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Singing Verdi at Teatro Regio di Parma: An Insight into Challenges and Controversies

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by

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ABSTRACT

Singing Verdi at Teatro Regio di Parma: An Insight into Challenges and Controversies

by

Valdis Jansons

The intended audience of this thesis is professional singers who are at the beginning of their careers, or those who have interest in Italian operatic theater culture, with particular emphasis on Teatro Regio di Parma, which has often been described by a range of artists as the world's toughest theatre. Following a brief overview of Teatro Regio from a historical and cultural point of view, this thesis shifts focus to the artist's perspective, and provides a set of historical facts and a chronicle of incidents related to a host of artistic choices and events that occurred at Regio, with the intention to shed light on the acts or historical influences that triggered such tensions or misunderstandings through the lens of a singer.

In analyzing sources, I gather as many different points of view as possible (even those that appear conflicting), thus pointing out the inherent subjectivity of each argument. This thesis provides opinions from audience members, singers, conductors, scholars, journalists, and collaborative pianists. The fourth chapter of this thesis focuses in particular on this last category - collaborative pianists - as they often have practical and applied knowledge from listening to singers, directors, and conductors, as molded through decades of work at Regio, such as indications or suggestions of stage directions given during the artistic production process. I interview three pianists, asking them to also discuss their points of view on

controversial topics about vocal interpretation, with particular emphasis on the genius loci and main focus of this thesis, Giuseppe Verdi.

With the complex and often conflicting factors gathered through testimonies and my firsthand experience, I have analyzed the most recurring controversies, juxtaposing a technical insight from an artist's perspective with that of the audience. As a result, while pointing out well-known stereotypes about the "Verdian voice" (i.e., a type of voice "required" to sing Verdi), one of the main factors of the controversies I analyze is the deviation from the original score in a performance. Put simply, there are countless examples of artists not following what was written in the score by altering pitches and musical form, adding extramusical features, etc., which has created a performed sound with said changes that audiences have come to highly expect. Frequently, the non-observance of these performed "traditions" becomes the very core of a conflict. As part of this thesis, I discuss the importance of artistic integrity (not only from an artist's perspective but also through the lens of fidelity to the composer's will), which creates a space for conscious artistic choices where all the benefits and drawbacks are analyzed beforehand.

I then discuss the phenomenon of overlapping aesthetic codes, mainly when applied to Verdi's music, as well as their effects on how we assess performances of Verdi's operas. By rethinking and re-evaluating these strictures (which often are driven by stereotypes), Verdi's artistic heritage can become more accessible (and relevant?) to a broader pool of singers, which would, however, most likely meet a determined resistance from the most conservative groups of audiences.

Finally, I draw out some practical considerations and bits of advice that help grasp the challenges that Teatro Regio might represent to an unfamiliar singer, thus revealing an

awareness of the modern values and achievements in performing Verdi without forgetting about the traditions of the past.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Being an opera singer makes me feel lucky and privileged. Nevertheless, I do not want to suggest that being a professional artist is a matter of luck: alongside beautiful memories, a profound sense of satisfaction, and the opportunity to meet interesting people and experience different cultures, there are years of hard work, auditions that haven't gone well, performances in which one struggles until the end, and many other hardships. As artists, we also feel lucky, considering the low odds of success. In my experience, only five to seven percent or so of those who studied to become opera soloists have actually made careers out of it.

As for feeling blessed, it is a true gift to be the one who is actively involved in the creative artistic process, who makes his own decisions and molds an individual artistic point of view and then realizes these ideas on the physical level. A singer should take care of such a gift, acknowledging that our artistic mission implies a fair amount of knowledge and responsibility. Yet, certain artistic decisions do not come easy, as they might produce tensions, contestations, and controversial reactions. These have elicited my curiosity and desire to analyze this often-overlooked aspect of artistry more thoroughly.

My hope is that this thesis will be of interest to young opera professionals who are curious about what could be the most challenging professional experience of their careers and what this implies in practice. This research can also give a different perspective to those not directly involved in artistic production but who wish to understand the singer's mentality when dealing with the audience's expectations - including some singular and controversial episodes that show what happens when those expectations are not fulfilled.

My journey as a professional opera singer began in Parma, Italy. This Northern Italian town is famous for its Parmigiano Reggiano (Parmesan Cheese), a fine Lambrusco wine, and ham. Still, I was attracted to it by one of the most prestigious conservatories in Italy, located near the theater of Parma – *Il Teatro Regio*. Parma, even today, boasts an impressive cultural heritage and vibrant musical life, which has distinguished this city for centuries. Many names are tightly bonded to Parma: Cipriano de Rore, Niccolò Paganini, Cleofonte Campanini, Arturo Toscanini, Renata Tebaldi, Carlo Bergonzi, and, of course, Giuseppe Verdi.

Following manifold testimonies, references, and my firsthand personal and professional experience, corroborated by the widespread claim that Parma Opera House is the toughest opera theatre in the world, made me want to analyze these testimonies and question the claim about Teatro Regio of being the “world’s toughest.” For this reason, I have decided to limit the area of research to Parma and its province but with an emphasis on Verdi’s figure since it is the common denominator in most available references to artistic divergencies, conflicts, miscomprehensions, and extravagant manifestations of approval and disapproval, such as (sometimes) witty and open commentary coming from the audience during the performances, public’s interactions with artists outside the theater before and after the show, physical confrontations and even imprisonment as a consequence of a non-satisfactory performance.

In Chapter 2, I give an overview of the cultural life of Parma throughout the last four centuries. I consider this essential because it provides a reader with a clearer understanding of historical events and their dynamics in modern times. While focusing mainly on opera, I also wanted to go beyond the widespread and generalized statements, such as “opera was

very popular in Italy (or in Parma),” and to provide more tangible insight into the data by analyzing how that popularity fares today.

During my studies at Conservatorio A. Boito di Parma (2002 – 2013), I witnessed numerous operas at Regio, resulting in triumphant ecstasy in some cases and miserable fiascos in others. As mentioned in the beginning, artists are not immune to failure; unfortunately, it is the “part of the game,” which is hard (but necessary) to deal with. I have heard firsthand from many spectators and opera zealots that the things one can witness at Regio, such as open contestations and conflicts that devolve into brawls, will probably not be seen in any other theater. The fiascos and triumphs I witnessed firsthand (none with any sort of physical confrontation, though) and those reported in various testimonies have a common denominator – they are, in most cases, productions of operas by the composer Giuseppe Verdi.

For assiduous operagoers, connoisseurs of the works of Verdi, and most Parmigiani and Parmensi,¹ Verdi - il Cigno di Busseto, a native of Roncole near the aforementioned Busseto in the province of Parma, is much more than a composer or musician.² Unsurprisingly, the public’s sensibility reaches its peak when it comes to Verdi in Parma.

In analyzing the audience’s sensibility, I found that the more I became acquainted with the testimonies of outstanding singers, conductors, and stage directors, the more my awareness of the peculiarity of Regio and its public grew. I wanted to give space to what usually does not end up in scholarly works, such as the conflicts, their nature, motivations,

¹ Parmigiani refers to the inhabitants of city of Parma, while Parmensi stands for those who originate from the Province of Parma.

² The Swan of Busseto, as Verdi is often called, translated from Italian.

and contrasting points of view on artistic matters arising between the audience and artists. In traditional operatic scholarship focused on opera as music, scholars tended to overlook these conflicts because there is often very subjective and biased reasoning behind the tensions. Even in more recent scholarship, in which the conditions and concerns of audiences and reception have become more of a music historical focus, academics tend not to highlight the impact of tension on the practical realities of singers, which is the focus of this thesis. In Chapter 3, I discuss a series of incidents and conflicts at Regio occurring throughout the last two centuries. Alongside a brief analysis of each of them, these historical insights give artists who are unaware of Regio's peculiar audience some concrete examples of how certain expectations and historical debates may indeed help singers prepare how best to perform in a context such as Regio.

In an effort to find a more balanced and more inclusive perspective on the problems regarding conflicts, performance practices, "traditions," and compliance (or non-compliance, which often triggers those conflicts) with those traditions, I draw on testimonies from collaborative pianists who worked at Regio. Interviewing three outstanding collaborative pianists who represent three different eras allowed me to delve into the "golden years of the opera" (usually referred to as the 1950s - 60s) and provided an essential source of practical knowledge derived from these pianists' experience. In some instances, collaborative pianists provided complementary facts or perspectives that shed a different light on historical events (conflicts, in this case) that occurred at Regio. These interviews (translated by me from Italian along with all sources in Italian used in this thesis), constitute Chapter 4 and serve as a poignant testimony of the development of singing, performance practices, and audience

perception, alongside adamant and straightforward bits of advice to the young singers facing vocal and technical obstacles.

Speaking of obstacles in a broader sense, many obstacles on my professional path were instances of intellectual “bullying.” At the beginning of my career, such incidents were daunting, and I questioned my preparation and professionalism. How should an artist react to a stage director’s rage bordering on anger when working on *Rigoletto* after admitting that you have not read Hugo’s *Le Roi s’amuse*? Or, imagining that your answer is “yes,” and you have read it: most likely, the subsequent question would be, “Did you read it in French?” If so, your French would most likely be tested on the spot. Such testing would continue until the stage director finds a weak spot for leverage. In the case of conductors, it is often about the composer’s letters, scholarly works, and biographical subtleties, which, in most cases, singers are unaware of. At this point, a singer might question their competence, forgetting that performers have and should have a different standpoint since dealing with performance-related issues implies a different perspective, frequently contrasting to those of directors or conductors.

As I alluded to before, such episodes rarely represent an intellectual challenge. Instead, it is a game of power, where the intellectual “inferiority” implies more obedience due to the inability to construct a counterargument. Far be it from me to suggest that a singer should not be familiar with primary sources in literature or the composition history of a specific opera. Such knowledge would only enrich the artist and would undoubtedly be helpful. Yet, it is critical to remember that artists have a field of expertise that significantly differs from those of stage directors and conductors. Thus, it is crucial to keep in mind that

the practical knowledge essential for a conductor or stage director might only be complementary for a singer and vice versa.

