

Cambridge Studies in Opera

Susan Rutherford

Verdi, Opera, Women



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University of Manchester



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107043824

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First published 2013

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Rutherford, Susan.

Verdi, opera, women : premio internazionale: 'Giuseppe Verdi' / Susan Rutherford.

pages cm. – (Cambridge studies in opera)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-04382-4 (hardback)

1. Verdi, Giuseppe, 1813–1901. Operas. 2. Women in opera. 3. Opera--19th century. I. Title.

ML410.V4R78 2013

782.1092--dc23 2013015865

ISBN 978-1-107-04382-4 Hardback

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Verdi's operas – composed between 1839 and 1893 – portray a striking diversity of female protagonists: warrior women and peacemakers, virgins and courtesans, princesses and slaves, witches and gypsies, mothers and daughters, erring and idealised wives, and, last of all, a feisty quartet of Tudor townswomen in Verdi's final opera, *Falstaff*. Yet what meanings did the impassioned crises and dilemmas of these characters hold for the nineteenth-century female spectator, especially during such a turbulent span in the history of the Italian peninsula? How was opera shaped by society – and was society similarly influenced by opera? Contextualising Verdi's female roles within aspects of women's social, cultural and political history, Susan Rutherford explores the interface between the reality of the spectators' lives and the imaginary of the fictional world before them on the operatic stage.

SUSAN RUTHERFORD is Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Manchester. In addition to various essays on voice, performance and nineteenth-century Italian opera, her publications also include *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre, 1850–1914* (co-editor, 1992) and *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge, 2006), which received the 2007 Pauline Alderman Award (IAWM) for research on women and music.

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Verdi, Opera, Women

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first express my deep gratitude to the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani and the Rotary Club of Parma for awarding me the Premio Internazionale 'Giuseppe Verdi', which was the impetus for this book. The institute's director, Pierluigi Petrobelli, and another member of the awarding panel, Julian Budden, were unstinting in their generous support and advice during the process of writing; I am grieved that neither lived to witness the book's publication. Other members of the institute's staff, led by its president, Maria Mercedes Carrara Verdi, also played a vital role, most notably Marisa Di Gregorio Casati, Anna Zuccoli, Michela Crovi and Maria Luigia Pagliani. I have benefited enormously from the kindness of Roger Parker (an earlier recipient of the Premio Internazionale 'Giuseppe Verdi' in 1985); his guidance and scholarship have contributed more than I can say to the development of the following pages. All errors, of course, are my own.

Much of the research on critical reception was undertaken at the Centro Internazionale di Ricerca sui Periodici Musicali (CIRPeM); I am especially grateful to its director Marco Capra, and to Cristina Trombella and Francesca Montresor of the Casa della Musica for making my frequent visits to Parma so productive and enjoyable.

I owe sincere thanks also to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the funding that allowed me time to complete this book, and even more so to my colleagues at the University of Manchester – especially John Casken, Laura Tunbridge, Philip Grange, Rajinder Dudrah and Rebecca Herissone, all of whom have contributed invaluable support in various ways across the years. The eventual emergence of this manuscript into print owes to the superbly professional and helpful hands of Victoria Cooper, the series editor Arthur Groos, Rebecca Jones and their colleagues at Cambridge University Press, and to Christopher Feeney, Jamie Hood and Emma Wildsmith at Out of House Publishing Solutions.

Short sections of this book were earlier published in three essays in *Studi verdiani*, Petrobelli's edited volume *Eroine tragiche ma non troppo* and *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*; I am grateful for permission to reproduce this material in revised form.

Much of the following pages is about operatic love in times long past. It could not have been written without the very real and very present love of my family: my dear husband James, my parents, my sister and brothers, nieces and nephews. This book is dedicated to our newest arrivals, Alice, Millie and Holly, and to their much-loved mothers, Helen and Ruth.

