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GIUSEPPE VERDI IN VICTORIAN LONDON

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SUMMARY. Despite the vast research on Verdi's compositional as well as dramatic achievements, little attention seems to have been paid to the early reception of his works in Victorian London. A review of such periodicals as *The Times*, *The Musical Times*, *The Athenaeum* has drawn attention to two particular aspects of relevance; Verdi's first operas impinged upon the model represented by Rossini's light-spirited *melodiousness* and provoked a sense of general bewilderment; even when opera-goers began to show clear signs of appreciation and to crowd the theatres where Verdi's operas were performed, critics continued to object to their value and to ascribe their success to the singers' new vocal and dramatic skills.

Keywords: Verdi; Opera; Reception; Victorian London.

With my contribution I will try to shed some light on the way our perception of the value of a composer's music changes over time, depending on a quite diverse set of context-related conditions. If we turn our eyes back to the past two centuries and have a look at what happened to other composers, we are extremely likely to find out that many of them were forgotten immediately after their death, no matter how famous, acclaimed or even celebrated they were during their professional career, while, on the other hand, nowadays we value composers who were either neglected or appreciated in their lifetime only with regard to aspects that we would now consider negligible.

Let's think of Johann Sebastian Bach for a short moment and the way he was held in great esteem as an improviser and an organ tester during his career. He had to strive to obtain proper working conditions, he was reprimanded for the lack of appropriateness of his ornamentation while accompanying the liturgy and finally, in 1737, he was harshly criticized by Johann Adoph Scheibe, who argued that his music was particularly complicated, unnatural, unmelodious, and "artificial". Today we worship J.S. Bach and value his music to such an extent that he could not have dreamed of.

And what about Johann Nepomuk Hummel? Trumpet players are quite familiar with his concerto, but we very often fail to recall his name in connection with his own instrument, the piano. His works include no less than 127 opus

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numbers and his treatise, *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instruction on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte* (1828) sold thousands of copies within days of its publication. When he died he was famous, but in a few decades his music disappeared from the "regular" piano repertoire while today, had it not been for the Trumpet concerto, we would hardly remember his name. Of course there are many good reasons why both Bach and Hummel enjoyed quite different a reputation during their lifetime from that which they enjoy among our contemporaries. A similar picture can be drawn with regard to Giuseppe Verdi, whose 200th birth anniversary will be celebrated next year, and whose international reputation today does not always correspond with the quality of those critical remarks which accompanied the first production of his operas not only in Italy, but also in France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Although one of the most acclaimed champions of Italian opera ever, and notwithstanding the vast research on Verdi's compositional as well as dramatic achievements, little attention seems to have been paid to the early reception of his works in London. In fact, although much has been published with regard to the reception of Verdi's Operas in Italy, Germany and France, little or no attention has been paid to the way critics conceptualized Verdi's operas in Victorian London.

But when did the whole story commence? The first opera presented to the London public was *Ernani,* produced at Her Majesty's Theatre on 8 March 1845. *Nabucco* was chosen by Benjamin Lumley to open the operatic season at Her Majesty's Theatre on 3 March 1846, while *I Lombardi* was performed a couple of months later, on 12 May in the same theatre. It was thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit and managerial attitude of Benjamin Lumley that Verdi was first introduced to the London public[2]. In his capacity as Manager and Lessee of Her Majesty's Theatre at Haymarket, Lumley was the person who held the financial responsibility of the enterprise and had to secure the most celebrated composers for his operatic establishment, together with the most applauded, cherished, and looked for interpreters of the moment. We can see Lumley as a discerning manager who understood opera as a genre strongly dependent on the public's taste and inclinations, always in search for what was new and fashionable. His entrepreneurial spirit involved a keen sense of what the international market could offer, of how the public's expectation could be raised, and how the media might be used to steer the discussion and influence the so-called common taste. It was Lumley who commissioned Verdi to compose a new opera to be premiered at his theatre in 1847, *I Masnadieri*.

But what kind of reaction did Verdi's early operas produce in London? How did *Ernani*, *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* or *I Masnadieri* impact the English musical milieu?

[2] Lumley, Benjamin, *Reminiscences of the Opera*, Hurst and Blackett, London, 1864.

