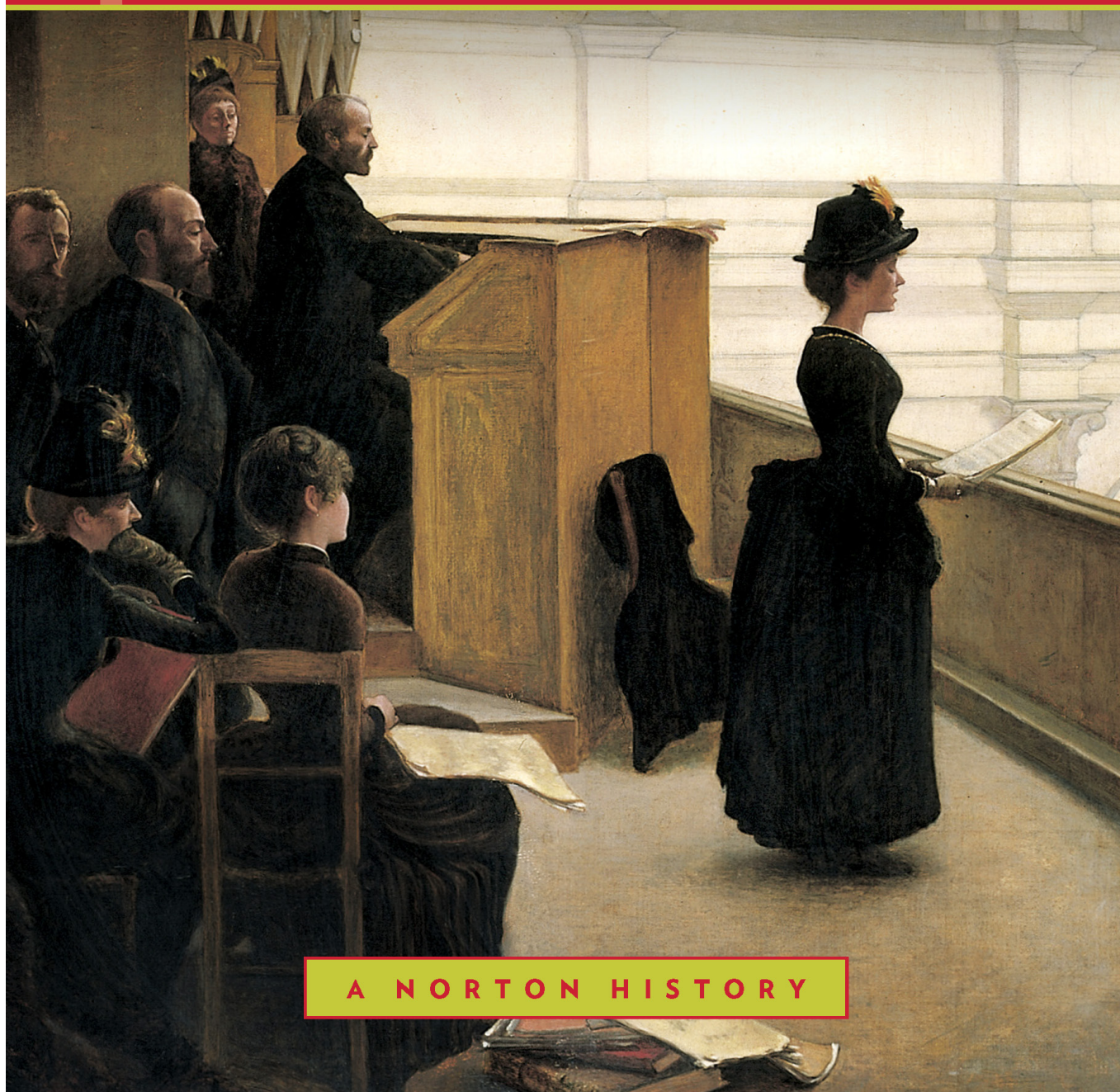


WALTER FRISCH

# MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

WESTERN MUSIC IN CONTEXT



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## GIUSEPPE VERDI

Even at its most musically complex, the Italian operatic tradition we examined in Chapter 4 retained a populist strain. Italian composers wrote for a public that was passionate about opera and wanted flesh-and-blood characters and great tunes they could leave the theater singing. The figure who best balanced sophistication and broad appeal across the latter half of the nineteenth century in Italy was Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901). Born in the same year as Wagner, Verdi was in a sense his counterpart, attempting analogous reforms on the other side of the Alps.

