is possible to argue that, at least until the 1870s, Verdi and Wagner did not really hold an antagonistic position. Verdi's operas, being regularly performed in London soon became the object of a severe critical scrutiny and an animated debate, and it was not until 1870 that the London audience could first attend the full performance of Wagner's *L'Olandese Dannato*. However, Wagner came to be the object of an as animated critical discussion with regard to his challenging theories already in the 1850s, long before any of his even more challenging music-dramatic works could be heard in the London theatres.

But what was the nature of the critical judgements bestowed upon either composer by the mid-1850s? With regard to Verdi, it is possible to sum up a few fundamental aspects that emerged among the critics, who divided into two classes: the overtly hostile and the moderately appreciative. Those who showed themselves to be overtly hostile held that:

- his operas impinged upon the palmy model represented by Rossini;
- his music was completely devoid of melody, the most typically distinctive feature of Italian music;
- the dramatized style adopted by Verdi abused the voice.

On the other side, those who showed themselves to be moderately appreciative argued that:

- his music was not entirely devoid of melodiousness;
- his concerted pieces were his strength;
- his music dramas were qualified by strong dramatic power.⁷

Notwithstanding the hostility showed by some of the most conservative critics, such as Chorley from *The Athenaeum* and Davison from *The Times* and *The Musical World*, by the mid-1850s Verdi's popular success was beyond discussion as the fact that the public thronged the London theatres whenever his operas were either created or revived confirms.

But what was Wagner's position? In December 1852 his figure emerged from the limbo in which we left him in 1844, when a long article appeared in *The Athenaeum* ironically entitled "The two new (rush) lights to lighten the darkness of the musical Jesuits at Leipzig." The two lights were Schumann and Wagner but the critic held that neither could really do much to lighten the darkness in which German music found itself. While lamenting

⁷ See Massimo Zicari, "Giuseppe Verdi in Victorian London" *Studia UBB Musica*, LVII, 2, 2012 (p. 153-162), and "Nothing but the Commonest Tunes: The Early Reception of Verdi's Operas in London, 1845-1848", *Dissonanz*, June 2011, n. 114

all the faults and shortcomings exhibited by Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* he went as far as to sigh: "How low must the opera goer be brought when he can think of Verdi with complacency and longing!"⁸

The expression of regret just reported leads to my second point. No sooner had Wagner's writings and ideas started to circulate than the image of Verdi started to change for the better and be perceived, at least by a critic like Chorley, in less negative terms. Something similar happened also with *The Times* and *The Musical World*, whose critic, James William Davison, appeared to become more lenient towards Verdi probably also on account of the Wagner-effect, or the Wagner-phobia, as it could also be defined. According to Henry Davison, James William's son, and the compiler of his memoirs, the events that had occurred in the three years which preceded the premiere of *Rigoletto* in London (1853) had worried his father. In 1851 Richard Wagner had circulated a "communication"⁹ to his friends, in which he traced the development of his dramatic and musical ideas and showed his desire to sweep away "a mass of art-encumbering rubbish"¹⁰. This communication triggered a series of strong reactions also in England, involving both composers and music critics. While some of the most progressive English composers saw in Wagner's theories an incentive to realize their own innovative ideas and respond to their own urge for novelty and originality, the most conservative critics looked suspiciously at the disrespectful attitude shown by Wagner and reacted badly to his threatening claims. Henry Pierson belonged to the first class; he was a young British composer who, having studied in Germany, had his oratorio *Jerusalem* performed at the Norwich Festival on 23 September 1852. On that occasion some of the most conservative critics condemned him a mere parasite of the Wagnerian school, even though it was not easy to trace in his music any affinity to the Bayreuth composer¹¹. Among these critics was Davison, whose conservative inclination prompted him to pronounce Pierson a young composer too dangerously influenced by Wagner's false idol.¹² In a way, Davison's conservatism found in Wagner a new source of

⁸ Reported in *The Musical World* (1852: Dec. 25), n. 52, p. 822.

⁹ Richard Wagner, "Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde", 1851 in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*: Volume IV, Pages 230-344; English translation by William Ashton Ellis *A Communication to my Friends in Richard Wagner's Prose Works* (London: Kegan, 1895), vol I, p. 267.

