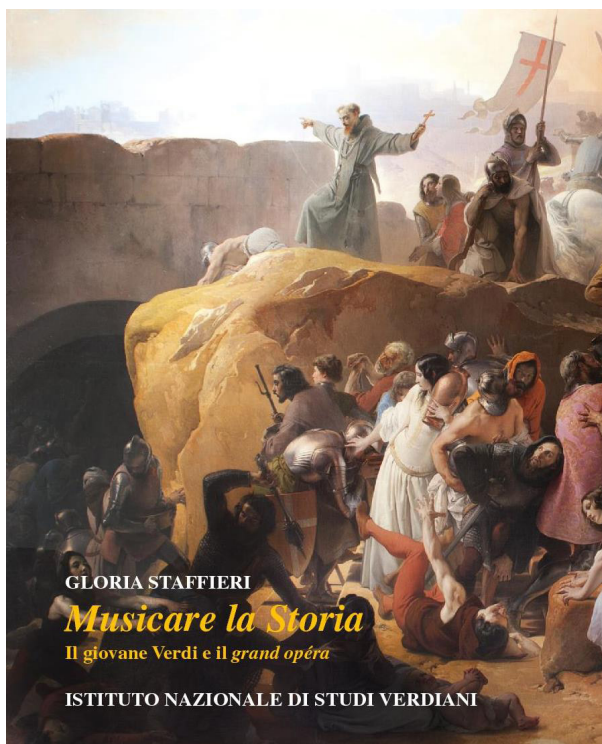




GLORIA STAFFIERI, *Musicare la Storia. Il giovane Verdi e il grand opéra*, Parma, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani (Premio internazionale Rotary Club Parma “Giuseppe Verdi”, 8), 2017, pp. xx+417, ISBN 978-88-85065-79-6.

Giacomo Meyerbeer was such a dominating presence in Paris from the 1830s through the mid 1860s that no composer – not even Richard Wagner or Giuseppe Verdi – could ignore him. When Verdi was preparing his first original work for the Opéra, *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855), he was not only working with Meyerbeer’s principal librettist, Eugène Scribe, but also hoping for nothing less than to outdo Meyerbeer on his home turf. Although Verdi fell short of this goal at the time, he would achieve it with *Don Carlos* (1867), a French grand opera that is still a staple of the operatic repertoire.

Scholars of Italian opera have been investigating Meyerbeer’s influence on Italian composers for some time, covering the reception of his operas on the Italian peninsula and in particular their function as models for Verdi’s melodies, form, dramaturgy, and orchestration.¹ But it has generally been contended that the Italian reception of



Meyerbeer’s works began with a considerable delay,² and that there was no reception of other composers of French grand opera to consider. Gloria Staffieri’s new study now proposes a dramatic corrective, showing that the reception of French grand opera in Italy began earlier, with Gioachino Rossini’s *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826) and *Moïse et Pharaon* (1827); continued with grand operas by Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, Meyerbeer, Fromental Halévy, and Gaetano Donizetti; and influenced Verdi’s operas from *Nabucco* (1842) onward. Verdi’s early operas thus no longer appear as a mere ‘laboratory’ for the masterworks of the 1850s but rather as substantive works in their own right, works that in turn reinvigorated Italian opera through their engagement with French grand opera (p. 19).

Staffieri is able to substantiate such an early reception because she investigates an unusually wide spectrum of works: French grand operas in Italian translation («traduzioni»); their modifications in plot, music, or both («adattamenti»); newly composed Italian operas

¹ For practical purposes, I shall henceforth use ‘Italy’ in lieu of the more correct but cumbersome ‘Italian peninsula’, fully aware that Italy was not politically unified during the period under consideration.

² See, for instance, SEBASTIAN WERR, *Musikalisches Drama und Boulevard. Französische Einflüsse auf die italienische Oper im 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2002, p. 91.

derived from French librettos («rifacimenti»); and non-operatic genres appropriating the subject matter of French grand opera («trasposizioni»). Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828), for instance, came to Italy in all four guises: as a «traduzione» (*La muta di Portici*), as «adattamenti» (*Manfredi il trovatore* and *Il pescatore di Brindisi*), as «rifacimenti» (*Fenella* and *La vendetta*), and as «trasposizioni» (*Matilde di Catanzaro, ovvero I pescatori delle Calabrie, Mas-Aniello, Masaniello*, and *Il pescatore di Brindisi*). Staffieri estimates that the performances of such works from 1827 through 1848 numbered in the thousands (p. 33) and that they sent a cultural shockwave through Italy. The Italian press reviewed them with great interest, offering us a key to the dramatic elements Italians considered to be necessary for a renewal of their operatic tradition. As she reminds the reader repeatedly, this renewal was geared toward the expression of an opera's dramatic essence («unità di concetto»), a goal that lies at the center of Giuseppe Mazzini's nationalistically tinged tract *La filosofia della musica* (1836).

