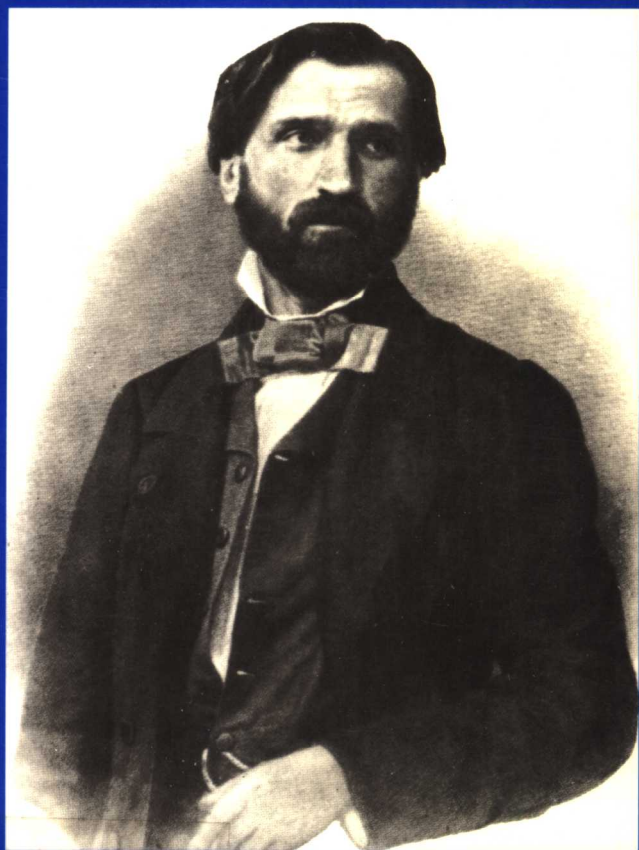


# THE OPERAS OF VERDI

VOLUME 1

From *Oberto* to *Rigoletto*

REVISED EDITION



JULIAN BUDDEN

CLARENDON



PAPERBACKS

JULIAN BUDDEN

# The Operas of Verdi

I

From *Oberto* to *Rigoletto*

Revised edition

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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

'Do we really need another book on Verdi?' The question, twice put by a well-known critic during the last few years, will no doubt be asked yet again. The present author must be ready with his answer.

Verdi's life spanned a relatively backward period in Italian music. Having for more than two centuries led the world in the invention of new forms and techniques, Italy found the reins firmly taken out of her hands by the first Viennese school and its successors. Instrumental music languished; the quartet, the symphony, the tone-poem gained only the slenderest foothold south of the Alps; even song was mostly reduced to the short, strophic *romanza* with a perfunctory piano accompaniment. There remained only opera organized on an old-fashioned system and with an eye to commercial values. Here too the conventions of musical expression failed to keep pace with those of the rest of Europe. Italian opera was the chief boggy from which Wagner claimed to be rescuing his contemporaries.

It was at the end of this period that the English musical renaissance began. Inevitably its gods were almost exclusively German. Largely anti-operatic by conviction (Stanford being an honourable exception) it was tolerant of Wagner, Gluck and Mozart. But in general it set its face against Covent Garden and the public who thronged there night after night—to be described by Sir Hubert Parry as 'having the lowest mentality of any who presume to call themselves musical'. The fact that Verdi's works formed the largest single contribution to the repertoire was unlikely to commend their author to the new Establishment.

As a result the voices raised on his behalf have tended to be defiant rather than persuasive. The English books which deal with his works, beginning with Bonavia's still eminently readable monograph of 1930, are full of arbitrary judgements which give the reader no idea as to the standard by which they are being made. There is general recognition of a steady progress from *Oberto* to *Otello* and *Falstaff*—two works which have usually inspired the respect if not the affection of the die-hards—but even here opinion has changed over the years, as successive writers find more and more to admire in what had previously been dismissed or apologized for. But if you proclaim *I Masnadieri* a neglected masterpiece, how do you avoid throwing it into the same scale as *Aida*? Only by going into the hows and the wherefores to a greater extent than has been attempted hitherto. The present vogue for Verdi among the literary intelligentsia is of course welcome, but not wholly musical in origin. The belief that Verdi's worst naïveties are somehow morally and spiritually healthier than the ruminations of Wagner is seldom due only to liberal sentiments (for was not Verdi a man of the left, while Wagner . . .?) but also to a certain lack of musical appetite, and the inability to digest the kind of sustained musical argument which Wagner never fails to provide. How many of these enthusiasts would ever sit through a symphony concert? Not enough, it seems to me, has been

written to demonstrate (as in Wagner's case) what Verdi has to offer the informed musician.