¹⁰ Henry Davison, *Music during the Victorian era. From Mendelssohn to Wagner: being the memoirs of J. W. Davison, forty years music critic of "The Times"* (London: Reeves, 1912), p. 139-145.

¹¹ Rosa Harriet Newmarch, "Henry Hugo Pierson" in *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900*, Volume 45.

¹² *The Times* (1852: Sept. 24). See also Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press 1850-1914: Watchmen of Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) pp. 14-20.

concern and apprehension, which would turn out to be beneficial to the image of all those composers who, like Verdi, were understood as much less threatening not at least on account of the higher degree of familiarity with their music and a complete lack of theoretical formulations.

Of a similar nature was the discussion triggered in London when Wagner was invited to succeed Michael Costa as conductor at the Philharmonic Society in London in 1855. The entire musical Europe had reacted badly to his *Judenthum in der Musik*, (*On Judaism in music*) published in the columns of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (NZM) of Leipzig in 1850, in which he had pronounced the music of such Jewish composers as Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn a sham. As a consequence, wherever the names of these composers were respected Wagner might have easily expected many fierce and vindictive enemies, eager to counterattack. Chorley, from the columns of *The Athenaeum*, and Davison from *The Times* and *The Musical World*, continued to favour Mendelssohn and value his classical composure and were ready to fight back¹³.

In 1855 the issue concerning the future conductor of the Philharmonic concerts found ample resonance in the columns of *The Musical World*, and the negotiations leading up to the final agreement were chronicled in its columns. Hector Berlioz was taken into consideration, but had to decline the invitation, having already given his word to Henry Wylde, co-founder of the New Philharmonic Society. Lindpaintner, Sterndale Bennet, Robert Schumann, Franz Lachner, Ferdinand Hiller were then considered, until the name of Richard Wagner was pronounced. The critic of *The Musical World* said him to be "the musician earnestly bent on upsetting all the accepted forms and canons of art, [...] in order the more surely to establish his doctrines that rhythm is superfluous, counterpoint a useless bore, and every musician ancient or modern, himself excepted, either an impostor or a blockhead."¹⁴ The agreement between Wagner and the directors of the Philharmonic society being reached, on 10 February *The Musical World* took the opportunity to introduce the German composer and conductor to his readers and anticipate the nature of the battle that was to commence.

Now that the period of Richard Wagner's arrival approaches, it is well for Philharmonic subscribers to make themselves thoroughly acquainted with his art-doctrine, in order that they may easier comprehend his hidden meanings, and appreciate the subtler beauties of his compositions. We shall aid them to the best of our ability, by expounding, on fit occasions, whatever we have the wit to fathom. Our "line," however, not being interminable, there are likely to

¹³ Reginald Nettel, *The Orchestra in England, A social History* (London: Cape, 1948), pp. 183-189.

¹⁴ *The Musical World* (1855: January 20), n. 3, p. 41.

*be many soundings too deep for us to “make” – like Bottom’s dream, in Shakespeare, so called because it had “no bottom.” In such cases we shall appeal to those, who, having engaged Herr Wagner as Conductor of the Philharmonic Concerts, must be well versed in his philosophy, and steeped by anticipation in the “music of the future.”*¹⁵

The tones clearly reveal a vein of sarcasm not only with regard to Wagner, but also to those who, having decided for the most troublesome of German living musicians, were certainly no better qualified or prepared to extricate themselves from the music-dramatic entanglement represented by Wagner’s theories. Should they fail to accomplish such a challenging task; the critic suggested that the additional service of Dr. Franz Liszt, whose efforts to support Wagner and evangelize the crowds were also made object of ridicule, might be required. At Weimer Liszt, who was said anxious to hold the torch “by which the Gospel of St. Richard may be revealed” was certainly willing “to do for Wagner what Proclus did for Plato, Taylor for Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas for the Immaculate Conception.”¹⁶ Wagner the messiah needed apostles who might enlighten the uninitiated. In the following months several writings made their appearance in the columns of *The Musical World*, where the issue concerning Wagner’s music and theories was frequently raised. Long before either *Tannhäuser* or *Lohengrin*¹⁷ could be properly performed and listened to in London, their composer was pronounced contemptuous of everybody but himself, devoid of any technical skill, and deficient in the treatment of both the orchestra and the voice¹⁸.