Staffieri's study is divided into two parts: the first one investigates the reception of French grand opera in Italy, the second one its reception in Verdi's operas from *Nabucco* through *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849). Staffieri considers a wide range of forces that drove this process: impresarios (led by Alessandro Lanari) and editors who knew about the importance of novelty, especially after the retirement of Rossini and the premature death of Vincenzo Bellini; critics who reviewed foreign premieres, especially those in Paris, thus whetting the appetite and priming the taste of Italian audiences; Italian composers with an eye on Paris and singers with an eye on Italy who served as «mediatori culturali» (p. 54); and Italian patriots, whether exiles or émigrés, who promoted the innovation of the Italian repertoire as a patriotic duty, often holding up French grand opera as a model.

The Paris Opéra, as is well known, preferred librettos that focused on intertwined levels of conflict: a public one, usually of a political or religious nature, and a personal one, usually of an amorous nature. As Staffieri points out, the Italians were interested in such librettos for two reasons. First, the public conflicts (between suppressors and suppressed, aristocrats and the proletariat, church and state, or distinct religions) were of immediate relevance to a nation striving for political unification; second, the tension between the public and private conflicts produced characters of a level of complexity not usually found in Italian opera. But at the same time as they attracted the interest of audiences, editors, composers, librettists, singers, and exiles, these operas struck fear in the hearts of local governments; they posed a threat to the status quo and thus required censorial intervention.

Some of the operas were performed with their dramatic gist relatively intact. Among these is Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe*, first performed in Italy (as *L'assedio di Corinto*) in 1827. In this opera, the fifteenth-century resistance of Corinth against the Turks resonated with the Greek war of independence against the Ottoman empire (1821), which in turn resonated with the Risorgimento. One of Staffieri's particularly effective examples concerns the scene in which Jero, the guardian of the Corinthian tombs, prophesies the Greeks' liberation («Nube di sangue intrisa»). His prophecy builds from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* and culminates on the words «Oh patria!», thus giving both musical and textual expression to the hopes of the suppressed (pp. 73-74). It is astonishing that this passage was allowed to stand, especially in the 1843 Scala production, where the opera ended with it. It is less astonishing, however, that a few years later, during the 1848 revolution, the prophecy was turned into an independent «Inno nazionale» of overt Italian patriotism (p. 75). Staffieri surmises that the censors at the

time misjudged not only the message of the libretto but also the power of the music and relied too heavily on Rossini's name as a guarantor for non-revolutionary plots (p. 73).

Not all adaptations were as faithful, however. Staffieri shows that Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, probably due to its focus on a revolution erupting on Italian soil, first came to Italian theaters in the form of two «rifacimenti» with crucial scenes cut or toned down politically. And even when the opera itself reached Italian theaters, Calisto Bassi's translation shifted the focus from the public to the private sphere, in part by weakening Masaniello's justification for the revolution.

The transfer to Italy of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* was similarly problematic and led to two distinct translations. The first one, by Francesco Guidi, turned the Catholics into Puritans and the Huguenots into Anglicans, St. Bris into Cromwell and Raul into a supporter of Charles I. The reason is clear: Valentine's conversion to the Huguenot faith and the portrayal of the Catholics as murderous zealots would not have been acceptable in Italy. A second translation, by Bassi, tried to accommodate the censors in a different manner: it replaced the Catholics by Guelphs and the Huguenots by Ghibellines, a solution Staffieri suggests was still too reminiscent of a Catholic conflict to be acceptable in Italy. Worse yet, it could have been read in the context of Vincenzo Gioberti's neo-Guelph movement of the 1840s (which sought a political unification under the leadership of the Pope) and thus was probably never performed (pp. 97-98). Censorship was even stricter in operas that dealt with such controversial topics as regicide or conflict between throne and altar (*Gustave III*, *La Favorite*, and *Dom Sébastien*). Staffieri shows that the resulting distortion of the plots led to a shift in the audiences' interest from the libretto to the music and its performance (p. 123); her next section accordingly focuses on the musical components of the adaptation.