Curiously enough the situation in other countries is not so very different. When Verdi died in 1901 opera had already entered an idealist phase, much under Wagnerian influence, in which literary and dramatic values were held to be as important to the finished result as those of music, and libretti were expected to stand up as plays in their own right. Debussy's *Pelléas*, Pfitzner's *Palestrina* and all the works of Strauss and Hoffmannsthal conform to this canon; of Verdi's only the last two. Hence the tendency among writers brought up in such a climate to lay far too much stress on the merits or demerits of the libretti when assessing his work. The views set forth by Helmut Ludwig in the Atti of the Second International Congress of Verdi studies deserve to be printed in letters of gold above every opera-critic's desk. The plot, he maintains, is a vital matter to the composer but not to us. A libretto is an important *donnée*; it conditions the outward form of the opera; it affects the composer's invention in so far as it affords more or less scope for emotional expression; it can affect an opera's popularity in so far as it offers situations or characters which engage the ordinary opera-goer's sympathy (witness the failure of Mozart's *Titus* to gain a hold in the repertory). But its own merits as a drama are quite irrelevant. Therefore the statement that 'X is a bad opera because the libretto is badly constructed/jill-motivated/unbelievable, etcetera' is nonsense. Yet one comes across it over and over again in Verdi's biographies, from Monaldi to Abbiati.

At the opposite pole there have always been those who consider that 'ideal' opera in any form is not Verdi's *métier*; that *Otello* and *Falstaff* represent a diminution of the composer's real voice. Such was the view of Soffredini, one of the earliest writers to attempt a comprehensive critical survey of the operas. Ridiculous, you may think; but it was endorsed by Igor Stravinsky, by Shaw and in a sense by Vaughan Williams, who infinitely preferred *Rigoletto* to *Falstaff*. In the German-orientated world this often goes hand in hand with the 'irrational' approval of Verdi. We are all familiar with the person who announces with a laugh both patronizing and defensive that he *adores Il Trovatore*—as one who confesses a weakness for Danny La Rue. For such people this book is emphatically not intended.

Many leaders of the English musical establishment have had good and penetrating things to say about Verdi—Dent, Tovey and Blom, to name but a few; but for anyone brought up on the German classics, and taught to regard the '48', in Parry's words, as his daily bread, Verdi's development as a composer presents a good many puzzles and problems. Even the sympathetic Wagnerian Edward Dannreuther could be dismayed by the apparent backsliding from the music-drama of *Rigoletto* to the old-fashioned melodrama of *Il Trovatore*. The clue to all such mysteries lies in a deeper study of form and convention in the works of Verdi and his contemporaries, and their relation to those of the rest of Europe. In this area there will, I imagine, be plenty of room for further writing since there has been so little in the past. What I have endeavoured to do is to fill in some of the gaps left by my predecessors (though inevitably being obliged to go over the same ground as they); to describe in greater detail the musical procedures of Verdi's day, the extent to which he used, modified or departed from them and why; to chart the evolution of one of the most personal of nineteenth-century styles, showing how, as the long, some-

what inflexible melodic limbs of the early operas give way to smaller, more plastic units, susceptible of variation and development, so the music gains in range and depth of expression. I have dwelt sparingly on the subject of influences since not only are these often a matter of speculation, but the similarities which are supposed to prove them too often exist in the ear of the individual, as do personal likenesses in the eye. If by contrast I have dealt at length with anticipations it is to show the fundamental consistency of Verdi's style throughout his composing life. To find pre-echoes of pieces by other composers is a temptation no writer can resist. However, when faced with a theme such as heralds the arrival of Malcolm and his forces in Act IV of *Macbeth*, rather than regard it like Spike Hughes in his stimulating *Famous Verdi Operas* as a precursor of the army song 'One-eyed Reilly', I would prefer to hear it as a martial variation on the stretta finale-theme of Bellini's *Beatrice*—as Verdi's contemporaries would have done. In discussing individual operas I have followed the method of Spike Hughes and Ernest Newman (*Wagner Nights*), combining exposition of the plot with commentary on the music, so as to be able to relate the two without repeating myself more than is strictly necessary.