The fabricated story about Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse* is just a pattern that I had to deal with many times, especially at the beginning of my career, until I realized that the "not-knowing" in most cases indicated that the subject of an argument was outside of my field of expertise, rather than a sign of incompetence. However, to be able to deal with a similar situation, a singer should have strong competence in their own area of expertise.

Chapter 5 provides several practical examples of when a singer's artistic sense and competence are questioned. This time, the tensions directly relate to a singer's field of expertise and demand for a possible course of action. In most cases, the singer must make these choices that may or may not impact the audience's perception and assessment, which is why this chapter resonates significantly with the discussion about controversies at the Regio in Chapter 3. For instance, in several cases, artists have been severely criticized for not making expected deviations from what was written in the score (changing notes, omitting entire sections, adding non-musical sound effects, etc.) Such criticism would not have space in an ideal world where a performer delivers the composer's music unaltered, following the author's precise directions, and it positively resonates with the audience's expectations. It is superfluous to say that there is a massive margin of interpretation for such subjects as the composer's intention, vocal technique, role vision, voice suitability, etc.

Rather than trying to point out what is "right" or "wrong," I attempt to create a dialogue between parties, where "pros and cons" may vary depending on the situation (venue, cast, audience, etc.) An essential part of this thesis is on the topic of operatic "traditions," a phenomenon often overlooked and underestimated not only by scholars but

also by artists. This topic discusses the tensions between the artist's agency to follow the original score (read "composer's will," with all the subjectivity that might derive from it), interpretational alterations (liberties taken by artists in an effort to improve their rendering of the role or the entire opera), and the expectations of the audience, which is a practical factor that an artist cannot ignore.

Further, exploring the nature and urgency of these alterations, juxtaposed with the original score and the composer's intentions, may reveal several polarized tensions, such as artistic vs. skillful, where a willingness to show one's vocal skills might distort a character's depiction or the whole opera's structure; entirety vs. individuality, where there is no clear standard that would indicate how much a performer can deviate from the musical score to create a personal interpretation and, an already briefly discussed one - fidelity to the score vs. interpretation. Without presuming to search for a definitive answer, I try to find a possible inner dialogue in order to provide a concrete and fact-supported ground on which singers can build awareness of their artistic choices.

I intend to make space for awareness without prompting for a determined solution. Awareness, in turn, should foster a sense of responsibility, which should be a distinguishing characteristic in anyone involved firsthand in artistic production. This research does not aim to stray from the performer's creative choices, favoring trends and preferences outside the "production" area. Instead, recalling several historical elements and developing understanding and awareness in even uncomfortable and challenging artistic positions is essential. When faced with Parma's judgmental and demanding audiences, having a solid opinion and understanding of matters such as "What kind of voice is required to sing Verdi?" "What has changed over the years in interpreting Verdi?" and "How was Verdi sung

in the nineteenth century?” can reinforce the performer’s artistic point of view and grow the singer’s stamina. More performers with such verve and awareness could represent the development of more conscious and clean interpretative standards not only in Parma and not only in Verdi but on a larger scale, too - looking at the roots with sensibleness but without necessarily aspiring to reconstruct opera “as it was then” (as one finds in “historically informed” productions), which would be a different topic with a completely different purpose and target audience.

It would be naïve to think that an artistic revolution could take place due to such efforts. However, a performer’s ultimate goal should be to strive for the aforementioned “ideal world,” where they strive for artistic integrity and competence that result from continuous research as sustained by critical evidence.

Chapter 2: All Ways Lead to Parma: Venues, Institutions, Organizations

Paraphrasing the famous "All ways lead to Rome," this provocative title indicates the importance of Parma and the ambition of its people when it comes to opera, and in particular, Verdi. Myriads of music history books thoroughly treat the environment of Parma and its musical realities. Contributing to this research is not my ambition nor the purpose of this text. Instead, drawing on historical facts from scholarly sources can provide an idea of how essential music, theatre, and, in particular, opera were to rulers and everyday people in Parma in the last three centuries. It would give us a clearer understanding of what kind of audience there was in Parma before Verdi and would address whether or not the hostility of Parma's public is only Verdi-related. In this chapter, I introduce Parma's several musical venues and cultural institutions in order to prepare a discussion about the city's cultural life, connections, and reciprocal intrinsic relationships. I consider several venues and institutions before turning to a close analysis of the city's most notorious opera house, the Teatro Regio.

Teatro Farnese

After attending a performance of Peri's *Dafne* in 1604 in Florence, Duke of Parma and Piacenza Ranuccio I Farnese decided to build his own theater in Parma that would be suited for opera productions. Although the theater was completed in 1618, another ten years passed before the theatre in Parma could be inaugurated. In December 1628, on the occasion of the marriage of Ranuccio I's son Odoardo to Margherita de' Medici, the new Teatro Farnese was opened to Farnese's invited audiences. It goes without saying that the audiences back then

consisted exclusively of representatives of the highest aristocracy and attended the performance only at the ruler's invitation. It hosted up to an awe-inspiring number of 3000, considering that even today's most capacious Italian theatres - La Scala in Milan and Carlo Felice in Genoa - hardly exceed 2000 seats. Competing with other monarchs for the grand opening, the Duke of Parma commissioned a new opera by the well-known composer Claudio Monteverdi, whose *Mercurio e Marte* (text by Claudio Achillini), which premiered in 1628 and introduced the operatic genre to Parma and thereby marked the beginning of one of the city's most distinguishable traits.

For the representation of the musical tournament Francesco Guitti, who had taken part in the planning stage, introduced an important innovation: the orchestra and musicians in front of the stage in the position which would become standard in Italian theatre.³

Considering that operas in the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries were realized only on special occasions, the theatre was used only nine times since its construction, with a final performance in 1732. Due to the theatre's peculiar structure and exorbitant maintenance costs, there was a need for a new, modern, and more accessible building and location.

Before moving the successor of Teatro Farnese, it is worth mentioning that it (Farnese) could have become the world's largest indoor theater: In the 1960s, there was a proposal to establish a "Festival Verdi" at Teatro Farnese, based on the successful models of the Salzburg Festival and Bayreuth Festival which also had large seating capacity. However, discordances between the local fire department - which asked for more security exits

³ "Farnese Theatre," Pilotta, Monumental complex of Pilotta, accessed 13 March 2024 <https://complessopilotta.it/en/the-farnese-theatre/>.

considering the theater's wooden structure - and the Superintendence the Fine Arts would not allow any structural alteration, leading to an impasse.⁴ Since then, only sporadic theatrical plays and chamber music concerts have taken place at Teatro Farnese.

In the 2000s, after considerable effort, some experimental opera productions were set at Farnese⁵. In addition to fire security issues, the venue was also challenged by dispersive acoustics and excessive reverberation.

One production that is worth bringing up is Verdi's *Stiffelio*, directed by Graham Vick in 2017 as part of Festival Verdi. For this performance, the public stood in the center of the theater. The soloists had small podium islands, the orchestra was situated on the other side of the venue, and the choir sang from the tiers that were originally meant for the public. Given the conditions, the subtitles were only available on smartphones.

Opera productions at Farnese became a stable reality from 2015: despite the unsolved (or unsolvable) fire security issues, even significantly reducing the theater's capacity and making it less commercially viable than Regio (Farnese's seating capacity is around 3000, meanwhile that of Regio is 1092)⁶, the venue remains historically important. This fortunate

⁴ "The Italian Scene. Vol. XII – N. 11 November 1966," 1-16.

⁵ In 1990, the Ensemble "Edgard Varèse" Cultural Association created a musical event, "Homage to Luigi Nono." From 2001, Farnese hosted "FarneseShakespeare," a series of Shakespearian plays, such as *The Tempest* (dir. Dominique Pitoiset, 2001,) *As You Like It* (dir. Gigi Dall'Aglio, 2001,) *Hamlet* (dir. Walter Le Moli, 2002). The first representation in front of 1500 (until then, the limit was 200) spectators was a concert by The Orchestra Mozart, conducted by Claudio Abbado, on June 12th, 2011. Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teatro_Farnese

⁶ Source: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teatro_Regio_\(Parma\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teatro_Regio_(Parma))

outcome was hardly imaginable at the time of the last performance there in 1732, after which the theater faced hundreds of years of oblivion, abandonment, and decay.

Since 2015, operatic productions at Teatro Farnese have been produced exclusively by Regio, and only during the Verdi Festival, so it seems appropriate to consider those productions potentially relevant to this thesis.



A scene from Stiffelio. Image taken from the website: <https://www.teatroregioparma.it/spettacolo/stiffelio-3/>

Teatro Ducale and Il Nuovo Teatro Ducale (later known as Teatro Regio)

By the second half of the seventeenth century, opera evolved and became more than an expensive way of exteriorizing one's power—it also became a business⁷. Opera theatre was not

⁷ Beth and Jonathan Glixons offer detailed insight into the business models of four Venetian Theaters in their *Inventing the Business of Opera. The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 66-105.

a venue limited to enjoying art; it became a socially vital crossroad for aristocrats, businesspeople, and political representatives. For that reason, there was a demand for a new theatre to be built: the Teatro Ducale, a direct predecessor to the Teatro Regio. It was inaugurated in 1689, 210 meters (690ft) from the Teatro Farnese, and was the site of the first documented episodes of the city's peculiar and hard-to-please artistic taste.