Two trends stand out here, one pertaining to form, the other to vocal performance. Since French grand opera was simply too long for Italian consumption, it needed to be cut. Staffieri shows that Italian theaters tended to cut arias rather than ensembles or large-scale choral numbers because arias were less directly concerned with advancing the plot. The resulting adaptations not only preserved the bulk of the plot (however distorted) but also paved the way for innovative large-scale structures in Italian operas. In the area of vocal performance, French grand opera introduced to Italy a darker style with a forceful declamation even of high notes. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker have recently pinpointed this shift in Donizetti's *Parisina* (1833) and credited it to the singers Carolina Ungher and Gilbert Duprez.³ Like Abbate and Parker, Staffieri credits it to specific singers, especially Duprez; but *contra* Abbate and Parker, she shows that it came to Italy via the French repertoire, especially *Guillaume Tell* (p. 55).

In the second part of her study, Staffieri examines Verdi's early operas through the lens of the issues addressed in the first part and in the context of other genres or art forms such as *mélodrames*, ballets, histories, and painting. She begins with the operas based on librettos by Temistocle Solera, operas with a strong historical and biblical background, highlighting in the first one of these, *Nabucco*, dramatic similarities with such operas as Rossini's *Mosè* (presumably *Mosè e Faraone* and not *Mosè in Egitto*) and Halévy's *La Juive*. She even pursues

³ CAROLYN ABBATE and ROGER PARKER, *A History of Opera*, New York, Norton, 2012, pp. 223-24.

connections between *Nabucco* and later versions of *La Juive*: when Giacomo Sacchero and Giovanni Pacini collaborated on their *Ebrea* (a «rifacimento» of Halévy's opera) two years after the premiere of *Nabucco*, they borrowed from its famous act III chorus «Va pensiero» the image of the «patria perduta» for their chorus «Addio, giocondo e libero»; and in Rachele's rondò finale «Oh! Vedi tu? – si schiudono», the image of the open firmament as a refuge is borrowed from Fenena's «Oh, dischiuso è il firmamento» in act IV of *Nabucco*, both passages conveying strong Risorgimento overtones.

Such overtones continue to resonate in *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, where the first crusade serves as an allegory for the Risorgimento. It is thus not surprising that prayers play a particularly important role (Staffieri counts eight), a concentration indicative of neo-Guelph ideals but ultimately derived from French grand opera. The latter is also the source of other features, such as the unifying role of recurring motives, certain dramatic situations (e.g., Giselda's and Valentine's condemnation of their respective father's atrocities), and formal parallels with *Robert le Diable* (e.g., the juxtaposition of contrasting choral numbers). The influence of *Robert le Diable* is, according to Staffieri, particularly strong in *Giovanna d'Arco*, both in the sequence of some of its numbers and the musical expression of the supernatural. Staffieri concludes that it must have been with an eye toward the mastery of the techniques associated with French grand opera that Verdi saw in *Giovanna d'Arco* «la migliore delle mie opere senza eccezione e senza dubbio» (p. 225).

Here it might be helpful to compare Staffieri's findings with those Mary Ann Smart presents in her latest book, *Waiting for Verdi*.⁴ In the chapter on *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, Smart draws on many of the same sources as did Staffieri (especially Carlo Tenca's review of the opera and Mazzini's interpretation of Francesco Hayez's painting *Pietro l'Eremita* [1827-29]) but comes to rather different conclusions. In her view, the patriotic interpretation of Hayez's painting by Mazzini does not support the opera's connection to the Risorgimento but rather highlights the virtual absence of Risorgimento-related references in the opera's reception (Tenca's review is the lone exception).⁵ There are many reasons for the conflicting conclusions. Smart admits, for instance, to «differences in the status of painting and opera» and their «distinct modes of consumption» (pp. 159-60). Furthermore, she does not allow the neo-Guelph movement into evidence because it was not founded until 1843, the year of the opera's premiere, whereas Staffieri sees ideas related to the movement in circulation prior to 1843.⁶ And when considering the opera's reception, Smart accepts only overt nationalist-patriotic statements, whereas Staffieri also accepts hidden ones (such as the references to a «musica filosofica» in the sense of an «arte politicamente impegnata» [p. 65]). Finally, Staffieri includes contextual evidence Smart does not (the case of Rossini's *L'assedio di Corinto*, mentioned above, is only one such example). Both scholars agree, however, that the overarching significance of Verdi's early operas goes beyond the Risorgimento: Smart sees it in the context of a general quest for stylistic and technical innovation, Staffieri in the quest for innovation in the spirit of French grand opera.

⁴ MARY ANN SMART, *Waiting for Verdi. Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Italy, 1815-1848*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2018.

⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 172-73.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 157.