"In England, the strenuous, fiery composer, whose music flamed along in such an unmeasured manner, met with strong opposition; in some cases with downright abuse". This excerpt belongs to an extensive article published in *The Musical Times* on 1 March 1901, one month after Verdi's death (27 January). It provides us with a first concise account of the overall quality of the critical attitude towards Verdi in England in the 19th Century. The author was Joseph Bennett (1831-1911), lead writer and music critic of the *Daily Telegraph* from 1870 to 1906, though he also collaborated quite extensively with *The Musical Times*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Musical World*. Together with Henry Fothergill Chorley (*The Athenaeum*) and James William Davison (*The Times*) he was considered one of the most influential critics in Victorian England; he had also contributed an extensive reportage on the premiere of *Falstaff* in Milan to the columns of *The Musical Times*, in 1893[3]. What strikes the modern reader while reading this article is the apologetic quality of the text. In a way, Bennet had to admit that his colleagues' behaviour had been inappropriate, not to say indecorous, and intended to apologize to Verdi for the harsh quality of their criticisms. In choosing the word "abuse", he clearly drew his readers' attention to the way Verdi had been ill-treated by the Victorian critics, and this to such an extent that, at least now that the composer had just passed away, an apology was necessary. Bennett quoted *in extenso* from an article published in *The Musical World* on 7 March 1846 and commented on a couple of passages concerning the reactions provoked by Verdi's first operas performed in England.

> *Ernani* led us to suspect, and *Nabucco*, has certified our suspicion, that of all the modern Italian composers, Verdi is the most thoroughly insignificant. We listen, vainly, as the work proceeds, for the resemblance of a melody. There is positively nothing, not even a feeling of rhythm – but rather, indeed, a very unpleasant disregard for that important element of musical art. The choruses are nothing but the commonest tunes, arranged almost invariably in unison – perhaps because the composer knows not how to write in parts. The concerted music is patchy, rambling and unconnected. The *cantabiles* are always unrhythmical – and the absence of design is everywhere observable. The harmonies are either the tritest common-places, or something peculiarly odd and unpleasant. Nothing can be more feeble than the orchestration. The employment of the wind instruments is remarkably infelicitous, and all the experiments are failures. The overture is the poorest stuff imaginable, and yet the only glimpses of tune in the opera are comprised within its limits – and these are subsequently employed throughout the work *ad nauseam*. Serious criticism would be thrown away upon such a work.[4]

[3] Langley, Leanne, *Notes*, Second Series, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Mar. 1990), 583-592 and Zicari, Massimo, *The Land of Song*, Ed. Peter Lang, Bern, 2008, p. 175-197.

[4] *The Musical World* (1846: March 7) n. 10, Vol. XXI, p. 105 also in: Bennett, Joseph, *Giuseppe Verdi*, in: *The Musical Times* (1 March 1901), p. 153.

As Bennett clarified in 1901, strong dramatic feeling, energy, passion and exuberant conception were the qualities recognized, somewhat tardily and, no doubt, reluctantly, by most of the English critics who wrote about Verdi. In fact, negative reactions and unsympathetic comments were far more frequent than positive criticisms, referring to a repertoire of faults and shortcomings repeated over and over again. But why was Verdi so harshly criticized? What musical milieu did his music impinge upon? Were there specific reasons why strong dramatic feeling, energy, passion and exuberant conception were at first addressed so negatively?

In *Richard Wagner and the Music of the Future*, published in 1874, Francis Hueffer, the scholar who was asked to prepare the English version of Verdi's *Otello*, included an extensive account of the past development of Italian opera that incorporated a large paragraph on Rossini and his music.[5]

As Hueffer put it, the main feature of Rossini's music was melodiousness, a trait that was considered typical of the whole population of the Italian peninsula, although distinctive of a musical culture dangerously inclined towards the trivial.

> What he [Rossini] could do and did admirably well was to open the rich mines of melodious beauty with which nature had endowed him, and which it is so easy to augment and develop in a country whose very language is music, and where the *gondolieri* chant the stanzas of Tasso to self-invented tunes. This principle of absolute melodiousness, as Rossini carried it out to its extreme, combined with the charming freshness of his good-natured humour, was well adapted to silence the objection of graver criticism in the universal uproar of popular applause.[6]

Most of the negative reviews and criticisms published in the 1840s referred to the idea of melodic beauty that had been so dear to Rossini and the traditional Italian school of *bel canto* to which Verdi now seemed to prefer a much stronger dramatic feeling and a new, dramatized singing style. Verdi's first operas impinged upon the model represented by Rossini's light-spirited *melodiousness* and provoked a sense of general bewilderment.

