

Verdi

5/2/17

Life of Verdi (1813 - 1901)

- Not a peasant; middle class (tradesmen, small landowners).
- Early talent, recognized and nurtured (contra Verdi's account).
- 1832 Rejected from Milan Conservatory. At 18, he's a little late, has faulty piano skills, though the admission committee acknowledges "geniune imagination." (New Grove, *Masters of Italian Opera: Verdi* (Andrew Porter) p. 195)
- How much contrapuntal skill is somewhat in debate...
- Loses daughter, son and wife in the 1830s; depression. Composition of *Nabucco* (or, *Nabucodonosor*) – 1841. Success.
 - Aid of Giusseppina Streppina (whom he'd later marry)
- 1845 "My mind is black, always black, and will remain so until I have finished with this career that I abhor." ... "I must write six operas – and then farewell to everything!"
- "Galley years" – 14 operas in 9 years. Incl. *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore*.
- After Traviata, slows pace somewhat, increases fees. Huge commissions, e.g. *Aida*, (1871).
- Nabucco had cost something like 2000 lire. *Macbeth* fetches 18,000.
- Struggle with censors. (e.g. Macbeth, witches → gypsies. I lombardi baptism scene removed)
- 1861 becomes a member of Italian parliament. (resigns 1865)
- 1871 Cairo Opera Commissions *Aida*
 - "operas made with ideas" rather than "operas made of duets, cavatinas, etc."
- Frustration with his position in the climate of the *Zukunftsmusik*.
 - "Why on earth should I write music? What have I to gain from it? ... I should be told all over again that *I don't know how to write*, that I have become a *follower of Wagner*. A fine sort of glory! After a career of almost 40 years to end up as an *imitator!*" (Porter, p. 258)
- 1874 Requiem.
- Semi retirement – "a job becomes a calling" (Taruskin) – and *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

Changes in Theater Culture over Career of Verdi

- Score is not “art” at the beginning of Verdi’s career:
 - ‘music was a means to the “artistic fact” of the performance, not an end in itself. (Roccatagliati, “Italian Theater of Verdi’s Day,” in *Cambridge Verdi*, p. 18”
 - Author vs. “man of the theater.”
- Revolutions of 1848, increased power for music publishers, copyright, royalties, licensing. Impresario loses some power. “Boom” for composing industry?
- 1861 unification of Italy: new government ends subsidies to theaters. Opera taken over by entrepreneurs.
 - Theaters with greater capacity and more democratic design. Growth of “repertory.” Publisher is now the “key player.”
 - “Within this new system, the integrity and inviolability of the score became the premise of the publisher’s commercial rights and the author’s artistic ownership. So the idea took hold that opera composers should be considered true ‘authors’ of veritable ‘artworks.’” (Roccatagliati, p. 25)

Wagner and Verdi

- Appreciates the “invisible orchestra” in Wagner.
- Wagner encroaches upon traditional terrain of Italian music.
 - “scapigliati” – shaggy Wagnerites in Italy...hipsters?
- Wagner the “spook” (Taruskin): someone about whom you had to take a position.
- Difference: realism and tragicomedy.
 - Think of the Fool in King Lear.

Politics and unisoni

- Verdi provides “musical propaganda” for the nationalist movement in Italy;
 - Nabucco (1841): **Va pensiero**
 - Freedom, politically charged; Hebrews remembering Zion.
 - Anti-clerical element...
- **Ernani (1844): “si ridesti il leon”**
 - Hymn of the conspirators to assassinate the Holy Roman Emperor.
- I Lombardi (1843): “O Signore, del tetto natio”
 - Lombards recall their *patria*

Va Pensiero

Va', pensiero, sull'ali dorate;
Va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,
ove olezzano tepide e molli
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!
Del Giordano le rive saluta,
di Sionne le torri atterrate...
Oh mia Patria sì bella e perduta!
O membranza sì cara e fatal!
Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,
perché muta dal salice pendi?
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,
ci favella del tempo che fu!
O simile di Solima ai fati,
traggi un suono di crudo lamento;
o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto
che ne infonda al patire virtù!

Hasten thoughts on golden wings.
Hasten and rest on the densely wooded
hills,
where warm and fragrant and soft
are the gentle breezes of our native
land!
The banks of the Jordan we greet
and the towers of Zion.
O, my homeland, so beautiful and lost!
O memories, so dear and yet so deadly!
Golden harp of our prophets,
why do you hang silently on the willow?
Rekindle the memories of our hearts,
and speak of the times gone by!
Or, like the fateful Solomon,
draw a lament of raw sound;
or permit the Lord to inspire us
to endure our suffering!

cf. psalm 137

- Psalm 137
- Rivers of Babylon (1970) – fame via *The Harder They Come* (1972)

Tinta of the *Risorgimento*

- Rid Italy of foreign powers; Austria, France
- Slowly, steadily, and led *from above*, the Italian state as we know it, more or less, established in 1871.
- “Viva Verdi” acrostic
 - “Viva V. Emanuele Re D’Italia”
- Relationship to art; but a different romanticism, one which scorned “morbid individualism.” (Taruskin)
- Thus, a *tinta* of “cruelty, of strife, of force.”
- Tragicomedy?

Rigoletto (1851)

- Duke of Mantua (originally royalty in Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*) seduces and abandons Gilda, the beautiful daughter of his hunchback jester, Rigoletto.

- Questa o Quella

- Questa o quella per me pari sono
a quant' altre d' intorno mi vedo,
del mio core l' impero non cedo
meglio ad una che ad altre beltà
La costoro avvenenza è qual dono
di che il fato ne infiora la vita
s' oggi questa mi torna gradita
forse un' altra doman lo sarà.
La costanza tiranna del core
detestiamo qual morbo crudele,
sol chi vuole si serbi fedele;
Non v'ha amor se non v'è libertà.
De' i mariti il geloso furore,
degli amanti le smanie derido,
anco d' Argo i cent'occhi disfido
se mi punge una qualche beltà.

