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VERDI AT THE GOLDEN GATE

OPERA AND SAN FRANCISCO
IN THE GOLD RUSH YEARS

GEORGE MARTIN

with a Foreword by Lotfi Mansouri

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VERDI

at the Golden Gate

*Opera and San Francisco
in the Gold Rush Years*



George Martin

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Lotfi Mansouri

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BOOKS BY GEORGE MARTIN

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The Battle of the Frogs and the Mice:

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(1962; 2d ed. 1987)

Verdi, His Music, Life and Times

(1963; 4th ed. 1992)

The Red Shirt and the Cross of Savoy:

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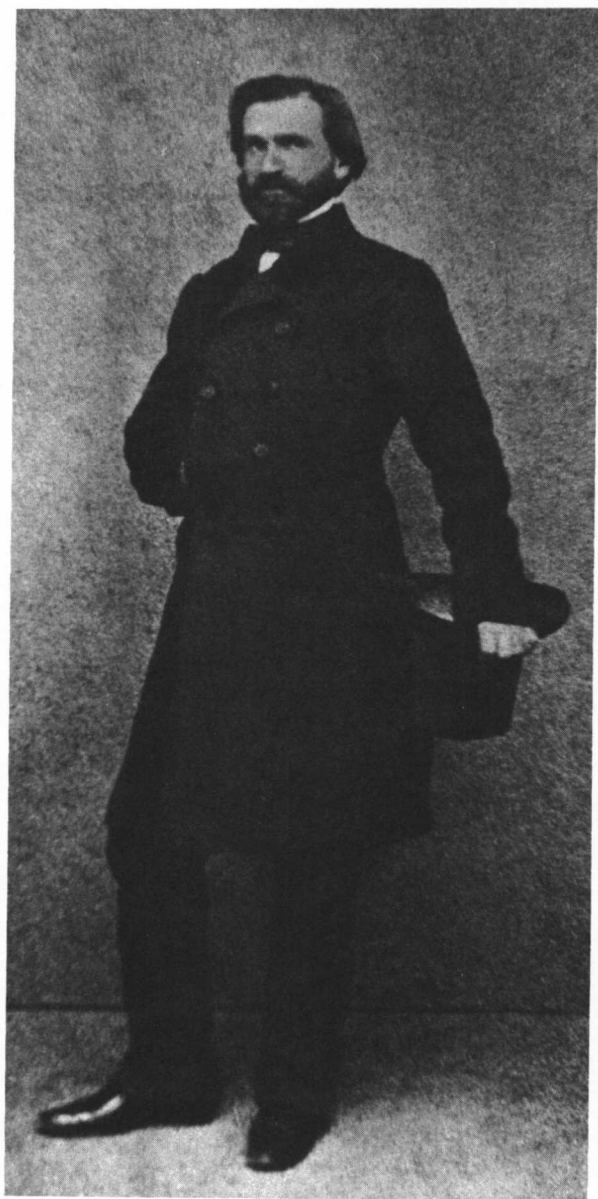
Aspects of Verdi

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Verdi at the Golden Gate:

Opera and San Francisco in the Gold Rush Years

(1993)



Verdi in 1853.

*For my niece
Julie Cheever
who has made her life
in San Francisco*

Foreword

If you look in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* under the heading “San Francisco,” you will read that “Opera was the city’s first musical love.” One of the marvelous things George Martin has accomplished in *Verdi at the Golden Gate* is to demonstrate how the remarkable love affair between opera and San Francisco—a relationship that we take for granted today but that, viewed objectively, is a highly improbable development—came to be.

Of course, most people today are aware that San Francisco Opera is a major force in the world of international opera, and has certainly been the preeminent operatic institution in the Western United States since its founding in 1923. In fact, my first actual participation in an opera production was with San Francisco Opera when it toured to Los Angeles some 40 years ago, when I appeared as a supernumerary spear-carrier in an opera by Verdi, no less—*Otello*.