After the Solera operas, Staffieri shifts her focus to those on librettos by Francesco Maria Piave (*Ernani*, *I due Foscari*, and *Macbeth*), operas built on tighter plots focused more sharply on individuals than on history or religion. Staffieri shows, however, that in some respects these works reflect Verdi's preoccupation with French grand opera even more clearly than the Solera works. The reasons for this assessment range from continuity within numbers to the use of recurring motives, the «configurazione delle melodie» (essentially what I have called «conducting a melody»⁷), and similarities in dramaturgy. The latter include the concept of the honorable host, who protects his guest even when the latter turns out to be an enemy (as in *Ernani* and *La Muette de Portici*), and a series of gondoliers' songs that function as a foil for the fate of the protagonist. These songs – from Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre* (1841), Donizetti's *Caterina Cornaro* (January 1844), *I due Foscari* (November 1844), and Pacini's *Regina di Cipro* (1846) – are not only dramatically similar but also share a significant amount of vocabulary (especially the songs by Halévy and Donizetti on the one hand and those by Verdi and Pacini on the other). Staffieri does not point out, however, that Donizetti originally set a different text and then changed it, most probably due to censorship; only the new text resonates with that from *La Reine de Chypre*.⁸

The *pièce de résistance* of Staffieri's musical analyses is without a doubt her comparison between the structures of *Robert le Diable* and *Macbeth*, intended to show that Verdi's opera was the culmination to date of the «ibridazione tra moduli 'parigini' e moduli italiani» and thus «una sintesi stilistica di straordinaria originalità» (p. 281). To show this hybridization, Staffieri presents *Robert le Diable* as the de facto model for *Macbeth*. *Robert le Diable*, she points out, has a symmetrical design, in which acts I, III, and V pertain to Robert's 'symbolic' story (the struggle between good and evil) and acts II and IV to his 'real' story (his love for Isabelle). For some reason, however, Staffieri labels this form ABA'CA (a large-scale rondo) and not ABABA (a truly symmetrical design). The reason for this tweaking of the form seems to be the presence of rondo-like structures within the acts, which allows Staffieri to characterize *Robert le Diable* as an opera organized by rondo structures on both the macro and micro levels and thus as particularly unified. She detects a similar organization in *Macbeth*, focusing however on symmetry rather the rondo. The axis, according to Staffieri, falls between acts II and III, but since acts I and act III both begin with witches' choruses, a parallel design would in some ways be more convincing than a symmetrical one. Whereas the structural analysis may need some clarification, other observations make good sense, especially with regard to the supernatural, the use of two orchestras (in the infernal waltz of *Robert le Diable* and the apparition scene of *Macbeth*), the pantomime, and the recurring motives.

Staffieri concludes her study with two 'firsts' falling in the «lungo quarantotto»: Verdi's first work for the Opéra (*Jérusalem*) late in 1847 and his first work for an Italian theater free of political censorship (*La battaglia di Legnano*) early in 1849. *Jérusalem* is a reworking of *I*

⁷ ANDREAS GIGER, *Verdi and the French Aesthetic. Verse, Stanza, and Melody in Nineteenth-Century Opera*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 66-72.

⁸ Donizetti originally set the following text: «Or che invita alla preghiera | la pia squilla ogni fedele, | lieve aurette della sera | spira amica alle mie vele.» This text (crossed out in the autograph manuscript but preserved in the 1845 Parma libretto) is replaced by «Or che l'astro in mar si cela, | e l'uom toglie alla fatica, | sulla fragile mia vela | lieve aurette spira amica.»

Lombardi alla prima crociata, in which Verdi replaced Pagano's infatuation with a secondary character (Viclinda) with Roger's infatuation with a primary one (Hélène) and added two private numbers (the short duo between Gaston and Hélène at the beginning of act I and the aria for Gaston at the end of act III). By changing the balance between public and private spheres in favor of the latter and by turning an idiosyncratic configuration of relationships into a conventional love triangle, Verdi transformed a work originally written in the spirit of a French grand opera (*I Lombardi*) into one more closely aligned with the Italian tradition (*Jérusalem*). With these changes, Staffieri suggests, Verdi reinvigorated the repertoire of the Opéra just as French grand opera had previously reinvigorated the Italian repertoire (p. 321). If this intriguing hypothesis holds up, the crisis of French grand opera began somewhat earlier than Anselm Gerhard has suggested.⁹

La battaglia di Legnano – first performed in Rome shortly after the proclamation of the Republic – is Verdi's only overt Risorgimento opera. As foreign-controlled governments were toppled and political censorship was falling by the wayside, Verdi was finally free to compose an opera on an openly patriotic subject (he chose the twelfth-century defeat of the German emperor Barbarossa by the Lombard league). The overt nationalism of *La battaglia di Legnano*, however, which originally contributed to the opera's success, also caused its absence from the repertoire once the revolutions had failed. The heavy reliance on elements of French grand opera (the recurring themes, the interdependence of public and private emotions, and the *tableaux*) could not change this course.