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Another book on Verdi? The shelves of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani in Parma are already burdened with the accumulation of reviews, scholarly tomes, biographies, pamphlets, programme notes and assorted ephemera on his operas since *Oberto* in 1839. It seems ironic that so many words should be expended on a composer who displayed such little interest in analyses of his work. Praise embarrassed Verdi; criticism irritated him. Some comments in the musical press in 1874 provoked this characteristically testy outburst to Opprandino Arrivabene (a former journalist): ‘Do you believe that all or almost all [critics] can penetrate the guts of a composition and understand the intentions of the composer? Never and again never!’¹ Nor, unlike Wagner, did Verdi himself theorise publicly about his works and methods. For Verdi, the liveness of the operatic event superseded discourse: words could not adequately substitute for music, or for the immediacy of performance. His ideas about opera were reserved primarily for his private correspondence with his librettists, editors and singers, where it is apparent that the greatest stimulus in his creative process was a desire to make the operatic event a compelling, intense experience for the spectator. That intensity, after all, was his own response to the act of composition: ‘When I am alone, and occupied with my notes, then my heart throbs, tears rain from my eyes and my emotion and pleasure are indescribable.’² Verdi’s contract was not with the critic or the historian, but rather with audiences and the actuality, or the ‘presentness’, of the operatic event.

How can we access that ‘presentness’ when it lies so far in the past? Paradoxically (and only partially), through the very discourses that Verdi distrusted. One of the more curious volumes of the epoch was written by an American soprano-turned-journalist, Blanche Roosevelt.³ Its cumbersome title – *Verdi, Milan and ‘Othello’: Being A Short Life of Verdi, with letters written about Milan and the new opera of Othello: represented for the first time on the stage of La Scala theatre, February 5, 1887* – none the less signals an unusual effort to capture the operatic experience in print. Embedding her account of the performance in the broader background of the sights and sounds of late nineteenth-century Milan – its people, customs, monuments and galleries – Roosevelt demonstrated a keen sensibility to the milieu of *Otello*’s première, and the way in which the reception of opera is shaped by a greater complex of interactions between art and society.

My own book shares some of this territory, albeit from a different temporal perspective. Whereas Roosevelt sketched the cultural geography of a city in the present, I am tracing the artistic and social topography of a community in the past. Her book clamours with the commotion of contemporary life; mine strains to catch muffled

reverberations sounding distantly across the silence of more than a century. And my interest is not just in Verdi but also in Roosevelt herself – or, rather, what she represents. As the first woman to write publicly about Verdi, Roosevelt provides a rare glimpse of how the work of the most influential Italian composer of the second half of the nineteenth century was perceived and evaluated by a female spectator. In short, my book is about women (and men) watching women – or rather, representations of women enacted by live performers.

For his female audience, the long decades of Verdi's operatic career from 1839 to 1893 produced an abundant diversity of heroines: warrior women and peacemakers, virgins and courtesans, princesses and slaves, witches and gypsies, mothers and daughters, erring and idealised wives, and, last of all, a feisty quartet of Tudor townswomen. To modern eyes, their portraits might appear faded and fixed, little more than an assortment of stiffly posed figurines in quaint costumes and elaborate coiffure, and all too distant from our own notions of personal and sexual freedoms. To the audiences of their day, however, Verdi's heroines were often unsettling precisely because of their equivocal attitudes to the acknowledged codes of femininity. Even their moments of self-sacrifice (and there were many) were criticised as either inadequate or excessive, or sometimes as an act of grace that they frankly didn't deserve. Grouped together, these protagonists seem almost a kind of chorus, one that speaks – or in this case, sings – in Greek fashion about the travails and pleasures of their epoch, about women's wrongs and sometimes (more obliquely) women's rights.