What many people may not be aware of, however, is the degree to which the Bay Area embraced the muse of lyric theater long before San Francisco Opera was even a glint in the eye of founder Gaetano Merola, or even before Gaetano Merola was a glint in his own father’s eye. It’s a highly entertaining and highly improbable story—but then, San Francisco has always had a rather improbable history.

Martin analyzes, among other things, how the city's unique qualities influenced its taste for opera. Bay Area residents today are perhaps a bit too quick to say, "Only in San Francisco," but as Martin so convincingly demonstrates in this remarkable book, it's a phrase that is, in this case, perfectly apt.

In his epilogue, Martin writes, "Most likely, depending on each reader's previous knowledge of San Francisco or Verdi, he or she will find in this history a different set of surprises." For a book as filled with surprises as this one, that is an understatement. Martin deals generously with all aspects of the city's cultural history, and part of the surprise comes from his vivid reconstruction of the tone and style of life in what was, at the start of the second half of the nineteenth century, probably the most rugged, coarse and primitive community in America. That opera would take root and flourish in a society whose populace was less than 10 percent female should go a long way in laying to rest the tired canard that opera is an experience to which women drag their reluctant husbands.

On the other hand, women receive credit from Martin for their sometimes disproportionately large share of performance duties, when mezzo-sopranos had to make up for the dearth of capable tenors or baritones. Indeed, the means to which early opera impresarios resorted in the 1850s will be very familiar to ambitious opera presenters in the smaller American communities even today.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable revelations for me was the fact that much of San Francisco's earliest exposure to operatic music came by way of artists who were engaged at the opera houses of Mexico City, Lima, Valparaiso, and Santiago. These were established citadels of culture at a time when San Francisco was a barbaric settlement of roughshod miners. Today, in our outreach and exchange programs, particularly through the activities of our San Francisco Opera Center, we have been establishing anew our musical ties with other countries on the Pacific Rim; how gratifying it is to learn that our own operatic impulses first came to us from some of those very regions to which we now extend our own cultural resources. In a wonderful way, it seems that we are merely beginning to pay off an old artistic debt.

The more one reads of Mr. Martin's engaging chronicle, the more the mind boggles. How it can change our perspective of American musical life when we learn that San Franciscans were hearing music by Verdi—an occasional aria, at least—at a time when he had not yet composed *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, or *La traviata*! Martin, through his exhaustive research, shows us that the evolution of musical taste in San Francisco during the mid-nineteenth century was not, despite the area's extreme physical isolation, very far out of step with the rest of the world. As the author so poetically puts it, "Rossini's sun was setting, its laughter and brightness giving way to the dark, romantic dramas of Donizetti and Verdi."

Many people in our own time have been impressed with the ability of so relatively small a city as San Francisco to support an opera company on a par with those of urban centers five or ten times its size; how even more miraculous to see the far-flung frontier outpost of San Francisco in the 1850s become, to use Martin's term, "mad for opera." One of my favorite statistics the author has compiled is the fact that if New York in 1992 were to play to an audience proportionate to that of San Francisco in 1860, it would need to build twenty additional opera houses and run them every night of the year.

Each reader, however, has his or her own thrilling discoveries to make in this intriguing text. It's a narrative unlike any other, combining the most colorful, passionate, and theatrical of all art forms with the history of the most colorful, passionate, and theatrical of all American cities. The pairing now seems so obvious, so right, that local Bay Area sociologists and art historians might well feel some embarrassment that it was left to a writer in Pennsylvania to record this incredible story. Let us just be thankful that the task was left in such capable hands. San Francisco, opera, George Martin—truly a menage made in heaven!

I'd like to conclude with an addendum that illustrates a type of continuity, however tenuous, between the San Francisco that Martin writes about and the opera company over which I preside today. In 1914, Verdi was honored again in San Francisco with a statue erected in Golden Gate Park. As part of the dedication ceremony, Luisa Tetrazzini sang an aria from *Aida* to the assembled crowd. A little more

than a half century later, the Friends of Recreation and Parks decided to revive this wonderful notion of combining opera with the beautiful surroundings of that unique park, by presenting an al fresco concert featuring the stars and orchestra of San Francisco Opera.