The scope of Staffieri's *Musicare la Storia* is exceedingly ambitious, whether in repertoire (French grand opera, its various Italian adaptations, and most of Verdi's early operas) or methodology. With regard to the latter, the author writes:

Dal punto di vista metodologico non sembra quindi più sufficiente nell'ambito degli studi operistici (come degli studi *tout court*) un'indagine limitata a specifiche e dichiarate fonti (da cui sono tratti i lavori verdiani o non), oppure un tipo di analisi prettamente formalista o, ancora, tutt'interna a un singolo 'testo', che sia esso drammatico, musicale o performativo. Beninteso, il lavoro sulle fonti e su tutto il materiale documentario ad esse connesso rimane una base fondamentale e insostituibile per qualsiasi tipo di ricerca.¹⁰

This lofty goal raises – perhaps inevitably – the question about omissions. The reader might ask, for instance, whether characteristics attributed to French grand opera might not have come to Verdi through different repertoire, especially Italian serious opera or French comic opera. The far-reaching structural experiments of Rossini's Neapolitan operas would appear to offer a particularly promising field of investigation because these works did not completely disappear from Italian stages until mid-century and, likewise, the experiments of *Maometto II* and *Mosè in Egitto* were subsequently planed down in *Le Siège de Corinthe* and *Moïse*

⁹ ANSELM GERHARD, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Mary Whittall, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 437-438.

¹⁰ GLORIA STAFFIERI, *Musicare la Storia. Il giovane Verdi e il grand opéra*, Parma, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2017, p. 345.

et Pharaon.¹¹ Rossini's Neapolitan operas included at least some ostensibly French elements (if not in the concentration later present in French grand opera): characteristic pieces (such as prayers, barcaroles, oaths, prophecies), recurring themes, original orchestration, and formal and melodic flexibility.¹² It is indeed tempting to suggest that there is no other passage in *primo Ottocento* opera as replete with these characteristics as is the third act (equivalent to a single number!) of Rossini's *Otello*.

The complexity and scope of Staffieri's study may also have led to some mechanical issues. For instance, the author too often acknowledges her sources only when she draws on them for the first time and not when she draws on them subsequently. Furthermore, exceedingly long sentences (sometimes stretching over a quarter of a page) and complex sentence structures suggest a lack of editorial support.

Nevertheless, Staffieri makes a convincing case for the historical significance of Verdi's early operas, a significance she sees in their contribution to the nationalist discourse and their renewal of Italian opera in the spirit of French grand opera. The contribution of Verdi's early operas to the nationalist discourse has, as is well known, been at the heart of a twenty-year scholarly controversy.¹³ It is unlikely that Staffieri's study will soften the hardened fronts in the near future, despite the wealth of new and convincing evidence she presents for a nationalist reading. But even the skeptics will come away with a deepened understanding of French grand opera *per se*, its reception in Italy, and its influence on Verdi's early operas. The richness of the sources, the sophistication of the connections, the wealth of contemporary reviews, and the breadth of fascinating repertoire all make Staffieri's tome a veritable treasure trove for future scholarship. And what began as a proposal for the 1999 International Prize of the Rotary Club Parma 'Giuseppe Verdi' can now take its prideful place among the competition's published volumes.

ANDREAS GIGER

¹¹ See PHILIP GOSSETT, *Giochino Rossini*, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, 29 voll., London, Macmillan, 2001², vol. XXI, pp. 734-68: 749; and ID., *History and Works That Have No History: Reviving Rossini's Neapolitan Operas*, in *National Traditions of Nineteenth-Century Opera*, ed. by Steven Huebner, 2 voll., Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, vol. I, pp. 221-241: 223.

¹² *Ivi*, pp. 232-238.

¹³ Some well-known examples include: ROGER PARKER, "*Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati*". *The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s*, Parma, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 1997; PHILIP GOSSETT, *Le «edizioni distrutte» e il significato dei cori operistici nel Risorgimento*, «Il Saggiatore musicale», XII, 2005, pp. 339-387; and GEORGE MARTIN, *Verdi, Politics, and "Va, pensiero"*. *The Scholars Squabble*, «The Opera Quarterly», XXI/1, 2005, pp. 109-132.