The Teatro Ducale hosted many world premieres in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, probably only music historians are now acquainted with the operas of such composers as Giuseppe Persiani, Giuseppe Mosca, Ferdinando Orlandi, or Antonio Calegari, who boasted premieres at the Teatro Ducale during this time. Alongside some of these lesser-known 18th-century operas that I will discuss later, it is worth remembering that fiasco accompanied the premieres of Rossini's hits, such as *L'Italiana in Algeri* (December 26th, 1814) and *Il Turco in Italia* (October 25th, 1817),⁸ giving us an idea about the public's deportment. Admittedly, *Il Turco* was not well-received at its premiere at the Teatro alla Scala either. In contrast, *L'Italiana* was triumphant at La Fenice di Venezia. As we will discover in the next chapter, such unpredictability became a distinguishing pattern in Parma, where the fact that an opera or a singer had success elsewhere before Parma elicited cautiousness and even suspicion in local spectators. Pandering to the growing popularity of opera and its requirements, in 1828, the Teatro Ducale saw its last season before being demolished soon after and giving space (not physical, though) to the new theater.

⁸ Paolo-Emilio Ferrari, *Spettacoli drammatico-musicali e coreografici in Parma dall'anno 1628 all'anno 1883*, 58.

The new theater was called “Il Nuovo Teatro Ducale” (The New Teatro Ducale), which emphasized the connection with its predecessor. It was across the street from the Teatro Ducale, 210 meters (690ft) away, which is the same distance from Teatro Farnese to Teatro Ducale. These distances show that being positioned in the very heart of the city was an essential condition. For its opening, the city's influential figures hoped that Rossini, the most prominent Italian composer at the time, could write an inaugural opera. But Rossini declined the invitation by saying he was too busy, thus raising malcontent and bias among commissioners toward the possible (and less “prestigious”) alternative solution. Due to complex political dynamics, a theatre board member had to write the libretto for the new opera. The inaugural opera *Zaira*, composed by a less well-known composer, Vincenzo Bellini, was not received well.⁹ In 1849, the theater changed its name to Teatro Regio di Parma, which, over time, it became synonymous with the ‘world’s toughest opera theater’ for singers. Today, Teatro Regio boasts sold-out performances of operas by composers from Mozart to Weill and, above all, Verdi, whose name is closely related to and associated with the venue. If singing at Teatro Regio is prestigious, singing Verdi at Teatro Regio is even more so; in fact, a successful performance of Verdi at Regio can be considered a sort of *passe-partout* to any other opera house. This thesis will provide several examples of clamorous fiascos at Regio because of the high demands and expectations, and ones that happened for singers often after huge successes elsewhere.

⁹ Karyl Charna Lynn, *Italian Opera Houses and Festivals*, 204.

The Conservatory of Parma

The Conservatory of Parma (Il Conservatorio Arrigo Boito di Parma) is another thriving pole of the city's musical life: being near one of the country's most prestigious institutions of musical education has always been an advantage to the Regio, which is just a short walk away. The Conservatory was founded in 1808, and, thanks to the Duchess of Parma Marie Louise's initiative, since 1818 its students have had the opportunity to study singing. This field, singing, became the Conservatory's distinguishing mark. Even today, a multitude of students worldwide who want to become opera singers are attracted by its history and prestige.

Like in a few other cities, where an opera theater cooperates with the local educational institutions, Regio boasts a very close collaboration with the local Conservatory: its outreach programs are entirely cast by local students, who also have the opportunity to perform at presentation concerts, sing in opera choir, as comprimario (performers of secondary roles), and sometimes principal roles at Regio. Professors of the Conservatory often work at Regio, too. The Conservatory of Parma boasts such alums as Cleofonte Campanini, Arturo Toscanini, Romano Gandolfi¹⁰, Renata Tebaldi, Aldo Protti, Michele Pertusi, and Luca Salsi as well as faculty members such as Michelangelo, Marcello, and Claudio Abbado, Ettore Campogalliani (teacher of Luciano Pavarotti, Mirella Freni, Ruggero Raimondi, and others), to mention a few.

¹⁰ Romano Gandolfi (1934-2006) was a prominent cultural figure associated mostly with choral conducting. From 1971 until 1983, he was principal choirmaster of Teatro alla Scala in Milan. Subsequently, he collaborated with such theaters as Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcellona, Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari, Teatro Comunale in Bologna, Teatro Regio di Parma, Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro, the Metropolitan in New York, and others, working with such conductors as Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, Gianandrea Gavazzeni, Tullio Serafin, James Levine, Zubin Mehta, Georges Prêtre, Carlo Maria Giulini, Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti, Riccardo Chailly, Pierre Boulez, and Carlos Kleiber.

The Popularity of Teatro Regio

Defining Teatro Regio di Parma as the world's most challenging opera stage might sound provocative or pretentious. In the shared knowledge of the Italian opera community, corroborated by my firsthand experience and numerous conversations with opera professionals and operagoers, one hardly will find more testimonies about controversial events and conflicts than those from Regio. This chapter, represents the informational weight—both in quality and quantity—of many testimonies and references I have gathered, and constitutes the reason for the following arguments in subsequent chapters.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Regio intrinsically had bound its name to Verdi; thus, it is fair to say that to many practitioners and audience members, Regio means Verdi, while Verdi means much more. For years, a very hard-to-please public of Parma represented a range of emotions, from utter dissent to ecstatic euphoria and veneration of singers. Unintentionally, it set a very high standard for singers coming to sing in Parma, attributing a *passe-partout* value to the stage of the city's opera theater. The Regio, throughout the years, broke multiple stereotypes and straightforward schemes: if a singer triumphs at, say, the Metropolitan Opera, they will most likely succeed at Covent Garden, Wiener Staatsoper, or Arena di Verona and the other way around. It does not work for Parma. Or better, it works only in the reverse way: if you succeed in Parma, especially in Verdi, then most likely, you will succeed everywhere else. In addition, if one does succeed in Parma, a triumph is even more delightful as most times (at least from my experience, after dozens of shows attended), it is accompanied by a sold-out. From an economic point of view,

assisting such a performance, whether it is a premiere or not, is affordable and keeps opera popular in the broadest possible sense¹¹.

Speaking of opera's popularity, those unfamiliar with Italian life and customs might wonder how vital opera was for people and what kind of impact theater had on the city's social and cultural life in the 19th century.

Consulting information from *Rigoletto*'s debut at Regio in the season 1852-53, the numbers appear to be almost far-fetched: it premiered on December 26, 1852, and ran for 35 shows, with the last performance on March 17th, selling a total of 21,033 tickets.¹²

While there is no precise data about Parma's population in the 1850s, available information shows a population of 38,279 in 1833 and 48,523 in 1901.¹³ Given these numbers, it appears reasonable to deduce that in 1853, the population was around 45,000 inhabitants. Therefore, mathematically, a number of spectators close to half of the population of Parma attended a performance of *Rigoletto*.¹⁴ However, by examining additional details

¹¹ Teatro Regio always provided a limited number of free tickets for the dress rehearsals of every opera of the season, reserved for the voice majors of Conservatorio di Parma. Furthermore, I have personally attended numerous shows, paying five euros (around nine dollars in 2003 and 5,4 dollars in 2024) for a ticket. A limited number of such tickets are issued because it implies standing behind the last row or sitting in the steps between the seat rows in loggione. One had to join the line at the ticket office at least a couple of hours before the show to get one of these tickets.

¹² Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 157.

¹³ "Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani (1935)," Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/parma_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/.

¹⁴ While I did not find any evidence of how many tourists, i.e., non-parmesans, attended performances in this period, there is a mention of an approximate number of visitors who arrived to see Verdi's *Aida* in Parma in 1860, a number that would constitute at least a third of the audience's total. The number 400 was mentioned in Gustavo Marchesi, *Teatri di Parma. L'Opera lirica nella capitale della musica*, 159-162. However, the number of tourists in 1860 should be significantly higher than in 1852 due to a railway connection between Piacenza and Parma and between Bologna and Parma inaugurated in 1859. Marchesi explicitly refers to the arrivals by train.

from previous opera productions, one will notice that the same person could return to see the same show more than once or twice. In one exceptional case, the Parma Duchess Maria Luigia attended Verdi's *Ernani* at Regio twelve times between December 26, 1844, and February 9, 1845.¹⁵ In addition, opera, as a musical composition, expressed (and still expresses) social and political tensions and problems, serving as a mirror of society.¹⁶

Even imagining that the theater public was only made of fanatics who each attended the show twelve times, let us try to project the same proportions to New York, with its 8.468 million population.¹⁷ Hopefully, it will give a clearer idea of Regio's popularity. The opera zealots would constitute 330,252 persons (3.89 percent of the total), possessing 3,951,733 tickets for 35 shows, where the theater's capacity should be around 112,907! Or, with the actual Metropolitan Opera capacity of 3,977, it would take nearly three years, that is, more than 993 full-house shows, to satisfy the demand.¹⁸

Obviously, many factors would affect the outcome of these simplistic and unpretentious calculations. However, even considering significant variations to these numbers, realizing the importance and popularity of opera in Parma is awe-inspiring and suggests why familiarity with opera and knowing entire operas by heart was so widespread.

¹⁵ Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 76.

¹⁶ For instance, Verdi promulgated ideas of Italian liberty from an Austro-Hungarian yoke through his *Nabucco*. There is no need to focus on this aspect since there are dozens of books written on Verdi and his music's role in social and political life in the 1800s. The word *Italian* is used here for convenience, considering that Italy as a state was founded in 1861.

¹⁷ According to www.datacommons.org
<https://datacommons.org/place/geoId/3651000#>.

¹⁸ Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metropolitan_Opera

The Orchestra of Teatro Regio

Regio's good fortune was crucially shaped by having a monarch with vital interests in artistic growth, especially with aims to defy the stereotypes of provincial cultural life. The name of Duchess Maria Luigia (Marie Louise I) (1791 – 1847), the second wife of Napoleon I Bonaparte, is still profoundly respected and venerated. During Maria Luigia's reign, many musical ensembles in the city were at their absolute best: il Corpo Bandistico (a military band), the Orchestra Ducale, and the Armonia di Corte, an 18th-century French and Austrian chamber ensemble. She also supported the Società Filarmonica Parmense [Parma Philharmonic Society], promoting musical education at every age.