That concert proved to be such a success that it was repeated in 1973 and again in 1975, after which it became an annual event. Today it attracts scores of thousands of opera devotees from every walk of life every year to Golden Gate Park in an annual celebration of the significant place that opera holds in the hearts of the citizens of this beautiful city. The love affair between the residents of the San Francisco Bay region and that miraculous combination of music and theater called opera—an affair that Martin so affectionately documents in this fascinating chronicle—continues.

Lotfi Mansouri
General Director
San Francisco Opera

Preface

My aim in this book is twofold: first, to write a history of opera in a particular place and time, San Francisco during the Gold Rush years, concentrating the events around the works of a particular composer, Verdi; and second, by exploring Verdi's rise to popularity in this city, in these years, to make a contribution to the more general history of San Francisco and, even, to the westward movement in the United States.

Both aims, specific and general, seem worthy because, with regard to the first, we lack detailed accounts in American musical history of how music started in our frontier towns: who began it, who supported it, what was played; and with regard to the second, most general histories, to their detriment, largely ignore cultural matters. For instance, one such history of California that has enjoyed many printings has no section, however small, on music, and not a single entry for it in the index. Yet from the start San Francisco, with its Bay area, has been an exceptional community for music, a leader in the United States.

This attempt to combine operatic and non-musical history may strike some readers as odd or ill-conceived; and certainly it is unusual. Therefore, to avoid any misconception of what follows, let me offer a word of explanation.

I have nothing to say about Verdi's life or the musical, political, and social influences that molded him or his music, and next to nothing about his musical techniques. I do have some comments on his musical style, which contributed to his popularity, and I have much to report on how his music was performed in San Francisco and how it was received by audiences who, for the most part, were hearing it for the first time.

No one in San Francisco in the Gold Rush years knew the facts of Verdi's life, or cared about them, and none, truth to tell, wrote about his music with much perception or learning. Yet artists and music-lovers in the city during these years took his music to heart and enthroned him as the most popular of opera composers and even perhaps—because there then was no great difference between “popular” and “serious” music—the most popular composer of the day. How and why this happened are themes of the book.

In this sort of history, for instance, the circumstances of what seems to be the first public performance in San Francisco of any of Verdi's music is worth noting. The performance was not of an opera, staged by a resident or visiting company in a theatre, with sets and costumes; it was of an aria, “Ernani, involami,” sung by a soprano with only piano and violin accompaniment, and presented as an intermission feature between a play and a farce. And the second sample of Verdi heard in the city, performed in a concert of more than forty artists (most, probably, amateurs), was a trombone fantasy on an aria from his opera *Attila*. Apparently no such fantasy at the time had been published, and so the trombonist, in all likelihood, had made his own arrangement from sheet music for the aria. And the same probably was true of the soprano and her colleagues.

These two performances most likely fit the pattern of how music first entered a recital hall in any town on the frontier—of which San Francisco, in some aspects of its founding, was one. It was settled, for instance, by immigrants moving into what they called “the Wilderness” and attempting to create a civilized society. In other respects, however, San Francisco was unique. Though isolated by thousands of miles from the nearest large cities of the American Midwest, it could

be reached by water, by ships carrying hundreds of passengers and much cargo, so that in many ways it was more like a maritime colony of the East Coast than an inland town on the advancing frontier. Nevertheless, the steps by which music in San Francisco moved from the back room of a saloon into a recital hall and finally into an opera house were probably not very different from their sequence in the more typical inland towns of the frontier—except for their acceleration by the event of 24 January 1848 that set San Francisco apart: the discovery in the mountains behind it of gold.