Yes, there will always be a need for more books about Verdi, if only because more relevant material is continually coming to light: the so called insert-arias (not so far discussed in any of the standard works), revisions, 'puntature' and sketches, some of which are here discussed for the first time; and of course—though of more marginal interest—letters. The *Copialettere*—some of which Charles Osborne has performed the invaluable service of translating into English—is, if not the tip of the proverbial iceberg, a small fragment of a very much larger whole. Letters totalling several thousand are scattered in publications now mostly out of print, ranging from books devoted to a single correspondent to the odd letter printed in a periodical now defunct. There is hardly a museum in Italy which does not have at least one letter from the maestro bussetano tucked away in its archives. But there is still a vast range of correspondence—some of it in the hands of private collectors—between Verdi and his librettists which the Verdi scholar is waiting to see and which may enable him to discover why such-and-such a passage was changed, why this or that singer was dropped from the cast and so forth. The Verdi Institute at Parma has made a valuable start in assembling a complete catalogue, and we may all look forward to the forthcoming publication under their auspices of the composer's complete business correspondence with his publishing house.

J.B.

October 1972



## PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Research is unending, and since this study was written a number of discoveries and exhumations have occurred of which even the present reprint has not always been able to take account. A performance of the composite *Messa per Rossini* for which Verdi supplied the 'Libera me', mentioned as a possibility in Vol. III, p. 161n., has in the mean time become a reality, having been given at the European Music Festival of Stuttgart, 1988, in an edition prepared by the Istituto di Studi Verdiani. A commercial recording on Hannsler Classic 981 949 (CD) followed soon after. Among documents a copy of Piave's original libretto for *Macbeth* with corrections by Andrea Maffei has recently come to light at the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan, and will in due course be published with a critical commentary by Francesco Degrada. Its chief interest lies in the evidence it provides of Verdi's readiness to throw out Maffei's ideas as well as Piave's if they did not meet his musical needs. Although the bulk of Verdi's musical sketches remain shrouded from public view, occasional items surface in Sotheby's catalogues, usually to disappear again into the hands of private collectors, though sometimes, more fortunately, into the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. A recent instance is a sketch for the soprano-baritone duet, 'Amai, ma un solo istante' (*Giovanna d'Arco*), a comparison of which with the definitive version shows how Verdi adapted the soprano part to the particular means of Erminia Frezzolini with her penchant for the stepwise-moving legato line. Still more tantalising is the first, fully scored page of a discarded aria (later replaced by 'Se al nuovo di pugnando') from (*La battaglia di Legnano*, reproduced in facsimile in George Martin's *Aspects of Verdi* (London, 1989) p. 156. The same study contains two previously unpublished letters from the composer to Ferdinand Gravure and Léon (or Marie) Escudier respectively (pp. 245-6), from which it would appear that Verdi supplied some ballet music for the Brussels première of *Nabucco* given on 29 November 1848. Has the score perhaps passed into the archives of Choudens et Cie, along with that of *La Force du destin*?

During the 1970s a valuable collection of letters forming part of Verdi's correspondence with the house of Ricordi during the years 1880-90 appeared on the international antiquarian market. Negotiations for its purchase by the Italian government came to nothing at the time; but fortunately the bulk of the collection was offered again in 1980 and was (like the Sibylline books) duly bought by the state, which granted exclusive publication rights to the Institute of Verdi Studies. A selection of these letters edited by Franca Cella and Pierluigi Petrobelli was published in the *Catalogo Giuseppe Verdi: corrispondenza e immagini 1881-90* (Milan, 1981), printed in association with an exhibition of the material mounted at La Scala in that year. One letter, written to Giulio Ricordi on 14 November 1881, gives the lie to Maurel's statement (see vol. III, p. 324) that Verdi disapproved the notion of a beardless Iago. 'I'm much in favour of Iago without a beard,' Verdi observed. And

indeed until comparatively recently every famous exponent of the role, from Titta Ruffo to Tito Gobbi, played it thus, as contemporary photographs show.