Undoubtedly, the artist who had the most significant impact on orchestral development during this period of Maria Luigia's reign was Nicolò Paganini. Apart from his friendship with the monarch, Paganini's ties with the city were rooted in his student years: Alessandro Rolla, Ferdinando Paer, and Gasparo Ghiretti were his violin teachers in Parma. After settling down in Parma, at the sunset of his career, the renowned violinist was appointed to the administrative board of the Orchestra Ducale and became the director just a year later. Paganini passed away in 1840 in Nice, and due to the long-lasting allegations of his devilry¹⁹, it took thirteen years for his son Achille to find a spot for his final rest. Unsurprisingly, the only place where the sepulture was granted was Parma, where his tomb is located today.

The Duchess invested a conspicuous amount of money in buying the most valuable and cutting-edge musical instruments, such as a Guarneri violin for the orchestra's concertmaster,

¹⁹ “[Paganini was] gifted with genius of the rarest order, cultivated to a perfection absolutely unique, his skill was attributed to the aid received from the devil.” From Stephen S. Stratton, *Nicolo Paganini : His Life and Work*, 90.

an ebony flute with ornamented silver keys, and a square piano with a six-octave range, imported directly from Vienna.²⁰

Predictably, flourishing musical and cultural life inspired Verdi, who started his career during these favorable years.

Verdi considered Teatro Regio's orchestra one of the best, if not the best, in Italy, undoubtedly superior to La Scala's. This fame, which dates to the years of the failed Paganini reformation, however, increases during the years of the conductor Nicola De Giovanni (1802-1856), violin concertmaster from 1836, also praised by Meyerbeer. De Giovanni managed to achieve balance and compactness never seen after the Bourbonic age in terms of overall quality, whereas instrumental technique of several elements, inherited from a musical culture rooted at the end of the previous century, was so impressive that Verdi reckoned it as "The best orchestra of Italy."²¹

The same source returns to similar statements referring to the season 1852/53, adding quotes from *La Gazzetta di Parma*, which is still the city's most influential newspaper:

Praising the orchestra and De Giovanni is no news anymore, but [...] the score [of *Rigoletto*] had been read through without interruptions in the orchestra in the first rehearsal, without having seen it before. [...] "This fact is so significant per se that there is no need for words to commend it." Undoubtedly, at the time of De Giovanni, the orchestra of Regio was one of the most prominent opera orchestras in the world.²²

However, Regio's orchestra depended heavily on its leaders. After the passing of De Giovanni, the glamor vanished, and the orchestra was nearly dissolved. A valuable restoration opportunity came when Verdi agreed to direct *Aida's* rehearsals in 1872. In this period, the composer focused primarily on the orchestra, which was undoubtedly successful, so that Verdi wrote in a letter a few months later:²³ "In Rome, they will never have an

²⁰ Roberta Montemorra Marvin, "Music at Court during the Reign of Maria Luigia, Duchess of Parma, Piacenza, and Guastalla: A Partial Survey," 475 – 481.

²¹ Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 20.

²² *Ibid.*, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 158.

²³ Marco Capra, "Il teatro d'opera a Parma: quattrocento anni, dal Farnese al Regio," 110.

orchestra like in Parma, and so the choirs as it was in that occasion, the scenography, costumes, the *mise en scène*, and, above all, the finesse of the rendering.”²⁴

In conclusion, in this chapter it has been my aim to give a sufficiently deep insight into the musical reality in Parma, Teatro Regio, its roots, organizational dynamics, and socio-cultural significance. This insight is crucial for building a balanced and as unbiased as possible opinion about the audience of Teatro Regio, the public’s literacy, and, consequently, how it would depict what kind of environment Teatro Regio represents for a singer who has to work in it.

opera and knowing entire operas by heart was so widespread.

Parma: Performance Outcome Statistics

Although the word “tough” when speaking about Teatro Regio is inherently subjective, there is still a need to provide some quantitative evidence for it or, at least, to make qualitative comparisons between the theaters of Parma and the more famous Italian theaters in Milan, Venice, Rome, or Naples.

First, in dealing with unexpected and unpredictable fiascos in Parma (such as Rossini’s *Il Turco in Italia* or Verdi’s *Luisa Miller*), ²⁵it is necessary to inquire if the audiences in Parma differ from those of other theaters. If so, what are the causes of such a difference?

As much as I wanted to make this insight comprehensive and inclusive, several objective limits prevented it. The documented conflicts between artists and audiences I have researched are mostly from the nineteenth century, but some go back as far as 1759. The

²⁴ Giuseppe Verdi, “Letter to Vincenzo Torelli, August 22, 1872,” in Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi: Volume III*, 604.

²⁵ See p. 12 of this document.

most substantial evidence I analyzed goes back to the nineteenth century and on, and I have not found any relevant evidence from 1628 to 1759 to build my discussion around.

Parma and its theater's life from the 18th century onwards have been broadly documented and analyzed in scholarship. Drawing from Margaret R. Butler's book *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, I would like to give a brief insight into Parma's geopolitical singularity in the eighteenth century, which undoubtedly influenced the audience's literacy and attitude.

Butler states, "Parma has long been recognized as a city where Italian and French operatic traditions encountered each other."²⁶ Furthermore, she points out that it was a crossroads where two powerful dynasties, the Habsburgs and Bourbons, merged, also thanks to the figure of the Duchess of Parma, Marie Louise. The Duchess of Parma was the daughter of a Habsburg, the last Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, who was also the first Emperor of Austria, Francis I (1768 – 1835).²⁷ Moreover, the fact that she was the second wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, she brought to Parma a French (read Bourbon) imprint that significantly impacted opera in Parma in the eighteenth century. In speaking of such a "fruitful commingling" and referring to Tommaso Traetta's (1727 – 1779) operas that represented this kind of cultural fusion, Butler also states:

Parma's mid-eighteenth-century theater demonstrated this reality [coexistence and reciprocal influence of French and Italian opera] more clearly and prominently than any other contemporary opera theater in all of Europe was able to do, even others where

²⁶ Margaret R. Butler, *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, 127.

²⁷ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_II,_Holy_Roman_Emperor

French influence was strong and where there was interest in and support for presenting French and French-inspired cultural products.²⁸

After Maria Louise died in 1747, cultural life in Parma showed no decline. On the contrary, as of 1760, speaking of the public of Teatro Ducale, Butler claims that “Parma’s court and public could have counted themselves as among the most fashionable of European audiences.”²⁹ Around the same time, Parma gradually gained a reputation as “the Athens of Italy.”³⁰ Already in 1756, referring to Athens as “the source of drama at its purest,”³¹ a vivid example of Parma’s cultural prosperity is brought up by Butler through a letter of Traetta’s librettist Carlo Innocenzo Frugoni (1692 – 1768) addressed to the polymath, poet, and art critic Francesco Algarotti (1712 – 1764). Frugoni, commenting on the corruptness of contemporary drama, writes to Algarotti: “You deserve to have been born in Athens in its happy days,”³² referring to Parma and its thriving cultural life. Arguably, Frugoni indirectly and consciously alludes to the superiority of Parma over Venice in that period, given that Algarotti was born in Venice.

However, despite all the abovementioned facts and references, the audience’s literacy and competence did not go hand in hand with its temper, causing Guillaume du Tillot (1711 – 1774), a French politician and minister of finance of the Duchy of Parma, to issue a decree

²⁸ Margaret R. Butler, *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, 127.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 88, referring to Algarotti, *Opere*, 13:62–63, letter dated 23 March 1756, which concludes, “Voi meritavate di nascere in Atene ne’ suoi giorni felici.” Quoted and translated in Loomis, “Tommaso Traetta’s Operas,” 21.

“designed to reform audience behavior” in 1755.³³ Thus, we can presume that the audience in Parma was challenging and uncontrollable at least as early as 1755.

Nonetheless, can we assume that the performance assessments of the “most fashionable” and yet uncontrollable audience of “the Athens of Italy” were consistent and reliable? Several studies³⁴ claim that “In opera, [...] experts are more likely [...] to produce valid and reliable judgments of performance,” and “experts are recognized and legitimated as arbiters of “good taste” in their field.”³⁵ Furthermore, scholars state that “operagoers will evaluate a performance based on their individual expectations, which are primarily a function of their education, training and experience with opera,” and that “spectators’ tastes are likely to influence their quality assessments.”³⁶ So, in the case of the Parma environment, it might be safe to assume that the audience’s judgments were consistent and coherent with their high expectations. However, according to Butler, it is also safe to believe that those expectations were higher than elsewhere due to the comparably high cultural literacy resulting from geopolitical events combined with an efficient and insightful artistic management system.

Effectively, Parma represents an exception that contradicts various studies on prestige effects in music psychology. Studies show that “audiences will rate a performance as high

³³ Margaret R. Butler, *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, 36.

³⁴ Such as Sabine Boerner and Sabine Renz, *Performance Measurement in Opera Companies: Comparing the Subjective Quality Judgements of Experts and Non-experts*, which refers to: Pierre Bourdieu, 1984. *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; Morris Holbrook, "The Role of Ordinary Evaluations in the Market for Popular Culture: Do Consumers Have 'Good Taste'?" *Marketing Letters*, Vol. 16, n° 2, p. 75-86, 2005.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

quality based on the reputation of the star performer. Similarly, a company's overall reputation - be it positive (e.g., "opera company of the year") or negative (e.g., unfavourable reviews) - may influence one's expectations for the performance."³⁷ In contrast, in Parma, the testimonies discussed further in this chapter corroborate somewhat the opposite – an acclaimed guest star artist or production would rather elicit suspicion than enthusiasm in the first place."

After having assessed the audience in Parma qualitatively, I would like to bring up historical evidence from chronologies of Teatro Farnese, Teatro Ducale, and Teatro Regio (from 1757 to 2009) to corroborate the claim of Parma (read Regio) being at least a "tough" (and cautiously not "toughest," this time) theater. As you will see, this evidence, Paolo Ferrari's *Spettacoli drammatico-musicali e coreografici in Parma dall'anno 1628 all'anno 1883* differs from similar sources from theaters in Milan, Venice, and Naples³⁸, as the only one that provides an assessment of the outcomes of the performances. Ferrari states that such evaluations come from the performance notes of the theater's administration and, thus, should represent a more formal and possibly an unbiased perspective. These assessments start from 1759 (four years after Du Tillot's decree on the public's behavior), concentrate

³⁷ Sabine Boerner and Sabine Renz, *Performance Measurement in Opera Companies: Comparing the Subjective Quality Judgements of Experts and Non-experts*, 26.