This claim finds ample support in a number of reviews and articles published between 1845 and 1852 in *The Times*, *The Musical World*, and *The Athenaeum*. According to some of the most conservative critics of the time Verdi, who belonged to the new Italian school, seemed to be inclined to choose crude and bloody dramatic plots; his preference for declamation, to which melody was sacrificed, was consistent with that inclination, since that

[5] Hueffer, Fr., *Richard Wagner and the Music of the Future*, Ed. Chapman and Hall, London, 1874.
[6] Hueffer, Fr., p. 39.

device had showed to be particularly effectual insofar as the strongest emotions were involved; his treatment of the voice, now forced to the extreme for the sake of dramatic effect, was simply ruinous; the noisiness of the orchestra was such as to force singers to shout and scream all the time, instead of sing; the French model seemed now to prevail upon the Italian classical tradition, represented by Cimarosa.

In January 1847, a scheme for a rival establishment at Covent Garden was announced and Lumley, the manager of Her Majesty's Theatre, found himself confronted with a competing opera season. His reaction is perfectly consistent with the managerial qualities described before for he decided to appeal to the audience by announcing an excellent cast and some strong operatic novelties. The prospectus he was in the position to circulate included, among other things, two newly composed operas: Verdi's *Il Corsaro* (eventually substituted for by *I Masnadieri*) and Mendelssohn's *La Tempesta*, which the composer never brought to completion. On 23 January the response from the press arrived and *The Musical World* published an article in which the critic congratulated the manager for his decision and wished him the best success.

> Cimarosa and Paisiello could sustain the Opera on its legs – Rossini could do it also, and without assistance – Mercadante, Donizetti, and Bellini, could effect it after a manner – but Verdi, and the like of him, cannot. The disease of the Italian Opera has grown into a head, and Verdi is the fungus to which all the bad humours have flowed from the various parts. To re-establish health, this fungus must be lopped off, and a wholesome plaster be applied. The plaster will be Mendelssohn – but beware of applying it before the cancerous tumour, in which all the most virulent poisons of the disease are concentrated, be removed. It will not do for Mendelssohn to patch up Verdi – he must sit upon his vacant throne. Verdi must abdicate and Mendelssohn reign in his stead.[7]

The reason why the critic congratulated the manager lies in the choice of the composer who was asked to write a new opera; not Verdi, but rather the king of modern German musicians, Mendelssohn, who was to set to music a libretto by Scribe based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. While Lumley was clearly trying to undertake all the necessary steps that would secure the most applauded opera composer of the moment for his lyric establishment, Giuseppe Verdi, together with the champion of musical composure, Mendelssohn, the critic showed to be appreciative only towards the second, the first being the object of severe, if not offensive critical remarks.

By the time *Nino* and *I Lombardi* were performed in London the critical attitude that accompanied the reception of Verdi's music appeared multifaceted or at least twofold. In his *Reminiscences of the Opera* Lumley includes an account of *I Lombardi* in which he suggests that the opera was a 'great and

[7] *The Musical World* (1847: Jan. 23), No. 4, Vol. XXII, p. 46.

noisy success – but yet a doubtful one', in opposition to the 'comparative unanimity with which *Nabucco* had been received'. According to his account, two opposite parties had confronted each other on the basis of arguments that were similar in content but opposite in value.

> Whilst, by the Anti-Verdians, *I Lombardi* was declared to be flimsy, trashy, worthless; the Verdi party, and the adherents of the modern school, pronounced it to be full of power, vigour and originality. The one portion asserted that it was utterly devoid of melody – the other, that it was replete with melody of the most charming kind; the one again insisted that it was the worst work of the aspirant – the other, that it was the young composer's *chef-d'oevre*.[8]

In the midst of this conflict – Lumley added – the public seemed undecided and wavering, hesitating between novelty and tradition.

But what position did the public take? How did the audience react? Again, even according to the most severe critics reviewing Verdi's music, the audience seemed to like his operas and continued to throng both theatres (Covent Garden and Haymarket) in order to attend them notwithstanding the negative reviews that appeared in the London periodicals. The antagonist position held by the two parties, critics and audience, finds confirmation in many later articles; among these is the one published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1855 from which the following excerpt is taken.