Further light is shed on Verdi's last two masterpieces by James A. Hepokoski's *Falstaff* (Cambridge, 1983), with its detailed account of the variants to be found in successive vocal scores, and the same author's *Otello* (Cambridge, 1987), where Verdi's and Boito's delineation of the leading characters is viewed in the context of nineteenth-century Italian traditions of Shakespearean performance. Meanwhile a contemporary document which seems to have eluded all Verdian scholars, with the exception of Marcello Conati (to whom I am indebted for a copy), is a series of three lectures on *Falstaff* delivered in 1894 to the Royal Institution of Great Britain by Alexander Campbell Mackenzie, then Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, London. These were printed in a pamphlet (now, alas, vanished without trace), and in this form evidently came to the attention of Ricordi who had them translated and published under the title *Tre letture di Falstaff*, Verdi himself was so touched by them that he sent Mackenzie a photograph of himself inscribed 'with great admiration and deep gratitude' (see A. C. Mackenzie, *A Musician's Narrative* (London, 1927) p. 251). True, the lectures tell us nothing new about the opera itself, but they are full of a lively appreciation which must have gone straight to the composer's heart. The conclusion is particularly charming. After a reference to Verdi's charitable works — the hospital at Villanova, the projected Rest Home for Musicians in Milan — Mackenzie continues:

You will surely know that centuries ago German theologians used to enjoy putting to each other the most bizarre and abstruse questions; and when the argument grew too heated they would break off and listen to a piece of music. One subject that used to concern them mightily on such occasions was: 'How many angels could in the same moment dance upon the point of a needle?' Well now, faced with this wonderful creation of the human spirit coupled with so beneficent a heart, like the unimaginative Scot that I am, I can only invite you to solve a similar problem: 'How many angels do you think could at this moment unite in joyous celebration on Verdi's last laugh?'

On a still lighter note, the so-called 'Maddalena aria' (*Rigoletto*) deserves a mention as the kind of false trail on which even the most careful of scholars may sometimes be led. In 1977 a Belgian bibliophile announced that he had in his possession in a reduction for piano and voice an aria for Maddalena written for a French version of *Rigoletto*. There was great excitement all round. Photocopies were obtained and distributed amongst the faithful. The directors of Opera Rara were determined to have the aria sung in a performance planned for Belfast later in the year. The music was clearly Verdi's; the words, 'Prends pitié de sa jeunesse', etc., were eminently suited to a girl who was pleading with her brother to spare the life of a young man; and the fact that the piece was published by Escudier ruled out the possibility of piracy. Accordingly, one scholar scored it in true Verdian style; two others set to work on an Italian translation; another, who possessed a French libretto containing the text, was able to indicate the exact point where the music could be slotted into the existing score. The moment of truth arrived when, in my capacity as External Services Music Organizer of the B.B.C., I commissioned an interview on the subject with Patric Schmid of Opera Rara for the World Service.

The broadcast was heard by a Mr Gerry Zwirm, resident in Italy, who wrote back to say that the music of the aria was identical with that of one of Verdi's salon pieces, 'Il poveretto', of which he enclosed a photocopy. A glance at the entry on 'Il poveretto' in the first volume of Hopkinson's bibliography confirmed that it had indeed been adapted as an aria for Maddalena; but that there was no evidence that the composer was even aware of this, let alone responsible for it. There were a few red faces in Verdian circles that day.

Yet our gaffe was perhaps less shaming than it might seem. Verdi, so insistent on maintaining the integrity of a work in the initial stages of its career, would sometimes, once its popularity had been assured, adopt an attitude of 'If they want such-and-such let them have it'. To this we owe the high C's in 'Di quella pira' and probably the reinstatement of the Fontainebleau act in *Don Carlos*. Moreover, until their quarrels of 1876 Verdi himself was on terms of the closest intimacy with Escudier, who knew only too well the danger of flouting the Master's wishes. The chances that 'Il poveretto', adapted to form Maddalena's aria for provincial performances in the French-speaking countries, may have had his permission, if not his approval, are considerable.