The proscenium arch separating these fictional characters from their spectators was in part a spurious division. Reality – in the form of the cultural and political mores of nineteenth-century Italian society – lay not beyond the opera house, but within it. It crowded the benches in the auditorium, draped itself elegantly in the boxes, roared its approval and whistled its contempt. Backstage, it wrote itself into contracts, raised a hemline here or lowered another there, dictated who should have this role and who that, prompted a librettist's hand, or whispered into a composer's ear. The real world was both background and foreground to the operatic experience: the characters and their avatars, the singers, faced it in the auditorium and met it offstage. This is not to deny the individual agency of the artist, or indeed the multiple collaborations between composer, librettist, singer, designer, stage director, technician, conductor, orchestra, impresario and publisher that produced opera. Opera as art form had its own logic, responding to its own practices and conventions. The creation, production, performance and reception of opera was none the less rooted within specific social environments at specific times.

Verdi's heroines accordingly reveal (as Hamlet put it) the 'form and pressure' of their time, as much as they contribute new contours. To attribute these characters to Verdi, however, is only partly accurate. Almost all his operas were drawn from pre-existing sources – poems, plays, novels, or earlier libretti designed for other composers – written

by a chronologically and geographically diverse range of authors, including Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois, Felice Romani, Tommaso Grossi, Victor Hugo, Byron, Shakespeare, Friedrich Schiller, Voltaire, Zacharias Werner, Joseph Méry, Émile Souvestre, Alexandre Dumas *frs*, Antonio García Gutiérrez, Ángel de Saavedra and Eugène Scribe. Their creations then passed through the hands of Verdi's librettists, mainly Temistocle Solera, Francesco Maria Piave, Andrea Maffei, Salvatore Cammarano, Antonio Somma, Camille Du Locle, Eugène Scribe, Antonio Ghislanzoni, Joseph Méry and Arrigo Boito. Verdi himself took an unusually active role in the process of adaptation, sometimes sketching out the early scenarios and imposing an ever more rigorous pursuit of clarity and brevity in the dialogue.

Julian Budden argues that what distinguishes Verdi from earlier Italian composers is his interest in reproducing the source narrative as closely as possible within the opera.⁴ Even given that aim, the compressed structure and formal conventions of opera demanded adjustments that inevitably impacted on the delineation of character and events. Particularly during Verdi's early career, the *convenienze* (a series of accepted practices and rules governing the operatic stage and the status of the singers) prescribed the quantity and scope of arias and other numbers allotted to the singers and the musico-dramatic relationships between them. Censorship on moral, religious or political grounds also determined what could and could not be shown, influencing both the choice and treatment of subject matter.⁵ Even where one theatre permitted the setting of a contentious subject (such as *Giovanna d'Arco* or *Rigoletto*) during the 1840s and 1850s, others implemented various amendments that could radically alter the nature of the text.

The actions and words of Verdi's characters were therefore the product of a process of negotiation between the source material, the conventions of opera and the operatic marketplace, censorship (either explicit or implicit) and the interventions of the composer and his librettists. Only the music, the way that word and action were embodied within patterns of sound, and also the *mise-en-scène* in most of his operas from 1847 on (when he began to assume increasing involvement in the stage direction) can be ascribed predominantly to Verdi's own creativity – although here again, some of his decisions owed mainly to operatic traditions and audience expectations. To speak of 'Verdi's heroines' therefore entails identifying the ways in which these characters were selected and subsequently shaped for the operatic stage through the adjustments of both composer and librettist.

In many respects, Verdi's choice of heroines from his eclectic array of sources does not reveal any obvious template. Certain similarities between heroines occur at different points in his output, but little that can be argued as typical across his long career. Attempts to fit them into a single mould labelled 'Verdian' invariably run into difficulty. The variety of characterisation might in itself appear a distinctive factor, but earlier, more prolific composers such as Rossini and Donizetti had similarly explored an extensive range of