³⁸ Luigi Romani, *Teatro alla Scala. Cronologia di tutti gli spettacoli rappresentati in questo teatro dal giorno del solenne suo aprimento sino ad oggi, con introduzione ed annotazioni*, Milan, 1862; Giovanni Salvioli, *La Fenice, gran teatro di Venezia. Serie degli spettacoli dalla primavera 1792 a tutto il carnevale 1876*, Milan, 1876; Bianca Maria Antolini, Review of *Il Teatro San Carlo di Napoli. Cronologia degli spettacoli 1737-1799, vol. I* by Paologiovanni Maione and Francesca Seller, *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2006), p. 361.

only on the opening nights, and are initially sporadic,³⁹ becoming continuous from 1807 through 1883 (when the source had been edited.) Despite the incomplete data, such information allowed me to draw, although somewhat approximately, the artistic outcome statistics of both Teatro Ducale and Teatro Regio.

The performances are assessed on the following scale: ottimo – excellent, buono – good, mediocre – mediocre, cattivo – bad, pessimo – very bad, and incerto – uncertain.

Outcome	Number of performances at Teatro Ducale (1759-1828)	%	Number of performances at Teatro Regio (1829-1883)	%	Number of performances at Teatro Ducale and Teatro Regio combined (1759 – 1883)	%
excellent	37	23	55	17	92	19
good	52	32	123	38	175	36
mediocre	19	12	100	31	119	25
bad	43	27	26	8	69	14
very bad	10	6	19	6	29	6
uncertain	0	0	1	<0	1	<0
total	161		324		485	

³⁹ There are assessments for the following years: 1759, 1760, 1762-63, 1765, 1769, 1781, 1789, and 1793.

Through the years, we can see that there are fewer “bad” performances and more “mediocre,” but also fewer “excellent,” compensated by more “good” shows. Besides these slight variations, the overall picture remains consistent. Given these (not exhaustive) numbers and assuming that “excellent” and “good” can be considered as a positive outcome and “mediocre” and below - a negative one, we can state that the ratio of success in an opera theater in Parma from 1759 to 1883 was 55:45, that is to say, 11:9. Simply put, the probability of success was around 55%, i.e., out of 20 productions, only 11 were at least “good.” In contrast, of the remaining nine, only five were “mediocre,” the other three were “bad,” and one was “very bad.” Thus, statistically, the chance of success in Parma was just slightly higher than the chance of failure.

As an active performer, and leaving aside the context of Regio, I would draw a professional success ratio of around 80-85 percent⁴⁰ as a whole, according to my observations within the opera world and my personal experience. Below this threshold, an artist can hardly be considered professionally trustworthy. Consequently, such an artist would not (and does not) last long in the professional opera environment. If every opera theater, not only Parma, had the same success rate (around 55%), it should have been directly reflected in a similar ratio applicable to singers performing in various theaters. Parma’s documented success rate of around 55 % proves that even a good performer successful elsewhere would have a higher probability of failure in Parma, thus proving that Parma is an extremely “tough” environment to perform, perhaps more so than most theaters. Leaving aside the performances I attended and sang in at Regio, from my experience as a listener and

⁴⁰ Whether we consider individual, long-term, or general performance success.

as a performer, it would be far-fetched to state that an average singer would succeed in over 50% of performances or that every other show is statistically mediocre or worse, to put it mildly. Thus, such a stark contrast is evidence of Regio's operatic environment's "tough" statistics.

Returning to Ferrari's *Spettacoli Drammatico-Musicali e Coreografici* it is essential to add that he created his work based on chronologies he compiled from the theaters of Milan and Venice⁴¹. However, unlike Parma, there is no such column as "outcome" data for theaters in Milan or Venice. We can only speculate whether he added similar data to his study of Parma due to the frequent theatrical fiascos and, consequently, the essential importance of such data. Speculating further, we might presume that such evidence (even if it exists in the theater archives) is absent in the chronologies of other theaters due to its statistical irrelevance, which would indicate the exceptional environment, and the "toughness" of Parma theaters to a greater extent.

⁴¹ Paolo-Emilio Ferrari. *Spettacoli drammatico-musicali e coreografici in Parma dall'anno 1628 all'anno 1883*, VII.

O P E R E					
ANNO	STAGIONE	TITOLO	GENERE	POETI	MAESTRI
1820	Carnovale . . .	Il Sacrificio di Epito ★	Serio . . .	Dalmiro Tindario P. A. cioè Kreglanowich G. T. S. B.	Carafa Michele . . .
	Carnovale . . .	Edoardo e Cristina (77)	Serio . . .		Rossini Gioachino . .
	Carnovale . . .	Ccstantino ✱	Serio . . .	Dalmiro Tindario P. A.	Hartmann Stunz . . .
1821	Carnovale . . .	La Conquista di Granata ★ (78) . . .	Serio . . .	Romanelli Luigi . . .	Nicolini Giuseppe . .
	Carnovale . . .	Arminio, ossia L'Eroe Germano ★ . . .	Serio . . .	Dalmiro Tindario P. A.	Pavesi Stefano . . .
1822	Carnovale . . .	Andrcnico ✱	Serio . . .	Dalmiro Tindario P. A.	Mercadante Saverio . .
	Carnovale . . .	Tobalzo e Isolina ★ (79)	Serio . . .	Rossi Gaetano . . .	Morlacchi Francesco .
	Autunno . . .	Il Matrimonio Secreto (80)	Giocoso . .	Bertati Giovanni . . .	Cimarosa Domenico .

A page fragment from Giovanni Salvioli's, *La Fenice, gran teatro di Venezia. Serie degli spettacoli dalla primavera 1792 a tutto il carnevale 1876*. The header is "Operas," and the columns, respectively: year; season; title; genre; poets [librettists]; and maestros [conductors].

57

1816

C A R N E V A L E

1. *Eroismo in amore*. D. s. Poesia di Romanelli, musica n. di Paër. — 2. *La vecchia rapita*. D. g. Musica di Zingarelli, ed in parte d'altri maestri. — 3. *Ginevra di Scozia*. D. s. Musica di Mayr.

Primi attori — Per le Opere serie Eloisa Manfredini, Maria Marcolini (Per essersi ammalata dopo poche recite la Marcolini, che sosteneva la parte di primo uomo nella *Ginevra di Scozia*, fu ad essa sostituita la prima donna Teresa Beltramelli Beltrand). *Ten.* Claudio Bonoldi, *Bassi* nella prima Opera Michele Cavara, nella terza Giuseppe Begnis. — Nelle Opere giocose Lorenza Correa, *M. car.* Claudio Bonoldi, *Buffi* Luigi Pacini, Michele Cavara.

BALLI

1. *Cesare in Egitto*. — 2. *L'allievo della natura*. — 3. *La Niobe*, ossia *La vendetta di Latona*. — 4. *Poltronetto*. Comp. Gaetano Gioja.

Primi ballerini serj. — Antonia Millier, Antonia Dupain, Giovanni Coralli, Caterino Titus. — *Pittori* Giovanni Perego ed Alessandro Sanquirico.

Nella sera del 4 gennajo alla presenza delle LL. MM. II. e RR. si è rappresentata l'azione drammatica intitolata *Il ritorno d'Astrea*. Poesia del cav. Vincenzo Monti, musica n. di Weigl.

Attori — Lorenza Correa, Maria Marcolini, Carlo Bonoldi, Giuseppe De Begnis.

A page fragment from Luigi Romani, *Teatro alla Scala. Cronologia di tutti gli spettacoli rappresentati in questo teatro dal giorno del solenne suo aprimento sino ad oggi, con introduzione ed annotazioni*. The header is "1816 Carnival." The information included here is the title, librettist, and composer of the operas. The following paragraph consists of information about the artists involved and notes, such as substitutions and program variations. The section after is dedicated to "Balli," i.e., ballets.

Unfortunately, I had no access to the analogical document from Naples. However, in Bianca Maria Antolini's review of *Il Teatro San Carlo di Napoli. Cronologia degli spettacoli 1737-1799, vol. I* by Paologiovanni Maione and Francesca Seller, there is an accurate reference to the information gathered in the source in question: date, title, librettist, composer, singers, choreographs and dancers, and technical staff.⁴²

By analyzing documents on Parma's audience's operatic literacy and chronological sources, we have sufficient evidence to call Teatro Regio (since it is one of the main focuses of this thesis) at least a "tough" theater. However, without analogous data from other theaters, we can prudently call it "the world's toughest" until it is proved wrong.

⁴² Bianca Maria Antolini, Review of *Il Teatro San Carlo di Napoli. Cronologia degli spettacoli 1737-1799, vol. I* by Paologiovanni Maione and Francesca Seller, *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2006), p. 361.

Chapter 3: Lion's Pit, Warriors, and no Angels around

The Lion's Pit, as often they call Teatro Regio, recalls the story from the Old Testament:

During the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, in the sixth century B.C., the prophet Daniel continued to pray to his God against the express command of the king. As a result, Daniel was thrown into a lions' den to be devoured. But God sent an angel to protect him, and he emerged miraculously unharmed the next day.⁴³

Nevertheless, if poked, the lions at Regio always gain the upper hand, and no other force can bring peace back. One might humorously suggest that the audience's fury in Parma is too excessive even for angels to intervene.

Since the documented conflicts between artists and audiences go back to the nineteenth century and on, in drawing from Margaret R. Butler's book *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, I would like to give a brief insight into Parma's geopolitical singularity in the eighteenth century, which undoubtedly influenced the audience's literacy and attitude.