> Verdi has long been popular as a dramatic composer; and his popularity has been literal – gained by the voice of the multitude in opposition to that of criticism. While writers learned in musical lore have been labouring to prove that Verdi is a shallow pretender, his operas have been giving delight to thousands in every part of Europe.[9]

A rapid glance at what Frederick Crowest wrote in *Verdi: Man and Musician* in 1897 leads us to suspect that the rigour expressed by Chorley and his colleagues in the forties does not reflect the apparently much more appreciative attitude of the audience.

> 'The Audience, if not the critics, were delighted with the work. The characters so musically individualised, the new and attractive orchestration, the *motive* distinguishing the singer, the perfect *ensemble*, the well-proportioned whole opera – all these thoroughly Verdinian [sic] characteristics were seized upon and admired'.[10]

[8] Lumley, Benjamin, *Reminiscences of the Opera*, Ed. Hurst and Blackett, London, 1864, p. 148-149.
[9] *Illustrated London News* (19 May 1855), quoted in Crowest, p. 125.
[10] Crowest, Frederick F., *Verdi: Man and Musician, His Biography with Especial Reference to his English Experience*, Ed. John Milton, London, 1897, p. 61.

Interestingly, even when opera-goers began to show clear signs of appreciation and to crowd the theatres where Verdi's operas were performed, critics continued to object to their value and to ascribe their success to the singers' vocal and dramatic skills only. Numerous instances can be found in the music columns of the time where frequent mention was made of the quality of the performance notwithstanding the scantiness of the music. A case in point can be made with regard to the baritone Francesco Ronconi and his rendition of the Assyrian monarch in *Nabucco* at Covent Garden in 1850, while a second instance is provided by Sophie Cruvelli's Elvira in *Ernani* at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1852.

On 31 May 1850 *The Times* reviewed Verdi's *Nabucco* and referred to Ronconi's vocal qualities as opposed to the harshness required by the music.

> With a light barytone voice, neither distinguished for great power or fine quality, he [Ronconi] produces effects both in cantabile and florid singing, which proclaim him a vocalist of the highest order. His manner of phrasing is admirably rounded and finished, his flexibility remarkable, and the most perfect taste invariably regulates his cadences, ornaments, and *fioriture*. He is, in short a striking example of the most finished school of Italian singing as it existed in those palmy days when Rossini, and not Verdi, was the idol of the Italians. It was to be regretted that Signor Ronconi should find it necessary to make his *rentrée* in one of Verdi's operas, where screaming is so often the substitute for singing, vulgar tunes for graceful melody and mere noise for the rich combinations of choral and orchestral harmony; but his conception of the character of the Assyrian monarch (Anato-Nino-Nabucco) is so fine, and the realization of his conception so masterly, that criticism is disarmed while he is on the stage, and the meagreness of Signor Verdi's invention is lost sight of in the genius of the dramatic artist.[11]

Two years later, in 1852, the critic of *The Times* reviewed *Ernani*, and took this opportunity to claim that it was only thanks to Sofie Cruvelli's rendition of Elvira that not only Ernani but also *Nabucco* and *Attila* had gained the popularity they were then enjoying, despite the poor quality of the music.

> *Ernani* was presented on Saturday, for the first time this season. Although Verdi's best work, it is doubtful whether this opera would so long have retained possession of the stage, in a country where the claims of its composer are less easily recognized than on the continent, but for Mdlle. Sofie Cruvelli, who first appeared at Her Majesty's Theatre, in 1848, in the character of the heroine, of which she has since retained almost exclusive possession. On other occasions when *Ernani* has been attempted it has failed. It may therefore be concluded that the part of Elvira, whatever its abstract musical merits, is well suited to Mdlle. Cruvelli, who enters into it with an enthusiasm which savours of evident

[11] *The Times* (1850: May 31).

> predilection. A reasonable cause for this may be assigned in the great success she has achieved in *Ernani*, *Nabucco*, *Attila*, and other operas of Verdi, at Venice, Genoa, Milan, &c., and more recently at Paris - complacently regarded by Frenchmen as the arbitress and dispenser of musical reputations. Signor Verdi owes a deep debt of gratitude to Mademoiselle Cruvelli; and it is to be hoped this may not be repaid by the ultimate annihilation of her magnificent voice.[12]

The story continues with the production of *Rigoletto* in 1853, when *The Musical Times* reiterated similar expressions of praise towards the interpreters, who, alone, were to be credited with the ephemeral success of the opera; given the poor quality of the music *Rigoletto*'s permanence in the operatic repertoire, it was held, would not be long. Verdi was now indebted to Ronconi and the tenor Mario for the temporary success of his opera.