protagonists. Gilles De Van offers a couple of tempting maxims, suggesting, for example, that in Verdi's operas 'the more active a woman is, the less she is a heroine'.⁶ He is right – but only up to a point. Some heroines (particularly those of the 1840s, such as Abigail, Giovanna d'Arco, Odabella, Lady Macbeth, Gulnara) show a remarkable zest for activity in comparison to their often hesitant male counterparts. De Van also identifies a fuller emotional expressivity ('the area of inner richness, flexibility and complexity') in the female roles, and the manner in which, especially in the later works, 'woman has a privileged connection with reality that is denied to the hero, with his naïveté and lack of realism'.⁷ Yet many of Verdi's male roles – even ostensibly unsympathetic characters such as Philippe II in *Don Carlos* – are correspondingly given to impassioned outpourings or anguished ruminations on their unhappy state. Similarly, Heather Hadlock's comment that 'the usual defining gesture for a Verdi heroine – her "primal scene" – is self-sacrifice' is certainly true of some characters (particularly of the 1850s), but much less so of others, as Hadlock herself observes in her perceptive discussion of *Il corsaro*.⁸ Nor was self-sacrifice exclusively a female preserve: Manrico in *Il trovatore*, for example, dares his life in an attempt to rescue his mother; Radamès (*Aida*) chooses death and eternal fidelity to the Ethiopian slave-princess rather than accept Amneris' offer of life by her side.

In short, no sustained image of what 'Woman' was or indeed should be emerges from these operas. If anything, Verdi often showed less regard for the epoch's concept of heroines and heroes *per se* (certainly within the parameters of role models or moral leadership) and rather more for the notion of complex, multifaceted characters. A critic of one of his earliest operas, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843), made exactly this point, complaining that within the cast of patricides, fratricides, assassins, traitors, renegades and the wayward Giselda, there was no protagonist worthy of the name, and that therefore the opera was 'headless' (*acefala*).⁹ Verdi's subsequent operas only confirmed his apparent disdain for the more simplistic archetypes then in vogue.

The shaping of Verdi's female protagonists was rather the consequence of the main driving forces in his compositional processes and, above all, his search for 'effect': character, conflict and innovation. For Verdi, opera as drama stemmed primarily from character, and his admiration for both Hugo and Shakespeare centred on their abilities to create conflicted and conflictual protagonists.¹⁰ He thus deliberately sought out characters who explored the outer limits of the epoch's social restrictions as well as their own inner resources. The notion of confrontation – toward state, religion, family and social conventions – that was as evident in Verdi's own personality as it was in his artistic strategy led him to narratives that constructed opposing planes of power, sentiment and action. These were the narratives he regarded as '*musicabile*': that is, those which appeared to him as not only *possible* to set to music (in the literal meaning of the term) but which actively provoked *his* music in particular. (See, for example, his comments during the composition of *Attila* in 1845: 'Oh, what a wonderful subject! And the critics can say what they want, but I say: Oh, what a wonderful libretto *musicabile*!')¹¹

His compositions encapsulated this emphasis on conflict in a wide *chiaroscuro* of sound, exploiting greater extremes of volume, pace, colour and effect than had been previously used in Italian opera.

The search for originality was the other constant in Verdi's approach. 'I desire nothing other than to at least attempt new things', he wrote to his librettist Salvatore Cammarano in 1849:¹² it was no empty statement. The selection of source material for his operas was an immediate starting point.¹³ Some of Verdi's sources were already familiar to Italian audiences in other forms, thus permitting the audience what Linda Hutcheon describes as the 'interpretive doubling ... between the work we know and the work we are experiencing'.¹⁴ Verdi's emphasis on using mainly foreign dramas, however, meant that a number of his operas introduced subjects new to the Italian spectator (although audiences elsewhere in Europe presumably brought a more informed perspective to those based on works by Gutiérrez, Dumas, Schiller and Shakespeare). Above all, it was the opportunities these sources afforded of experimenting with new ideas in music's relationship with drama that intrigued Verdi. He brought new sounds to the operatic stage (particularly in his later style), his operas created new vocal techniques and he facilitated the development of new voice-types – the baritone and the dramatic mezzo-soprano.¹⁵ If Verdi did not always succeed in his objectives for constant innovation,¹⁶ his efforts to explore the creative possibilities of opera none the less continued untiringly up until his very last opera, *Falstaff*.