These two titans of opera are often depicted as polar opposites, but the differences between Wagner and Verdi owe less to temperament or artistic vision—both were determined, focused artists—than to their respective national operatic traditions. In his early years Wagner served as kapellmeister or music director in small local German opera houses. Composition formed a relatively small part of his professional activity. Verdi had no such official position—the post of music director did not exist in Italy—but produced operas on demand, often one or two each year, for different Italian houses. This period, which Verdi later referred to as his *anni di galera*, or galley years, lasted from 1839 to 1850, and included 15 operas. Several of these, including *Nabucco* (1842), *Ernani* (1844), and *Macbeth* (1847), point the way to Verdi's mature works.

As discussed in Chapter 4, by the mid-1840s Verdi was able to improve his situation by choosing his own librettists, setting his own deadlines, selecting his own singers, and exerting influence over all aspects of staging. In the 1850s he effectively had a personal agent and watchdog in his publisher, Giulio Ricordi. From about 1856 to 1893 Ricordi issued a set of detailed production guides (*disposizioni sceniche*) for nine of Verdi's operas. These books, prepared mostly from Verdi's own notes and statements, sometimes extend to 100 pages or more, and include diagrams, illustrations, and instructions for staging, scenery, and lighting. All these elements are closely coordinated with what is being sung onstage and played by the orchestra. Thus Verdi sought and achieved a kind of total control over his operas considerably earlier than Wagner, who had to wait for his own theater at Bayreuth in the 1870s.

Like Wagner, Verdi was involved in the political scene of his native land. Italy was, like Germany, in a period of transition to unification. Until after midcentury it was not a nation, but a collection of separate states, some belonging to foreign countries, including France, Spain, and Austria. Beginning in the 1820s, the status quo was challenged by a series of popular uprisings that grew into a movement to unify and democratize Italy, called the Risorgimento (“resurgence”). The Risorgimento took on special urgency with the arrival on the scene of the patriot and politician Giuseppe Mazzini and the revolutionary military leader Giuseppe Garibaldi. Poets and writers also played a role,

especially Alessandro Manzoni, whose historical novel *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed), first published in 1827 and reissued in a definitive form in 1842, was a thinly disguised attack on Austrian and Spanish occupiers of Italian regions.

As happened elsewhere in Europe, the revolutions of 1848 yielded little in terms of liberalization in Italy and in fact led to redoubled repression, except in the kingdom of Sardinia, where a constitution was established under Victor Emanuel II. His prime minister Camillo Cavour led the next, smoother phase of the Risorgimento. In 1861, Victor Emanuel was declared king of Italy, and over the next decade other parts of the peninsula, including the Papal States around Rome, joined to form the nation that is today recognized as Italy.

As the most prominent composer in Italy, Verdi took an active part in the culture of the Risorgimento and its aftermath. Supporters of a unified Italy coined the popular slogan “Viva VERDI,” in which the letters of the composer’s name became an acronym for “Vittorio Emanuele Re d’Italia” (Victor Emanuel, King of Italy). Cavour was eager to have prominent figures in the new government, and in 1861 he urged Verdi to stand for election as a deputy to the new Italian parliament. Verdi won easily and attended sessions in Turin. After Cavour’s unexpected death in June 1861, Verdi’s participation dropped off, and he did not stand for reelection. But he always retained his loyalty to the constitutional monarchy.

Verdi was clearly attracted, especially in his early operas, to themes of political oppression or injustice. *Nabucco* is based on the Old Testament story of the captivity of the Israelites under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. The opera’s most famous number, *Va, pensiero* (Go, thought), is a slow chorus sung by the Israelites longing for their homeland. It has been suggested by generations of writers that *Va, pensiero* carries a covert patriotic message and that Italians were meant to recognize their own plight in that of the captives on stage. Similar claims are made for the chorus for Scottish exiles, *Opatria oppressa* (O, oppressed fatherland), which Verdi wrote for his operatic version of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that contemporary audiences interpreted these numbers as distinctively patriotic—even in 1848, the year of the biggest uprisings, when censorship by Austrian authorities in northern Italy was very strong. Indeed, at the premiere of *Nabucco* in Milan in 1842 the military band of the occupying Austrian army played onstage and was apparently welcomed by the Italian locals. Only much later, well after Italy’s unification, did *Va, pensiero* become a musical emblem of Italian nationalism, especially when it was sung by hundreds of mourners at a state memorial service after Verdi’s death in 1901.