Butler states, "Parma has long been recognized as a city where Italian and French operatic traditions encountered each other."⁴⁴ Furthermore, she points out that it was a crossroads where two powerful dynasties, the Habsburgs and Bourbons, merged, also thanks to the figure of the Duchess of Parma, Marie Louise. The Duchess of Parma was the daughter of a Habsburg, the last Holy Roman Emperor, and the first Emperor of Austria, Francis II

⁴³ From the website www.dictionary.com, accessed 3 April 2024, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/daniel-in-the-lions--den>.

⁴⁴ Margaret R. Butler, *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, 127.

and I (1768 – 1835), respectively. Moreover, the fact that she was the second wife of Napoleon Bonaparte brought to Parma a French (read Bourbonic) imprint that significantly impacted opera in Parma in the eighteenth century. In speaking of such a “fruitful commingling” and referring to Tommaso Traetta’s (1727 – 1779) operas that represented this kind of cultural fusion, Butler states:

Parma’s mid-eighteenth-century theater demonstrated this reality [coexistence and reciprocal influence of French and Italian opera] more clearly and prominently than any other contemporary opera theater in all of Europe was able to do, even others where French influence was strong and where there was interest in and support for presenting French and French-inspired cultural products.⁴⁵

After Maria Louise died in 1847, cultural life in Parma showed no sign of decline. On the contrary, as of 1760, speaking of the public of Teatro Ducale, Butler claims that “Parma’s court and public could have counted themselves as among the most fashionable of European audiences.”⁴⁶ Around the same time, Parma gradually gained a reputation as “the Athens of Italy.”⁴⁷ Already in 1756, referring to Athens as “the source of drama at its purest,”⁴⁸ a vivid example of Parma’s cultural prosperity is brought up by Butler through a letter of Traetta’s librettist Carlo Innocenzo Frugoni (1692 – 1768) addressed to the polymath, poet, and art critic Francesco Algarotti (1712 – 1764). Frugoni, making comments on the corruptness of contemporary drama, writes to Algarotti: “You deserve to have been born in Athens in its happy days,”⁴⁹ referring to Parma and its thriving cultural life. Arguably, Frugoni indirectly

⁴⁵ Margaret R. Butler, *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, 127.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Margaret R. Butler, *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma: Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*, 88, referring to Algarotti, *Opere*, 13:62–63, letter dated 23 March 1756,

and consciously alludes to the superiority of Parma over Venice in that period, given that Algarotti was born in Venice.

However, despite all the abovementioned facts and references, the audience's literacy and competence did not go hand in hand with its temper, so that in 1755, Guillaume du Tillot (1711 – 1774), a French politician and minister of finance of the Duchy of Parma, issued a decree “designed to reform audience behavior.”⁵⁰ Thus, we can presume that the audience in Parma was challenging and uncontrollable at least as early as 1755.

I have made mentions of Parma's public's demanding musical taste and, chiefly, of its way of expressing, which may appear too direct or even barbarous. Combined with the usually intemperate vulnerability of singers, this has produced the most extravagant, even absurd, conflicts that often go beyond the theater's walls. Over the years, the *loggionisti* (less wealthy audience members in the upper gallery, or “*loggione*”) have maintained an impressive power, influencing artistic decisions in a very unorthodox way, frequently instilling fear in singers.⁵¹ Although the views and assessments of *loggionisti* often do not coincide with those of the general public, an artist can be assured of one thing: if *loggionisti* do not like something, they will be loud and clear, literally.

which concludes, “Voi meritavate di nascere in Atene ne' suoi giorni felici.” Quoted and translated in Loomis, “Tommaso Traetta's Operas,” 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵¹ *Loggionisti* (pl., from *loggionista*, sing.). Traditionally, *loggionisti* are known for their untamable temper and direct and frequently picturesque ways of expressing dissent or appraisal.

Often, there was no margin for constructive discussion, and debate itself was almost impossible. If a confrontation occurred, an artist rarely had the upper hand. In addition to the aforementioned lion's pit, many other fanciful epithets had been given to Teatro Regio di Parma—e.g., a singer's Waterloo, career killer, etc.—and there are many examples of memorable tensions and conflicts and only occasional happy endings.

I will now consider some of these occurrences and try to understand the triggering motives, aesthetic divergencies beyond these tensions, and helpful takeaways from a singer's point of view. In dealing with instances of urban legends, i.e., where the original source could not be verified, a story represents one or more incongruences, or when a story has multiple variations, I treated the very existence of such references from a historical perspective.

As mentioned before, many operas at their Regio premiere resulted in a fiasco, in particular Rossini's *Italiana in Algeri* and *Il Turco in Italia*. Even *The Barber of Seville* - although it had a successful premiere - did not allure the public to its replications. Matters grew worse with the passing years: Pietro Mascagni's *L'Amico Fritz*, staged in 1892 and 1908 (with Mascagni himself conducting the latter production), was laughed off the stage; Giacomo Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1895), *La Bohème* (1898), and *Tosca* (1901) did not succeed at their premieres, though they did gain acceptance and popularity shortly after. These examples show that in Parma, a new opera's success could hardly be dictated by its preceding performances at other venues, however triumphant. As Teatro Farnese's ambitious and spectacular inauguration in 1628 signaled, Parma did not intend to be second to others. Today, as it was hundreds of years ago, the same perspective applies to Parma's audience – it

does not feel like being second to anyone. Over the years, this attitude has become a symbol of the local audience.

The following set of incidents, stories, and anecdotes is an effort to reveal different characteristics and peculiarities of Parma's public in order to illustrate friction points for future singers. Although, in many instances, there are no exact dates for these accounts, I will try to follow a chronological order as much as the details will allow.

Stories from Parma

One of the first documented testimonies goes back to the era of Teatro Ducale, during the 1815-16 season. Reportedly, a tenor, Alberico Curioni (1785 or 1787 – 1875), who was engaged in three productions that season (*Trajano in Dacia* by G. Nicolini, *Zaira* by F. Federici, *Le Nozze di Lauretta* by F. Gnecco), had his performance in *Zaira* booed and whistled.⁵² He started a verbal fight in reply, shouting obscenities at the audience. A pandemonium ensued, which ended only after the police's announcement that the tenor had been arrested. The audience enjoyed a ballet on the spot for the rest of the night. However, the story had a tumultuous reprise. When Curioni returned to Teatro Ducale for the final performance, he attempted to get revenge. In the middle of the show, he stopped and started whistling. An apocalyptic turmoil started, and the police had to intervene again. This time, the tenor had been arrested and incarcerated for eight days and escorted to the frontier of the duchy afterward. Curioni was banished forever from Parma.

⁵² Bianca Maria Antolini, "Curioni, Alberico," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani – Vol. 31* (1985), *Treccani*, accessed 26 March 2024, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alberico-curioni_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

An element of Curioni's case shows how the Regio's public could influence the night's course. If they were unsatisfied, they could demand an alternative and it would be provided immediately. Later, we will see more recent occurrences that show that the audience still has power and influence on the theater's artistic decisions. Back then, especially at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when impresarios had considerable power, they sometimes ended up paying the price for an unsuccessful outcome: a couple of years after the Curioni debacle, following a disastrous premiere, an impresario was sent to prison for "offending the public's sensibilities."⁵³ This practice persisted for most of the nineteenth century.

Having such power made protesting a means of influencing artistic choices that were far beyond individual incidents. Often, the public not only expressed their dissent but also openly demanded an immediate replacement with a specific opera, its fragment, or a ballet. In many cases, the audience had the upper hand.

The exacting nature of the Regio public first showed itself at the opening night of the second season [1829/30] when the spectators laughed at the *terzetto* of the first act of Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo*, disgusted with the singing of Giovanni Cavaceppi (Lorenzo), and the *terzetto* was actually omitted from the next performance. At the world premiere of *Piccarda Donati* [an opera composed by Antonio Marchisio], which had only a single performance in 1860, the management had to drop the curtain in the middle of the second act amid a hurricane of yelling and whistling. Carlotta Marchisio, in the title role and sister of the composer, fainted on stage. The following year, Pedrotti's *Fiorina* did not fare any better.⁵⁴ The disapproval of the audience manifested itself with yelling and whistling that was so loud that the curtain was lowered in the second act and the theater's administration was fired. In 1885 Ponchielli attended the Parma premiere of *La Gioconda*, whose final performance had to be suspended because of the public protest, which also happened at the Parma

⁵³ Karyl Charna Lynn, *Italian Opera Houses and Festivals*, 203.

⁵⁴ Carlo Pedrotti (1817 – 1893) was a composer and conductor. Pedrotti wrote *Tuba Mirum* for *Messa per Rossini*, featuring Verdi's *Libera Me*, later inserted in Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*.

prima of Pagura's *L'Apostata* in 1907, when public protest interrupted the first act and the price of the tickets had to be refunded.⁵⁵

This short excerpt shows tangibly what the audience's power means in a practical sense, and the presence of illustrious singers or the authors of the operas frequently can only add fuel to the fire.

According to the memoirs of the famous baritone Giuseppe Kaschmann (1850 – 1925), he found some disappointed spectators with scythes and clubs in front of his hotel after being whistled at his debut.⁵⁶ Today, similar situations are unheard of and no one would come to a performer's hotel to threaten them in any manner. Still, the seriousness with which the public regards the opera remains unvaried, frequently eroding the boundaries between professional and personal in a way that not every artist is ready for.

It is worth remembering that the performers of the operas at Regio were predominately renowned artists with respectable and flourishing careers. Therefore, the incidents can hardly be attributed to a lack of professionalism or experience. The main cause was instead an environment with higher and, in many instances, different expectations than other theaters. A singer's previous success elsewhere did not assure a similar outcome in Parma. Even more, the stars coming to Parma for the first time were often greeted with a certain skepticism.

⁵⁵ Karyl Charna Lynn, *Italian Opera Houses and Festivals*, 206.