> With all that has been accomplished for *Rigoletto* by the directors of the Royal Italian Opera, it cannot live. It may flicker and flare up for a few nights, fed from the oil of Ronconi's genius, and blown into momentary vitality by the soft breathings of Mario's voice; but it will go out like an ill-wicked rush-light and leave not a spark behind, Such is our prophecy for *Rigoletto*![13]

Trovatore (1855) and *Traviata* (1856) followed, this last being accompanied by harsh criticisms on account of its questionable libretto and the alleged triviality of the music. In the following years the success of Verdi became more and more unquestionable and, as Henry Sutherland Edwards put it in 1881, in England at some point "it has been considered bad taste not to admire Verdi's music"[14]. When *Falstaff,* Verdi's last opera, was premiered at Covent Garden on 20 May 1894 things had changed quite meaningfully and even though not every critic agreed upon the artistic value of Verdi's more mature works, none of them would have ventured to address him in less than respectful terms.[15]

In conclusion, an extensive scrutiny of such periodicals as *The Times*, *The Athenaeum* and *The Musical World* allows us to shed some light on the issue concerning Verdi's early reception and highlight four fundamental aspects:

a) the reason why Verdi first met with such a hostile attitude lay in the way his operas impinged upon the palmy model represented by Rossini;

b) Verdi's music was perceived as completely devoid of the most typically distinctive feature of Italian music: melodiousness;

[12] *The Times* (1852: May 10).
[13] *The Musical Times* (1853: May 21).
[14] Sutherland, Edwards, Henry, *Rossini and his School*, Ed. Marston, London, 1881.
[15] Zicari, Massimo, *Ibidem*, pp. 175-197.

c) not only was the traditional notion of melody considered at stake, but also the vocal technique necessary to sustain it.

d) even when opera-goers began to show clear signs of appreciation and to favour Verdi's works, some of the critics continued to object to their value and to credit the singers alone with the success of the opera.

With regard to the periodicals taken into account, a few additional reflections are necessary, so as to better understand those context-related conditions to which I referred at the outset of my contribution and which played a pivotal role in determining the overall quality of Verdi's reception in Victorian London. *The Athenaeum* was probably the most influential literary journal of the time, and its music critic was Henry Fothergill Chorley; he disliked Schumann and Berlioz, considered Wagner music dramas pernicious, and favoured Mendelssohn, Rossini Mozart and Beethoven. The most conservative, severe and intransigent of all critics, he treasured the traditional notion of Italian *belcanto* and, as a consequence, opposed any new idea that could compromise or put at risk this much cherished tradition. The critic of *The Times* and editor of *The Musical World* (this last published by Novello) was James William Davison, a man who, together with other such leading figures as William Sterndale Bennet and George Macfarren, played a pivotal role in the so called English Musical Renaissance[16]. He was an ardent supporter of native talent and from the columns of *The Musical World* in particular, he worked strenuously to advocate the merits of local composers and oppose foreign virtuoso players. Two episodes can be recalled so as to understand to what extent Davison could raise barricades against invisible enemies. In 1847 he objected to the establishment of a second opera theatre at Covent Garden by arguing that this would attract even more foreigners at the expense of those local musicians striving for public recognition. In 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition in London, he published a series of articles in which he claimed that English musicians should take this opportunity to show the world their true value and argued for a *National Opera* being established on a permanent basis at Drury Lane in London. Of these three periodicals *The Times* showed itself moderately positive towards Verdi, while *The Athenaeum* was clearly more hostile. *The Musical World*, instead, represents a singular case as it served as a tool for Davison's nationalistic propaganda.

In general, a clear perception of the gap between what Italian opera used to be like before the mid-1840s, and the new dramaturgy proposed by Verdi was widely shared among the critics. What divided them into two different

[16] Hughes, Meirion, *The English musical Renaissance and the Press 1850-1914: Watchmen of Music*, Ed. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002.

orientations was the possible reason. While all seemed to recognize the symptoms, not everybody appeared to agree on the cause: a complete lack of compositional skills for some, an innovative attitude that sacrificed traditional melodiousness to more dramatic effects for others.

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