Yet there is no question that through such choruses Verdi helped to create a patriotic-popular musical idiom. He was also drawn to topics relevant to the culture of Risorgimento Italy. A frequent theme in Verdi operas is how the exercise of power and authority affects individuals. Personal relationships are set

against the backdrop of a larger national-political drama; lovers or friends are torn apart by conflicting loyalties. In *Don Carlos* (1867, rev. 1884), Elisabeth, the queen of Spain, is in love with Carlos, who fights for the enemy, the kingdom of Flanders. They are betrayed by a jealous Princess Eboli, who is also in love with Carlos. *Aida* (1871) involves a similar struggle between Egypt and Ethiopia, into which are entwined the fates of Radames, an Egyptian prince and warrior; Aida, an Ethiopian princess now enslaved in Egypt and in love with Radames; and Amneris, who exposes their illicit relationship because she also loves Radames. Both *Don Carlos* and *Aida* are strongly influenced by the tradition of French grand opera, where, as we saw in Chapter 4, politics and personal drama are also juxtaposed. (*Don Carlos* was written for the Paris Opéra.)

A passionate and sophisticated reader, Verdi was drawn to high-quality literature as a source for his operas. He sought, above all, distinctive, gripping characters and what he called “strong” situations in which they could interact. Verdi often adapted works written outside his native land, including plays or novels from France, England, Spain, and Germany. Verdi wrote three Shakespeare operas (*Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*) and planned a fourth (*King Lear*). Two operas were adapted from Lord Byron, and five were based on works by the German playwright Friedrich Schiller. Where Wagner looked to the remote past or to myth and legend for his sources, Verdi was sometimes drawn to the works of his own contemporaries, like the French writers Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas.

Like nearly all composers of opera (Wagner being the exception), Verdi never wrote his own librettos, preferring to work with excellent literary craftsmen who could help him shape his musico-dramatic vision. Verdi rode hard on his librettists, demanding (and often himself providing) many rewrites. His patient collaborators included Francesco Maria Piave (1810–1876), who worked with Verdi on ten operas, and Arrigo Boito (1842–1918), a poet-playwright and a composer in his own right, who was willing to subordinate his musical ambitions to adapt the texts for *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

#### RIGOLETTO

After the “galley years,” Verdi wrote in relatively close succession the three operas that were to become his most popular and beloved: *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (The Troubadour, 1853), and *La traviata* (The Fallen Woman, 1853). *Rigoletto* was adapted by Piave from Victor Hugo’s 1832 play *Le roi s’amuse* (The King Enjoys Himself). In the opera, a court jester named Rigoletto seeks revenge on the man he serves, the Duke of Mantua, for seducing his daughter Gilda. Rigoletto hires an assassin who, in the final tragic moments, kills Gilda instead.

Several aspects of *Rigoletto* epitomize the special qualities of Verdi’s mature operas. First, although he remains within the Italian tradition of the “number” opera, with clearly defined arias, recitatives, and ensembles, Verdi strives for greater musical and dramatic continuity, as well as greater compression. Act 3



of *Rigoletto*, lasting just over half an hour, moves seamlessly and breathlessly across a variety of number types toward its tragic denouement.

Second, each mature opera of Verdi has a special coloration, called by Verdi a *tinta*, which is imparted by the orchestration and certain kinds of melodic and harmonic gestures. In *Rigoletto*, the *tinta* includes a prevalent E-minor harmony, snarling brass, and sobbing melodic gestures. Verdi also uses lighter music in very dark situations, as with the Duke's aria in Act 3 (to be discussed below). In Act 3, Verdi enriches the *tinta* with an untexted humming chorus moving in parallel thirds, meant to suggest an impending storm, and flute arpeggios to convey flashes of lightning. Like Wagner, Verdi greatly expanded the role of the orchestra in opera.