Guided by these imperatives of character, conflict and originality, Verdi's selection and treatment of his female roles brought some distinctive protagonists to the operatic stage. Their room for manoeuvre was none the less circumscribed by the social constraints of the epochs of both their inception and, even more crucially, of their operatic incarnation. Verdi's career, spanning the second half of the nineteenth century, witnessed considerable if sometimes subtle modifications in ideas of gender for Italian women, as the following chapters will reveal. Broadly speaking, however, during the 1840s notions of female emancipation stemming primarily from France found their way into some elements of the patriotic movement (mainly those of republican bent); yet the next decade, shaped by the restoration of power after the failed uprising of 1848, largely determined sharper distinctions between ideas of masculinity and femininity. The foundation of the new Italy in the 1860s provoked both conservatives and radicals to assert their positions in the building of the state – thus, the *Codice civile italiano* of 1865 (often referred to as the *Codice Pisanelli*) enshrined women's subservience in the home, while Anna Maria Mozzoni produced the first solidly feminist tract (1864) arguing for greater legal rights. And finally the 1870s to the 1890s saw a gradual development of women's experiences outside the home, with a rise in female employment in the cities, entry to certain professions, increased access to education and the emergence of ideas of the 'nuova donna', all accompanied by more sustained (yet always unsuccessful) attempts to obtain suffrage for women.¹⁷

Although under increasing pressure, the conservative vision of women's role none the less remained obdurately intact across the period. A good example of its articulation emerges from the pages of the *Corriere delle dame* – a periodical published for a female readership and edited by its proprietor, Giuditta Lampugnani and her son, Alessandro. In 1851, the *Corriere* printed an account of the first National Women's Rights Convention held in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850, which inaugurated a formal, active movement for women's emancipation in the USA. Originally published in Cavour's journal, *Risorgimento*, the article maintained a dismissive stance towards the proposals of the Convention's architects:

Women have their own sphere, they have a noble and sacred mission in which they need not fear any rivals; neither, by leaving a position so eminent and chasing men from theirs, will women ever be able to cast aside their disposition or ennoble more their nature. They are mothers, widows, daughters; they are the inspiration of men, the comfort of husbands in adversity, the samaritans of the wounded and infirm. Do women want to repudiate these titles in order to execute badly the arts of medicine, law and philosophy? Those that leave this sphere in order to launch themselves into the clouds demonstrate that they do not know in what their true power and superiority resides.¹⁸

Here, the epoch's main prescriptions on female behaviour are rehearsed in familiar form: the insistence on separate spheres, the emphasis on pleasing and caring for men, and the implicit warning that should women choose to compete with (rather than complement) men, they would assuredly be the losers. This code of womanhood was inscribed in various ways in other cultural discourses. One example is Roberto Focosi's allegorical illustration of Verdi and his operas (see Figure 0.1).¹⁹ Published in the early months of 1853 (before the première of *La traviata*), it presents various tableaux from Verdi's works to date.

A tableau is a loaded image: one in which absence is as revealing as presence.²⁰ Focosi's choice and emphasis of context is illuminating. First, we might note the relative subservience of the women in the depictions of Verdi's operas: in almost all the tableaux, they are positioned below or behind the male characters. Their poses are often in supplication – hands clasped in prayer or pleading, eyes raised either to heaven or to the earthly architects of their travails. In his reduction of the operas to a single visual 'essence', Focosi has concentrated on their titles. The only woman therefore given significant prominence is Giovanna d'Arco (to whom the king kneels), while both Alzira and Luisa Miller (again, the eponymous heroines of their respective operas) are positioned at the front of the picture and are of a size more equal to the men who frame them. We might note too the singularity of the women in these communities of men: most illustrations have several male figures in contrast to a solitary woman.

How accurate was this crystallisation of Verdi's operas? Certainly, his heroines fulfilled aspects of the stereotypical brief advocated by the article in the *Corriere delle*



Figure 0.1 Roberto Focosi, *Giuseppe Verdi e le sue opere*, 1853 (Museo Teatrale, Teatro alla Scala, Milan)