The quality of the articles taken into consideration suggests that Wagner’s contemptuous attitude towards his colleagues, the singers, the managers and the critics had triggered a series of negative reactions that would bias the judgement on his music. Wagner’s manner of advocating his own artistic ideals and puffing his music-dramatic achievements sounded lofty and pompous to the extreme; furthermore, they raised the general expectation to such a degree that it would be impossible for the composer to keep up with. His ambition, his overcritical attitude, his overzealous attempt at the dissemination of idiosyncratic theories was a bad preparation for the performance of his works.

¹⁵ “Reactionary Letters”, *The Musical World* (1855: February 10) n. 6, pp. 88-89. Since January 1855 a long series of reflections on Wagner’s alleged virtues were published in the columns of *The Musical World* under the title “Reactionary Letters”.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ The first public performance in England of a Wagner composition appears to have been by the Amateur Musical Society on 10 April 1854, when the March from *Tannhäuser* was performed. “Wagner’s Music in England”, *The Musical Times* (1906: September 1), p. 589.

¹⁸ *The Musical World* (1855: February 17) n. 7, p. 99.

Despite the acrimonious attitude exhibited by its editor, Wagner was not denied some space in the columns of *The Musical World*, and on 24 March 1855 his long introductory text to Beethoven's Choral Symphony was published; the symphony had been included in the second philharmonic concert and the editor referred to Wagner's text as "an interesting rhapsody," by which he did not intend to pay him a compliment¹⁹. The Philharmonic Concerts opened on 12 March and comprised 7 concerts, three of which included Wagner's music: the Introduction, Bridal Chorus, Wedding March and Epithalamium from *Lohengrin* was performed in the second concert and the Overture from *Tannhauser* in the fifth and seventh concert.

Since the second concert of the Philharmonic Society included some selected pages from *Lohengrin*, it immediately drew the specialised journals' attention. The critic of *The Musical World* confirmed the reasons of scepticism already expressed with regard to Wagner's music and described it by adopting expressions such as mysterious, incoherent, abstruse, especially with respect to the manner in which Wagner seemed to defy the traditional notion of key and key-relation.²⁰ *The Spectator* had pronounced Wagner a conductor well capable of holding the orchestra in his hands and realize any desired expressive nuance, both in terms of timing and dynamics. As a composer, instead, the critic said Wagner different from what he had been led to expect; neither obscure nor extravagant, but rather broad and clear, conventional in the treatment of the form and by no means new in the melodic invention²¹. The critic of *The Morning Post* shared a sense of disappointment with his colleague from the *Spectator*, for while the theories presented in his *Kunst-werk der Zukunft* were worth the critic's respectful attention Wagner's music, at least as far as the recently performed selection from *Lohengrin* was concerned, showed "no marked individuality of style in the score, no epoch-making innovations, such as the very original literary works of the composer had taught us to look for."²² *The Athenaeum* was much less lenient and Herr Wagner was strongly criticized on account of a good number of shortcomings. To start with, as a conductor he had allowed himself to "finish up" Mendelssohn's music and withdraw the *ripieni* instruments from the solos in his Violin Concerto, which was in the programme, Henry Blagrove being the soloist. The instrumentation of Wagner's own music was particularly objectionable, for his acute fancies of scoring gave more pains than pleasure; his melodic invention was poor and his music commonplace²³.

¹⁹ *The Musical World* (1855: March 31) n. 13, pp. 177-179.

²⁰ *The Musical World* (1855: March 24) n. 12, pp. 200-301.

²¹ The opinion appeared in *The Spectator* and was also reproduced in *The Musical World* (1855: April 7) n. 14, pp. 211-212.

²² Also reproduced in *The Musical World* (1855: April 28) n. 17, pp. 268-269.

²³ Also reproduced in *The Musical World* (1855: April 7) n. 14, pp. 211-212.

One week later *The Musical World* started publishing the libretto of *Lohengrin* in its columns, to which *Oper und Drama*, translated expressly for that journal, and published in issues, was to be added on 19 May 1855, thus providing its readers with further and more in-depth access to Wagner's theories.