A third important Verdian feature is what the composer called the *parola scenica*, literally the scenic or stage word. These are short phrases in the libretto, set to music in a memorable way that captures or focuses a dramatic situation. In Verdi's own words, the *parola scenica* "sculpts and makes the situation precise and evident." Verdi would often push his librettists to include or expand such elements. In *Rigoletto*, the most noticeable *parola scenica* involves the word *maledizione* (curse) and Rigoletto's phrase "Quel vecchio maledivami" (The old man cursed me). In Act I, Count Monterone confronts the womanizing Duke for having seduced his daughter. Rigoletto publicly mocks Monterone, who then pronounces a curse that unsettles, even terrifies the jester. Rigoletto's memorable musical phrase embodies both his fear and his tragic fate (Ex. 9.1): it is his own daughter Gilda who is pursued by the Duke (something Rigoletto will learn only later) and who will die violently. Sung in declamatory style on a high single note, over a memorable harmonic progression featuring an altered sixth chord, the phrase recurs twice in its original form, and is alluded to on other occasions. Rigoletto's last utterance in the opera, as he weeps over the body of his daughter, recalls the *parola scenica*: "la maledizione!"

**Example 9.1:** Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act I, scene I, the curse motive

Rigoletto

(Quel vecchio maledivami!)

*morendo*

(That old man cursed me!)

A fourth significant aspect of Verdian musical dramaturgy the strategic deployment of melodies, as with the most famous aria in *Rigoletto*, *La donna è mobile* (Woman is fickle) (Ex. 9.2). The catchy main tune of this number serves a

structural role far beyond its mere characterization of the caddish Duke who sings it. It is not woven into the orchestral fabric like a Wagner leitmotif. But its three appearances are as dramatically effective as anything in Wagner. The Duke first sings the full two strophes of *La donna è mobile* at an inn where he flirts with Maddalena, the sister of the assassin Sparafucile. Then, as he is about to retire for the night, the Duke reprises a portion of one strophe in a fragmented version that indicates he is dropping off to sleep. Near the end of the act, he reprises in full the first strophe of the song. Here it is punctuated by short outbursts from Rigoletto, who is standing outside the inn. As he recognizes his master's voice, Rigoletto realizes that the Duke, whom he hired Sparafucile to murder, is still alive. By this point the irony of Verdi's simple ditty has become devastating, because we know more than Rigoletto: that it is Gilda, the Duke's former "donna," who has been killed instead of the jester's intended victim.

**Example 9.2:** Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act 3, *La donna è mobile*

Duke  
*con brio*

La don - na è mo - bi - le qual piu - ma al ven - to,

*pp*

*Woman is fickle like a feather in the wind*

A fifth characteristic of Verdi's style is the simultaneous presentation by different characters of multiple viewpoints on a single dramatic situation. Mozart and Rossini had developed this technique, especially in their act finales (as we saw in Chapter 4 with Act 1 of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*). But in the quartet from Act 3 of *Rigoletto* (see Anthology 15 and Opera Sampler), Verdi might be said to transcend his models. The pairs of characters are physically separated here: Gilda and Rigoletto are outside the inn, Maddalena and the Duke are inside. The Duke is trying to seduce Maddalena; she is amused and skeptical but finds him attractive. Gilda, looking in through the window, is distraught at the Duke's betrayal of her. Rigoletto encourages her revenge upon the Duke. These divergent emotions are all brought together musically by Verdi in an ensemble of stunning power, in which each voice has its individual profile. Nowhere are Verdi's powers more apparent than in this great ensemble, where we are at once beguiled by musical beauty and stirred by the dramatic situation.

We recall from Chapter 2 that Victor Hugo, author of the play on which *Rigoletto* is based and one of the chief figures of French Romanticism, advocated that artists

mingle strongly contrasting elements, including “darkness and light, the grotesque and the sublime.” Verdi’s opera and its source embody just such extremes in the characters of Rigoletto and Gilda—he the sour and vengeful hunchback, muttering about the curse; she the innocent girl spinning long, ethereal melodies. And as we have seen, the juxtaposition of lighter and darker music is part of the opera’s *tinta*. All these aspects help make *Rigoletto* a Romantic work. But especially in the scenes of naturalistic dialogue, the opera also goes beyond Romanticism in ways that, as suggested in Chapter 7, are characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century.