⁵⁶ According to the archives, the show in question is Verdi's *Don Carlo*. Kaschmann returned to Regio a month later for Verdi's *Ernani*. However, in *Ernani*, he was substituted by Mario Sammarco at the performance following the show "in his [Kaschmann's] honor." Kaschmann returned to Parma in 1916, interpreting Don Bartolo in *The Barber of Seville*. According to the *Chronology of Teatro Regio di Parma (1829 – 2001)*, available on <https://www.lacasadellamusica.it/cronologia/>, further on, CdTRdP.

A particularly striking example is provided by the public's dissent toward Verdi's *La Traviata*, which was immensely popular until the Regio's 1856-57 season when the public became exasperated by its repeated performances: on January 14th, the performance had been interrupted during the first act, after the "Brindisi," because the public "could not hear this opera anymore."⁵⁷ The curtain was dropped, and the tickets were again refunded.

This chronicle represents an extreme example of an exasperated audience in a rather absurd situation: one has seen *La Traviata* several times, comes back to the theater to listen to it again, but then complains because they have had enough of it! It is just one instance of the audience's unpredictability, and hardly any solution to such a problem exists. We can assume that the audience got acquainted with *La Traviata* and knew it by heart. Still, there is no sufficient evidence to prove that. In a broader view, no evidence demonstrates Regio's audience's musical literacy in the 19th century. At the same time, as we will see, in the 20th century, we can affirm that a singer tackling the stage of Regio will find a knowledgeable and exigent audience that will not easily forgive minor imprecisions or superficial interpretations. If you browse Regio's website, you will notice that, for example, from 2012 to 2020, *Rigoletto* was staged six times!⁵⁸ Given that a considerable number of opera zealots have attended all these performances for years, it is fair to expect a highly prepared audience that brings a certain bias resulting from unavoidable comparisons to memorable past performances. Awareness of the audience's expectations gives a singer a clearer idea of the challenges they face and, consequently, can help them arrive at an adequate performance strategy.

⁵⁷ Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 184.

⁵⁸ *Teatro Regio Parma*, accessed 29 March 2014, www.teatroregioparma.it.

The first anecdote about Parma's audience is one I have heard numerous times from my colleagues and opera lovers. Given that I found the same story several times in books and articles, arguably, it is the most frequently cited anecdote that deals with Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* performance at Regio. The famous prologue is the first sung part of the opera, where a baritone begins: "Si può? Si può? Signore! Signori! Scusatemi se da sol mi presento. Io sono il Prologo" [May I? May I? Ladies! Gentlemen! Pardon me if I appear alone. I am the Prologue]. Allegedly, after the first "Si può?" [May I?], there was an immediate response from the *loggione* with a mockingly gentle "No, grazie!" [No, thanks!], thus annihilating any singer's hope of a positive outcome. One can argue that this is an example of how an operagoer can assess a performer's skills after hearing only two initial notes. Nevertheless, although the references mentioned above lack specific details, suggesting the apocryphal nature of the story, the remaining constant reference to Parma indicates that Regio is the most consistent with the story itself, which, in turn, even if indirectly, points out the extravagance of the audience in question. David Blum narrates a similar story in "Classical Music; Where the Audience Is the Star" in the *New York Times* in 1992.⁵⁹

We will probably never learn whether it happened in Parma or elsewhere; however, this story has all of the elements regularly manifested at Regio. The first element is a certain ruthlessness: the spectator's attentive ear examines a singer from the very first note. The second element is the wit, often picturesque: you will not hear comments like "You sing

⁵⁹ David Blum, "CLASSICAL MUSIC; Where the Audience Is the Star," *New York Times*, 29 March 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/29/arts/classical-music-where-the-audience-is-the-star.html>.

badly” or “We don’t like you” —the goal of any commentary or critique is not only to deliver a message to an artist but also to entertain the rest of the public as well. Lately, more and more reactions are addressed to the direction and its elements, which might prove disturbing or cause misunderstanding for a singer: given the tension and focus artists have to deal with during the performance, it would be naïve to think that they can always discern the addressees of the commentaries. As we will see later, similar misunderstandings can have dire consequences, and for some artists, carrying on and staying focused on the performance may have been the wisest decision. The examples I will discuss can benefit a singer when elaborating a performative strategy on a psychological and practical level.

During my student years in Parma in the 2000s, I heard the story about a particular incident at Regio several times. This story resembled more of an urban legend to me. However, this incident was documented and is entirely coherent with the circulating rumor. A young, well-known soprano, Emma Carelli, at her debut in Amilcare Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda* at Regio in 1903, found herself in the middle of an operatic disaster: all the protagonists had their contracts terminated, starting with tenor, then the baritone, the contralto, and mezzo.⁶⁰ At the beginning of the second act, it was Carelli’s turn to be derided, and after a heated verbal quarrel with the audience, she left the stage and the theater, heading to the railway station. Still in costume and stage makeup, she immediately departed on the train for Rome and never returned to Parma.

⁶⁰ This unfortunate performance on February 14th, 1903, featured Alessandro Ravazzolo as Enzo, Bartolomeo Dadone as Barnaba, Giuseppina Giaconia as La Cieca, and Marta Currellich as Laura. The continuous remonstrations of the audience interrupted the show, and the tickets were refunded in full. CdTRdP, 1902/03 Carnevale.

Such a disastrous scenario repeated itself several times, creating the phenomenon of a sinking ship that takes everyone onboard with it. Carelli's case also suggests that she was not the most contested singer of the night since she, as the eponymous protagonist, did not get booed during the first act. Nevertheless, it suggests that singers should prepare for the possibility of finding themselves on a sinking ship and should not excessively burden themselves psychologically if it happens.

As we learned, adverse reactions could be elicited independently from the repertoire, whether a *bel canto* period opera, a Verdi classic, or a verismo representative. However, one particular opera stands out for the number of incidents and unfortunate nights at Regio: Verdi's *Aida*, which will often be the subject of interest in this chapter.

Aida remains one of the most frequently represented operas in Parma. Along with its extended duration, dense orchestration and challenging vocal tessiture and dynamic indications for soloists, especially in the tenor's part, Radames, no wonder there are so many stories and incidents regarding this masterpiece. A renowned tenor, Ismaele Voltolini, opened the 1919-20 season⁶¹ in *Aida* and, after the high priest's phrase "Radames! Radames! Radames! Proclaim your innocence," earned the following reply from the audience: "He can't possibly do that."⁶² Voltolini's case recalls the *Pagliacci* one discussed in the previous pages. Here, however, we have more concrete details and a name, thus confirming the nature of witty (although questionable) reactions to one's singing. It is also possible that this comment

⁶¹ CdTRdP, 1919/20 Carnevale.

⁶² Stephen B. Tanner, *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*, 49. Tanner erroneously locates this incident in 1922. Voltolini did sing in Parma in 1922, but in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*; meanwhile, he appeared in *Aida* in the 1919/20 season, singing all 13 performances, which, in addition to the role's difficulty, can constitute a plausible reason for a possible faux pas. Source: CdTRdP, 1919/20 Carnevale; CdTRdP, 1921/22 Carnevale.

did not represent any criticism addressed to the artist; however, no evidence confirms or denies it.

Another story regards a production of *Aida* in 1929. According to Anthony Gishford, a tenor who also ran a bicycle shop in Milan, had a stormy night at Regio. During the final scene, which ends in *pianissimo*, a voice from the loggione shouted in Parmesan dialect: “Would you fix my bike after you are done here?”⁶³ Added to the already-discussed humoristic expression, this shows us that spectators were frequently familiar with the details of artists’ private lives.⁶⁴

In some instances, however, the exposure of the artist’s private life could have been seen as an act of defiance. Such an extensive and detailed testimony about the environment and atmosphere around Regio is found in Tito Gobbi's memories:

It was 1946; I arrived in Parma to make my first opera appearance there, driving a new car – a special job – a custom-built Alfa Romeo. I am quite a motor enthusiast, and I recall that this car is what you would call “cool.” As I pulled into the square and parked my car in front of the hotel, word spread that the new baritone had arrived. A crowd gathered, ostensibly to admire the car, but they had really come to look over the new baritone, of whom, it seems, there had been good reports.

But one could clearly see in their sullen demeanor, their real feelings in the matter, which were: “We haven't given judgment on him yet!” Later that day, as I strolled through the street, I passed a butcher shop, and the proprietor – a huge, surly man – was lounging out in front (it was just after the war, and there being practically no meat to sell, he had little work to do). “Are you the new baritone who is doing Figaro in *The Barber of Seville* here tomorrow night?” I politely replied: “Yes, why?” He

⁶³ Anthony Gishford, *Grand opera; the story of the world’s leading opera houses and personalities*, 49.

⁶⁴ This production was a blight of tenors: Giuseppe Radaelli sang only at the premiere, Antonio Trantoul sang the subsequent three performances, followed by Francesco Merli, eventually substituted by a Parmigiano Attilio Barbieri for the remaining two nights. Out of four, the only Milanese was Merli (1887 – 1976), one of the greatest tenors of the first half of the 20th century, whose *Otello* inspired Mario Del Monaco and Plácido Domingo. Merli returned to Regio many times. CdTRdP, 1928/29 Carnevale.

then said threateningly: “You should have come here with a special voice instead of a special car.” I protested: “You haven't heard me yet!” He ignored this, saying ominously, “We'll see tomorrow,” and thus dismissed me.

The following night, with trepidation, I began my performance in the title role of *The Barber of Seville* before an audience that sat with folded arms like judges in a criminal court. Notwithstanding this pressure, or perhaps because of it, I sang quite well. However, there was practically no applause at the end of the individual arias and in the places where such audience response normally comes during the performance. I was making my greatest efforts and still I thought my goose was cooked. However, at the very end of the performance I received a tremendous ovation, lasting many minutes. Afterwards, practically the entire audience, it seemed, numbering many hundreds of people, followed me to the restaurant where I was to have my supper. All of their former intransigence seemed to have disappeared. They acted as if they loved me. I knew that I had passed the acid test, and this gave me the courage to ask them why they had applauded so sparingly up until the conclusion of the performance. They answered to the effect that they were not going to give me the satisfaction of a big hand. One of the spokesmen shrugged his shoulders and said by way of explanation, “That’s the way we are.”