In short, I have attempted to combine in a single account musical, social, and theatrical histories that more often are treated separately. If my experiment succeeds, it should tell us much about opera's growth across the country and also, I like to think, something about Verdi. In some circles such a book would be called a study of "the transmission and reception of musical culture"; in others, more simply but less descriptively, "cultural history." But whatever its label, my account will include as important events a frontier audience's first hearing and response to *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*—unimpressed, ecstatic, puzzled—and will tell of related persons and episodes such as the impresario who spat in the face of a creditor, a whorehouse Madam who sat in the wrong row of a theatre, her gambler-lover who later was hanged by vigilantes, and a fistfight in the audience that stopped a performance of *Daughter of the Regiment* and ended in a death by duel.

Verdi composed his melodramas in these years in a style that some persons found excessive, not only musically, but also in its pessimism. "People say," he once wrote of *Trovatore*, "this opera is too sad and there are too many deaths in it. But after all, in life there is only death. What else lasts?"

In San Francisco in these Gold Rush years, when good and bad occurred in frequent excess, the difference between life and art, often exaggerated by the prosaic, all but vanished. And the blurring of that usual division, I believe, in part explains Verdi's astonishing popularity in northern California—most of whose immigrants arrived by ship, sailing into San Francisco's great bay through a narrows called "the Golden Gate."

But of course, Verdi was not the only opera composer to achieve popularity in the West, or in the United States generally. There were also Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Balfe, Auber, and others, and taken all together, opera, Italian, English, and French, in these years had a great vogue.

There evidently is some confusion about this, for one distinguished music historian has concluded that "of all the kinds of art music of the American cultivated tradition between 1820 and the Civil War, the least significant, and the least widely heard, was opera." Another, writing more specifically about the arts in California, has lamented that by 1859 "we must accept a sad ending for the first chapter in the history of music on the Gold Coast."

Yet as I hope this book's accumulation of facts from contemporary journals will show, at least on the frontier of northern California and in the final decade before the Civil War, a great deal of opera was heard. And on the Gold Coast in 1859 opera was about to have a stupendous year, stupendous by anyone's measure. The truth is both more interesting and colorful than generally reported.

George Martin
Kennett Square
Pennsylvania

A word about the treatment of opera titles. In all quotations I have left the title—in language, in italic or roman type, with or without quotation marks—as it appeared in the original. In my own writing I refer to the opera in the language in which it was composed except when I am discussing a production that I have reason to believe was sung in some other language. Thus, in general I refer to Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, but when writing of a production sung in English I call it *The Barber of Seville*, and in French, *Le Barbier de Seville*. All rules, of course, have exceptions; to state one: when referring to the overture to Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, I call the opera *William Tell*.

Acknowledgments

In the research for this book I have been helped greatly by the learning, skill, and patience of librarians, chiefly those in San Francisco, Sacramento, New York, Boston, and Washington. I will not identify every individual in each institution who answered a question, produced a book or document, or made a fruitful suggestion—the number of names and titles soon would deprive the list of any meaning—but those libraries in which most of my facts were discovered or verified are as named below, and for the courtesy, learning, and willingness of their staffs, at all levels of authority, I am grateful.

San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum
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California Historical Society Library, San Francisco
Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
California State Library, Sacramento
Boston Public Library
New York Public Library
New-York Historical Society Library
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

I also wish to thank Jackson Research Projects of Davis, California, a business offering "historical consulting services," for its part in assuring the accuracy of many parts of this book. Although I did research myself in California libraries, living in the East I inevitably was forced often to rely on others to verify old facts or to uncover new ones, and on my application the Jackson company assigned to work with me Rand F. Herbert and, later, also David A. Riggs.

The people at Jackson Research Projects are experts in water rights, a subject of prime importance in California if the state's citizenry is to live at peace, and as I sent queries westward I soon was rejoicing in the exactitude of the replies I began to receive. Water rights, it would seem, make an ideal preparation for research in opera. Yet when I look back on our three years of work, I am surprised that the company was willing to take me on—and, I believe, there is some surprise on its part, too. In any case, though I still know nothing about water rights, Messrs. Herbert and Riggs have learned something about opera in San Francisco in the Gold Rush years, and the accuracy of this book owes much to their precision and sympathetic interest. And I delight in acknowledging their help.

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