In the meantime the season at the Royal Italian Opera commenced, *Ernani* being revived at the end of April, and repeated three times²⁴. While not a single word was spent by the critic of *The Musical World* on Verdi's *Ernani*, the third concert of the Philharmonic Society was carefully reviewed and Wagner's conducting was pronounced "unsatisfactory, full of fits and starts, not always intelligible, sometimes leading to new effects and good effects, but generally incoherent."²⁵ The critic disliked the manner in which Wagner invariably took all the second subjects of the symphonic works at a sensibly slower pace than the first, and the extent to which *crescendi* and *rallentandi* were abused by the conductor at the expense of the general balance. Despite everything though, the public was enthusiastic and some of the works were even encored. A further note of regret concerning Wagner's musical art as well as his conducting skills made its appearance in the columns of *The Sunday Times*, whose critic had taken some time to peruse two songs from *Lohengrin* and pronounce his unequivocal verdict.

*We may not have secured the key to this great music-mystery, or we may be in that state of invincible ignorance impolitely termed obstinacy; but, be it as it may, we are, on the evidence before us, forced to adopt one of two conclusions – either Richard Wagner is a desperate charlatan, endowed with worldly skill and vigorous purpose enough to persuade a gaping crowd that the nauseous compound he manufactures has some precious inner virtue, that they must live and ponder yet more ere they perceive; or else he is a self-deceived enthusiast, who thoroughly believes his own apostolic mission, and is too utterly destitute of any perception of musical beauty to recognise the worthlessness of his credentials.*²⁶

A detailed analysis of the music in question followed, in which the critic elaborated further on the numerous "stupid and unmeaning oddities" contained in the score. A couple of reflections on the way Wagner the charlatan showed to be harmful to the English nation concluded the article; his music had been imposed on the public so as to mystify them and "still more to divert their

²⁴ *The Musical World* (1855: May 5) n. 18, p. 283.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ "Two Songs by Richard Wagner" in *The Sunday Times*, reported from *The Musical World* (1855: May 12), n. 19, pp. 290-291.

attention from the just claims of their artist-countrymen"²⁷. Wagner represented a real threat to the English music.

At this point, leaving aside the vindictive reactions triggered by Wagner's personal attacks, a brief summary becomes possible of the arguments produced by those critics who did not seem to appreciate the German composer:

- the expectations raised by his theoretical edifice were not fulfilled by the music, which instead sounded either incoherent and abstruse, or broad and commonplace;
- his compositional techniques defied the traditional notion of key and key-relation;
- he abused the voices;
- the orchestration was confused and often deafeningly noisy.
- as a conductor he showed a disrespectful attitude towards the composers, whose scores he curtailed at his own pleasure.

More often than not, the judgements were quite general and an overall sense of unfulfilled expectation prevailed over a more precise analysis of his works.

In the middle of such an animated discussion, on 10 May 1855 *Il Trovatore* was premiered at Covent Garden. Even though some of the critics did not spare Verdi the usual repertoire of recriminations and objections, to our surprise, much milder judgements were pronounced by some of the severest among them. The critic of *The Musical World*, for instance, assumed an ambivalent position, uncertain between the reiteration of a well-known repertoire of faults and short-comings on the one side, and a more positive response on the other. Having described the plot, which was defined as an accumulation of horrors, and having mentioned the extent to which the interpreters were to be credited with the success of the performance, the critic pronounced a first tentatively positive judgement

*It [Il Trovatore] is apparently written with more care than the majority of his works; the unisons are fewer; and the desire to give a true dramatic interest to the scene is more manifest. On the other hand – which surprised us – the tunes are not so frequent as in his former operas. Much of the music of Il Trovatore, however, has character, is often pleasing, oftener well adapted to the situations, and occasionally in point of freedom and breadth – for example, the air "Ah! Ben mio," in the third act, so magnificently sung by Sig. Tamberlik – worthy of unqualified praise.*²⁸

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ *The Musical World* (1855: May 12) n. 19, p. 293.