Indeed, in these days in which every cut, however small, is frowned upon by the cognoscenti and the 'edizione integrale' enjoined by leading critics the world over, it is instructive to come across more and more evidence of the ruthless attitude of star singers of the past with regard to a composer's intentions. The list of transpositions and 'puntature' in the part of Lady Macbeth as sung by the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot-Garcia can be found in *My Reminiscences* by the conductor Luigi Arditi (London, 1896), pp. 58ff. Adelina Patti's score of *La Traviata*, in the possession of Jonathan Ruffer, proves no less revealing. Not only does it contain all the traditional cuts; the whole of her first 'scena ed aria' from 'È strano' down to the end of the cabaletta 'Sempre libera' is marked *Un tono sotto* after the first three bars. The 6/8 section of the duet with Germont beginning 'Non sapete' is removed, leaving only Germont's pendant 'È grave il sacrificio'. So is the entire final cabaletta ('Morrò, la mia memoria'). The rhythmic augmentation in the final phrase of 'Amami, Alfredo' is rewritten and shorn of two bars so as to make it conform to the melody as it appears in the prelude. (As Spike Hughes has pointed out, many singers do this automatically; but it takes a star of Patti's egotism to alter Verdi's notation.) In the final act the cabaletta 'Gran Dio, morir si giovine' is reduced to thirty bars shared out between soprano and tenor. If nowadays we err in the direction of inflexibility in our fidelity to the composer's intentions it is a fault on the right side.

It remains to signalise the steady progress of the Critical Edition of Verdi's works published by the House of Ricordi in conjunction with the University of Chicago Press. Inaugurated in December 1976, its first fruits have been *Rigoletto*, *Ermani* and *Nabucodonosor* (*Nabucco*). Of these the first and third have each received a prestigious baptism under Riccardo Muti at the Vienna State Opera (March 1983) and La Scala, Milan (December 1986) respectively. *Ermani* was mounted by the Associazione Teatrale de Emilia-Romagna in December 1984 under Roberto Abbado with a predominantly young cast, most of whom had been prepared for the occasion by a two-month seminar. The production by Gianfranco De Bosio aimed at recreating the style of the opera's period, using contemporary scenic designs, a proscenium and simulated candle-light which extended to the audi-

torium and was never extinguished during the performance. The orchestra included contemporary brass instruments and played on stage level. The result proved profoundly illuminating as to the composer's dramatic intentions and constituted a landmark in practical Verdian scholarship — happily a still thriving industry.

J.B.

*July 1990*

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I VERDI AND THE WORLD  
OF THE PRIMO OTTOCENTO



The primo ottocento (a term loosely used to cover the first half of the nineteenth century in Italian music) has up to now received scant attention from scholars; nor does it form any part of the ordinary music student's education. Most professors, with the authority of Berlioz, Schumann, Mendelssohn and Wagner to support them, have been content to dismiss it as a provincial backwater, an era of decadence in taste and craftsmanship. (They might do well to remember, however, that 'Wop-bashing' was always a favourite occupation of Germans—the result of two centuries of artistic subjection.) Even so staunch a champion of Italian music as E. J. Dent describes the period as, comparatively speaking, a desert, 'golden only in so far as it is glittering'.<sup>\*</sup> It is not the purpose of this chapter to challenge such a view: rather to try to explain the aims and values of an age which formed the background of one of music's supreme geniuses.

The early masterpieces of German opera—*Die Zauberflöte*, *Fidelio*, *Der Freischütz*—all represent a personal, an ideal synthesis of several traditions, of which the most important are eighteenth-century opera buffa and opéra comique. Both genres represent opera's left wing. They are concerned with the development of character, the conflict of personalities; and they ally themselves far more closely with the symphonic tradition than does opera seria, whose function was to express different, contrasted states of mind in a succession of exit-arias. Works such as Rossini's *Tancredi*, on the other hand, descend in a direct line from the so-called 'Neapolitan' operas of Metastasio's time, using many of the same verse-forms, expressing the same ideals, making the same concessions to performers and audiences as though Gluck's famous manifesto of 1767 had never been written. The reason is partly institutional. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had caused profound upheavals in European society and created new conditions in the world of art and entertainment. In Italy empires might rise and empires might fall, but La Scala, Milan, and the Teatro la Fenice, Venice, still needed their two opere d'obbligo (new operas) for the winter season. Even in the darkest days of warfare and military occupation Italian opera remained a thriving industry with a wide market at home and abroad, largely due to the prowess of Italian singers.