This girl or that girl are equal
to the all the others I see around me,
the core of my being I will not yield
to one beauty or another
their attractiveness is what they are gifted
from fate and embellishes life
Perhaps today this girl welcomes me
perhaps tomorrow another girl will demand me.
Constancy is a tyrant to the heart
it is a hated cruel disease to
only those who want you to be faithful;
There can be no love if there is no freedom.

Husbands' jealous rage,
lovers' woes I despise,
I defy the hundred eyes of Argo
if I fancy a few beauties.

Rigoletto

- Rigoletto mocks old man Duke is killing, is cursed for this. Gilda sacrifices herself to save Duke from her father's vengeance.
- Rigoletto sets a trap, brings Gilda to see the Duke philandering (la donna e mobile).
- Quartet: Duke sings to Maddalena, Gilda expresses horror, Rigoletto vows revenge. **Bella figlia dell'amore – libretto**
- Plan fails (she still loves him). Sacrifices herself, fulfilling the curse. Rigoletto hauls a sack full of what he thinks is the Duke's body, but hears someone singing "la donna e mobile" in the background...the curse has come true.

Aida

- Aida, slave, is actually a princess. In love with Radames, but the daughter of the Pharaoh also loves him. Priest tells Radames that he must lead Egyptian army against the Ethiopians.

Celeste Aida

– *Tenor di forza*

- Amneris overhears his song...is he in love? Aida enters, Amneris suspects her as a rival. Pharaoh sends him off to fight the Ethiopians (who are, of course, Aida's folks)
 - *Su! Del Nilo al sacro lido* – priests come off badly...
- Act II: Amneris tricks Aida into confessing his love for Radames. *Fu la sorte dell'armi*
- *The Grand March*: Ethiopian slaves are marched in. Aida recognizes her family among them. Priests argue for their execution. Radames awarded with the hand of the Princess. "Public celebration; private disaster." (Thomson Smillie)
- Act III: banks of the Nile. Aida's father, Amonasro, forces her to trick Radames into revealing a military secret, her father overhears, and he's indicted for treason.
- Act IV: judgment and death. Radames encounters Amneris, who fails to convince him to defend himself. Radames sentenced to be buried alive. Aida sneaks into his tomb, surprises him there. Amneris comments from above, along with the *sacerdoti*. *Death Scene*.

Retirement in 1870

- After *Aida*, he's quite rich. Farming.
- *Requiem, Dies Irae*
 - “disinterested” composition, art for art's sake, even in Italy
- *Otello*
 - Influence of Wagner? Much debated.
 - Or pursuit, simply shared with Wagner, of “continuous finale?”
 - Begins with **tumultuous chorus**
 - “I am writing in moments of absolute leisure, simply for my own amusement.”

Verdi, *Otello*

- All of Shakespeare's Act I is gone; fidelity?
 - Breaking literal faith to keep some other kind of faith?
- Otello, Act I scene – invented love duet. (watch on Met: track 10)
 - In some ways, conforms to *scena* convention
 - Intro, *cantabile*, *tempo di mezzo* (“*quando narravi*”) ends approx 8 minutes, *cabaletta-coda* (kissing) (8:30 ff.)
 - But, many distinct echoes of *Tristan*, which Verdi greatly admired.
 - Kisses ('bacio'):
 - 1: appog. To Tonic
 - 2: appog. To Tristan ($\frac{1}{2}$ dim) chord
 - 3: another $\frac{1}{2}$ dim chord, this time resolving to the Tonic
 - “Tristan and Isolde as old marrieds!” (Taruskin)
 - In the coda/cabaletta, **primacy of orchestral music.**
 - Under the shimmering sky
 - “the appoggiatura (A \sharp) resolves unproblematically to a member of the tonic triad, ironically reversing the chord's functional (=psychological) trajectory.” (Taruskin)

Otello, con't

- Act IV:
 - “era piu calmo?” (track 35 on met on demand)
 - Pre-bedtime consultation with maid Emilia
 - “ave maria” (37)
 - Sends Emilia away to pray
 - “chi e la?” (38)
 - Otello arrives; see especially 2:20 ff.
 - “niun mi tema” (41)
 - don't fear me; Otello has killed Desdemona, realizes what's happened, resigned. Especially 3:30 ff.

(proto?) Modernist

- Taruskin:

For the sake of continuity, both composers committed wholesale violations of traditional “form,” though only Wagner boasted of it. For both composers, ultimately, the conscious objective became fidelity to artistic ideals, abstractly conceived, rather than to their audience's expectations. That was the cradle of what we now call modernism, shrewdly characterized by Leonard B. Meyer, an American music theorist, as “the late, late Romantic period.”³⁰ And once Verdi could be viewed as a modernist, it became possible for academic critics to view him as great.

- These new virtues can certainly be explained without recourse to Wagner, but the esthetic parallel with Wagner need not be overlooked. The most essential parallel, to repeat, was the protomodernist conviction that artworks were not created only for the sake of enjoyment—that is, at any rate, for the audience's enjoyment. Artists wrote to please themselves. While working on Falstaff, the opera (also Shakespearean, also with Boito) that followed Otello, which he finished composing in his eightieth year, Verdi let it be known that “I am writing it in moments of absolute leisure, simply for my own amusement.”³¹ That made it respectable. And so did the assumption that underlay the composer's disinterested amusement: consciousness that his new manner of continuity and compression served the purposes of art.