Even though the work did not seem to fulfil the critic's expectations, fewer unisons, a defined character, a pleasing quality and a freedom and breadth worthy of unqualified praise are expressions of which we have no recollection from previous reviews appeared in the columns of *The Musical World* regarding to Verdi's earlier operas. On 19 May the same critic elaborated more amply on Verdi's last opera²⁹ arguing that Verdi's growing popularity was out of discussion and that he was to some extent gifted, it would be absurd to deny; however, the question concerning the basis on which his popularity was founded was still open to debate. Bellini and Donizetti being dead and Rossini being also dead, even though only musically speaking, the critic maintained that the main characteristic of Verdi's compositional work consisted in writing for the world, the mob, those tasteless common people who were not capable of critical judgement. Verdi was very good at caressing their uneducated ear and at gaining their most deafening applause; he spoke their language and was able to raise their enthusiasm to such an extent as to make most of his colleagues forgotten and their music neglected. This was his talent. In that regard Wagner's contemptuous sneer towards all his colleagues and lofty theories about the music of the future made of him the natural antagonist of Verdi as a popular composer. Furthermore, the critic acknowledged that their positions were complementary in that they could join a common team and learn from each other; in particular, listening to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* would have helped Verdi raise the tones of his musical ambition.

Verdi should communicate with Richard Wagner – the other red-republican of music, who wants to revolutionise the art after a fashion of his own. Richard would whisper something in his ear, by which Joseph (Giuseppe) might benefit. The firm of Wagner and Verdi would then be able to export their musical wares to all parts of the earth.

*P.S. A word to the Brothers Escudier. Has Verdi ever heard Lohengrin? If not, let him go and hear Tannhäuser.*³⁰

During the last months of the year further discussion was carried out, addressing both Wagner's objectionable theories and Verdi's popular success. With regard to the first, in August an article from *The Morning Post* stated that the German composer's erroneous principles were more harmful to music than his compositions, the way a murder does less harm to society than the cunning sophist who seeks to justify such a horrendous crime with the blandishment of his words and the rhetoric of his discourse.

²⁹ *The Musical World* (1855: May 19) n. 20, p. 313.

³⁰ *The Musical World* (1855: May 19) n. 20, p. 314.

*The most hopeless mediocrity – the most insane rhapsodies, might be passed over in silence, or merely provoke a smile; but the dissemination of false theories, rendered still more seductive and dangerous by the brilliant wit, keen satire, imagination, fervid eloquence, and occasional glimpses of truth which this gentleman's literary works include, would require a strong hand to oppose them; and still, in the end, that opposition would prove useless, for the downward course once taken, none but a Sisyphus would attempt to arrest it. Herr Wagner is a necessary devil.*³¹

In the years between 1861, when *Tannhäuser* was first performed in Paris, and 1870, when *L'Olandese Dannato* was finally performed, occasional echoes of the discussion concerning the *Music of the Future* in the continent reached London and several articles from the French and the German Press were translated and published in *The Musical World*. Reviews from *Die Kölnische Zeitung*, *Die Niederrheinische Musikzeitung*, *Die Wiener Neue Freie Presse* or *Le Ménestrel* were reproduced in the columns of *The Musical World* reporting on the hitches and squabbles of all sorts that accompanied the performance of Wagner's works³². The overall comments were negative and referred almost invariably to a noisy orchestration, a monotonous abuse of the voices, a superabundance of recitatives, the conflicting reactions of the audience. These were often accompanied by severe remarks on Wagner's boundless self-praise, his literary self-mirroring, his reformatory bombast, and his revolting degradation of the greatest composers of dramatic music, a circumstance that *obliged* both the critic and the public to apply a severe standard to his artistic productions, "for the purpose of testing what grounds there were for justifying, or even simply excusing, his arrogance."³³

To conclude, while in the time-span taken into consideration Verdi's works were conceptualized by Victorian critics on account of direct knowledge, the same cannot be said with regard to Wagner, whose figure suffered strongly from his pompous, aggressive attitude and the accompanying theoretical burden long before any one of his works could be put on stage in London. By the mid-fifties, Verdi's music came to be accepted even by those critics who had showed themselves to be averse to his early operas, also thanks to Wagner's controversial position and threatening figure. In that regard, Verdi the popular composer and Wagner the lofty theoretician were said to hold antagonistic and, to some extent, complementary positions.

³¹ *The Morning Post*, in *The Musical World* (1855: August 18), n. 33, p. 529.

³² *The Musical World* (1861: March 16), n 11, p. 164.

³³ *Ibidem*.

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