This is not least among the factors that kept Italian opera with one foot in the eighteenth century, when the singer, not the composer, was the starting-point. When Mozart was a youth no one would dream of composing an aria until he had first heard the artist who was to perform it; and this might be no more than a fortnight before the premiere. Thus, for instance, Leopold Mozart to his wife during the composition of *Mitridate Re di Ponto* in Milan in 1770—'Wolfgang has composed only one aria for the primo uomo, since he has not yet arrived and Wolfgang doesn't want to do the same work twice over'.<sup>†</sup> More than sixty years

<sup>\*</sup> E. J. Dent, 'Donizetti, an Italian Romantic', in *A Fanfare for Ernest Newman* (London, 1955), p. 86.

<sup>†</sup> Emily Anderson, *The Letters of Mozart and his Family* (London, 1938), I, p. 252.



later, when Bellini was writing *I Puritani* for the Théâtre des Italiens in Paris, the situation was no different. 'The whole of the first act is now finished, except for the trio, because I want first to try it out (*provarlo*) on Rubini.'\* *Provare* is the word used for trying on a suit. Bellini's contemporary, Giovanni Pacini, one of the most prolific operatic practitioners of his day, wrote in his memoirs that he always tried to serve his singers as a good tailor serves his clients, 'concealing the natural defects of the figure and emphasizing its good points'.† The dangers of not making to measure are illustrated by an incident in Bellini's career. For the revised version of his opera *Bianca e Fernando* (Genoa, 1828) he wrote a new entrance-aria, or cavatina, for the prima donna Adelaide Tosi. 'She tried it out with orchestra, and as she sang it like a pig and it went for nothing she wanted another one, and she wouldn't sing the stretta because there was no agility in it and it was music for boys; and if I didn't change it she would sing one of her pezzi di baule instead.'‡ In fact Tosi did not carry out her threat; she merely called in another master-tailor to make adjustments.

David [*the tenor*] told me that the changes had come from D. [*Donizetti*] and I'd already suspected that because Tosi herself told me that when D. went over the part with her he said that the stretta was no good. I believe he said this as his own honest opinion and without spite and because he was concerned about her; but his having gone over it with so many changes of tempo and all quite different from my own makes me certain that it is *absolutely impossible* to have friends in the same profession; and the fact that his opera comes on immediately after mine doesn't suggest that he's going to take kindly to my success.§

Donizetti too had his problems—a soprano who insisted on a cabaletta finale in *Lucrezia Borgia*, two prima donnas who fought each other during rehearsals for *Maria Stuarda*, a 'friend' of the management who had to be accommodated in a breeches-role in *Pia de' Tolomei*. None of these ladies could be treated lightly. It was only in England that Handel was able to hold a prima donna out of the window until she complied with his wishes. Verdi himself took a bold step in 1844 when he refused to provide Sofia Loewe with a rondò-finale for *Ernani*; and even he thought it wise to write to the baritone Felice Varesi offering him three differently scored versions of the final scene of *Macbeth* ('Mal per me che m'affidai') and asking him which he preferred.

Once the composer had fulfilled the terms of his contract by composing and rehearsing the music, and attending the first three nights in the orchestral

\* Letter to Count Pepoli, 19.9.1834. L. Cambi, *Bellini: Epistolario* (Verona, 1943), p. 433. See also letter to Florimo, 21.9.1834. Cambi, p. 439.

† G. Pacini, *Le mie memorie artistiche* (2nd ed., Florence, 1875), p. 72.

‡ Letter to Florimo, 5.4.1828. Cambi, p. 74. *Pezzi di baule* or 'suitcase-pieces' were the arias which were designed to fit stock operatic situations and which all singers liked to carry about with them to be used at discretion, particularly in revivals of operas at which the composer himself was not present.

§ Cambi, p. 75. The cabaletta which Adelaide Tosi wanted changed ('Contenta appien quest'alma') eventually found its way into *Norma* as 'Ah bello, a me ritorna', the movement which follows 'Casta diva'. See F. Pastura, *Bellini secondo la storia* (Parma, 1959), p. 133.