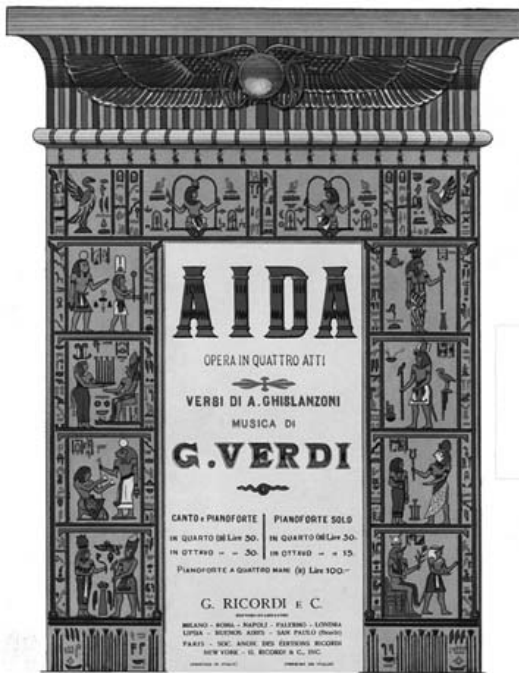
#### LATER VERDI

In his later years Verdi wrote fewer operas. Famous and well off, he became still more selective about topics and librettists. But it was hard to refuse a generous commission from the khedive of Egypt to write a new work, *Aida* (1871), for the recently opened opera house in Cairo. The basic plot, which was part of the commission, appealed to Verdi in that it embeds a personal drama within a broader political context, here involving a conflict between the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians.

*Aida* is Verdi’s best-known opera to depict characters and cultures foreign to western Europe. Such works are often described as exoticist or Orientalist. In the nineteenth century, the latter term was relatively neutral or benign, indicating the artistic use (or the scholarly study) of subject matter from the “Orient” or East, in contrast to the Occident or West. Orientalism has a long history in opera, where plots are sometimes set in locales distant from the Western world, like the Middle East or Asia. Mozart produced one of the most famous such operas with *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The Abduction from the Seraglio, 1782). A later example is Giacomo Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904–7), to be discussed in Chapter 12. Verdi’s *Aida* occupies a special place in this tradition in that a prominent Western composer received the commission not from a European opera house, but from the Orient itself—Egypt, where the premiere also took place. The Egyptian aspects of *Aida* were strongly played up by all concerned with the opera, including the publisher of the score, Ricordi (Fig. 9.1).

In 1978 the literary scholar Edward Said identified *Aida* as Orientalist in a more pejorative sense. Said redefined Orientalism as a complex relationship of power and domination that arises when a Western culture views a non-Western one from a position of superiority—a position shaped by European imperialist activities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But is *Aida* really Orientalist in Said’s meaning? To be sure, the scenario came from a French Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette, who may have been inspired by images made earlier in the century during the Napoleonic invasions of North Africa that depict an Egypt idealized and subjugated for European consumption. There are





**Figure 9.1:** Illustrated cover for score of Verdi's *Aida*, featuring Egyptian motifs, 1873

certainly musical aspects of *Aida* that depict Egypt as exotic, including flutes and harps, a modal scale with lowered second degree, and Middle Eastern–inspired dances. But we need not conclude that Verdi viewed such music as inferior to the traditional Italian operatic style that prevails in *Aida*. Within the opera's plot, Egypt is not a victim of European domination, but rather the imperialist aggressor toward Ethiopia. Thus it might be more accurate to understand *Aida* in the context of some of Verdi's earlier works, like *Nabucco* and *Don Carlos*, where a minority struggles against a brutal invader.

In the 1880s and early 1890s, after working on revisions of earlier operas, Verdi was coaxed out of retirement to create two final masterpieces, *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). Both operas were adapted from Shakespeare by Arrigo Boito (1842–1918), a member of a group of younger artists seeking to revitalize Italian culture by opening it up to more foreign influences. Among those influences was Wagner's music, which (as discussed in Chapter 8) began to be performed in Italy, and which the elderly Verdi came to know and admire. Yet there are few traces of Wagner in Verdi's later works. Traditional Italian forms or "numbers" still lie at the core of these operas—as in the cabaletta-like vengeance duet between Otello and Iago at the end of Act 2 of *Otello*. They are embedded in continuous scenes whose flow is governed less by Wagnerian principles than by Verdi's unique and ever more subtle control over all aspects of musical and dramatic expression. To capture the fast-paced action and zany situations in *Falstaff*, his only mature comic opera (based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and scenes from *Henry IV*), Verdi developed an especially fluid and brilliant musical language of quicksilver, able to adapt from moment to moment.