And that is Parma.⁶⁵

In contrast, referring to Gobbi's *The Barber of Seville*, *The Time Magazine* asserted the following: “Famed Baritone Tito Gobbi fell so far short in a performance of *The Barber of Seville* that the opera was booed to a halt after the second act.”⁶⁶ However, the truthfulness of this information can be questioned, as the same article presents some significant incoherencies, relying on urban legends altered over time.

Gobbi's memories reveal his failure to condition the audience (even if unconsciously) with external, professionally non-inherent factors, such as a luxury car or a lavish lifestyle.

Passing to more recent times, it is critical to linger on the most emblematic conflict, which occurred on December 26th, 1959, on the opening night of *Aida*. Radames’s part was

⁶⁵ Harold Rosenthal, Tito Gobbi’s memories quoted in Anthony Gishford, *Grand opera; the story of the world’s leading opera houses and personalities*, 51.

⁶⁶ “Music: The Parma Affair,” *TIME Magazine* 79, no. 4, 45-46.

entrusted to an already well-known Carlo Bergonzi, who triumphed at Regio in two productions of *Un Ballo in Maschera* in 1953 and 1955, *La Forza del Destino* in 1956, and in *Il Trovatore* in the 1956/57 season. Bergonzi, a native of Vidalenzo di Polesine Parmense, very close to Busseto, was a local hero, and the role of Radames was in his repertoire for several years. Bergonzi already triumphed as Radames at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (1956) and Arena di Verona (1958), to name a few. Being an advocate of thorough musical reading, Bergonzi not only fulfilled the composer's dynamic indications in the opening aria, "Celeste Aida," ending it in *pianissimo* but carried out a scrupulous dynamic plan in the duet of the third act, in the passage "Il ciel de' nostri amori," after which, according to the latest interviews with Bergonzi himself,⁶⁷ a comment followed from the loggione: "Bravo Tajoli!," referring to a very renowned pop-music singer Luciano Tajoli (1920 - 1996), famous for his soft falsetto-like voice.

Bergonzi's case raises a controversial argument regarding divergencies between artists and the public regarding operatic aesthetics and vocal technique. On this point, there are two conflicting claims. The first and the most widespread claim states that this comment from the public took place after the closing note of the tenor's aria "Celeste Aida" in the first act, on "Il trono vicino a sol," which, as indicated by Verdi, had to gradually fade to nothing in terms of dynamics on a final B-flat. by a prominent author and opera critic Alberto



The closing passage of "Celeste Aida"

⁶⁷ From docufilm by Mauro Biondini, *Carlo Bergonzi: tenore verdiano del secolo*, TV Parma, 42' 34".

Mattioli,⁶⁸ and is frequently quoted by Riccardo Muti.⁶⁹ Below is the final line of the tenor's part in the aria, which makes this version seem very solid and reasonable, presenting unquestionable dynamic marks with indications such as *pianissimo* and *morendo*.

It is important to recall that this aria has an alternative and less challenging ending. Supposedly, Verdi, aware of the technical difficulty of this passage, wrote an alternative ending to this aria.⁷⁰ The high B-flat could be sung on *forte*, followed by a repetition of "vicino al sol" an octave lower, thus giving the interpreter more technical freedom and allowing him to find the requested color and expression. However, this variation is considered by many (although not openly) a compromise suggesting the singer is incapable of adequately executing the former variant. Nonetheless, for instance, the alternative version of the closing bars was executed by Roberto Alagna at Teatro alla Scala in 2007.

Toscanini had also expressed his concern on the closing of "Celeste Aida," found in B. H. Haggin's "Conversations with Toscanini," which also provides the conductor's judgment on *falseto*:

I visited him in April. In fact, the first thing he did was to give me a photostat of the passage in the letter in which Verdi added the low B-flats at the end of "Celeste Aida" that are heard in the performance in LM - 6132. "I do not know why Verdi did not change the

⁶⁸ Alberto Mattioli, "La biografia diventa un libro," *Gazzetta di Parma*, 28 September 2019, 39.

⁶⁹ Vittorio Testa, "Muti: 'Io e Toscanini.'" *Gazzetta di Parma*, 11 January 2016. <https://www.gazzettadiparma.it/archivio-bozze/2021/12/06/news/muti-io-e-toscanini-498570/> This article contains also a colorful quote by Muti: "Per Verdi potrei uccidere" ["I could kill for Verdi"].

⁷⁰ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. III, 203-204. Budden hypothesizes that a new ending had been composed for *Aida's* revival at Regio di Parma on April 20, 1872. Verdi suggested this conclusion of the aria to the tenor Ernesto Nicolini, who asked, without succeeding, the composer to lower the aria by a half-step (Verdi's January 26, 1875 letter to Emilio Usiglio, in Hans Busch, *Verdi's "Aida": the History of an Opera in Letters and Documents*, 375-6).

published score,” said Toscanini. “Is impossible to sing high B-flat *pianissimo*, only in *falsetto*, which is not correct style in this work.”⁷¹

The other claim is that the incident is related to the passage in the third act's duet between Aida and Radames, supported by a thorough inquiry by Mauro Balestrazzi, which appeared in one of the most important Italian newspapers, *La Repubblica*. This version was reported by a loggione veteran and fervorous *bergonziano* (i.e., aficionado of Bergonzi), Gigét Mistrali, and it coincided with another chronicle by loggionista Gianaleandro Isi, acquired by Balestrazzi earlier on. Both stated that the incident referred to the phrase “Il cielo de’ nostri amori” in the third act.

Furthermore, Isi pointed out the person who made that very comment: Ennio Carra, a delivery man at *La Gazzetta di Parma* and an operatic zealot. As it turned out, Balestrazzi knew Carra well as a loggionista and attended many performances at Regio right next to him.

⁷¹ Bernard H. Haggin “Conversations with Toscanini,” 76.

Fl. 1^o
 " 2^o
 " 3^o
 Ob.
 Fag.
 Cor. in Sib.
 3^o e 4^o
 Rad.
 pa - tria, la . re . de ' no . stri Deil il suol dov' lo rae . col . si di gloria i primi al .
 Viol.
 V-le
 Vo.
 Cb.
 pp

Fl. 1^o
 " 2^o
 " 3^o
 Ob. 1^o
 Cor. in Sib.
 3^o e 4^o
 Aida
 dolce
 Là, tra fore . ste
 Rad.
 . lo . ri, l'ciel de' nostra mo . ri co . me se ordar po . trem?
 Viol.
 divisi.....
 pizz.
 V-le
 pizz.
 Vo.
 pizz.
 Cb.
 pizz.

The "incriminated" passage from the duet of the third act of Aida. The ppp sign appears two bars earlier in the orchestral part.

Recalling Carra's quote, "Remember that for singing Verdi you need three things: the first one is voice, the second one is voice, and the third one is voice," it was no surprise for the journalist that the incriminating "Bravo Tajoli!" came from his mouth. In addition, Balestrazzi analyzed reviews in newspapers after the premiere. Giuseppe Massera from *La Gazzetta di Parma* stated that "Bergonzi was laureled with a bushy crown of applauses after the high note of his romanza [aria]," indicating that there had been some sporadic dissents further on, without specifying at which point of the opera.

Two days after the premiere, on December 28th, 1959, another, more detailed review comes from the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino*, in an unsigned article, "Verdi's will, and fans," stating that "four or five whistles disturbed the unwinding of the fourth act of *Aida*." It was the third act, as Balestrazzi rectified. The same article defends the tenor, explaining why the passage "Il cielo de' nostri amor" must be executed on *pianissimo*, thus confirming the version of the loggionisti⁷².

Consider that in his interview for Biondini's docufilm, Bergonzi makes a couple of insignificant (irrelevant for the sake of this thesis) and inaccurate statements, such as the number of performances in that *Aida* production. He implies there were at least five performances, while according to the archives, there were only three. The fact that Bergonzi's memory failed him also leaves space for doubt in the "Bravo Tajoli!". However,

⁷² Further testimony that reinforces this claim can be found later in the following chapter.

the tenor acknowledges that after the phrase “Il cielo de’ nostri amori,” there had been a sign of disapproval: “Ancora mezzavoce!?” [Mezzavoce again!?] coming from the public.

Errare humanum est and it is possible that over the years, the conflict-igniting passage in his memory shifted from the third to the first act. It makes sense: firstly, advocacy of ending in pianissimo would align him to the loggionisti on an ideological level, where he would defend the very symbol of the role – the aria, demonstrating an accurate reading of the score. Secondly, it would expose the loggionisti as those whose judgment is hasty and superficial, considering that Radames’s part has three more acts to go and dozens of B-flats after the aria in the first act. Thirdly, according to the score, Verdi wrote a crescendo in the orchestra on the B-flat in the third act’s duet. The passage “Il cielo de’ nostri amori” has no direct dynamic indications, only a *dolce* above it. This addresses expressivity, not necessarily the dynamics, and there are a vast series of options in interpretation without necessarily equating *dolce* to *piano* or *pianissimo*—thus leaving Bergonzi's choice as one that could be subjective. The last reason is that the public contesting a less-relevant passage makes them appear much pickier and more irreverent by showing their ability to spot the *falsetto-like* note among dozens of *properly produced* B-flats, which is the very motive for idling on this incident.

Several poignant passages about encounters with the loggionisti are also found in Renata Tebaldi’s biographic book *Renata Tebaldi, the Voice of an Angel*. After a prolonged absence from Regio, Tebaldi was about to return to its stage. That season, 1961-62, however, was not promising: whistling and booing were on the agenda of nearly every show, and the audience’s dissatisfaction was becoming threatening. In *Don Carlo*, the public’s protests

addressed to the soprano, Giulia Barrera, prevented a video recording from being made.⁷³ In hindsight, considering the cast, one can only regret not having a tangible testimony of that performance with Cesare Siepi as Filippo II, Aldo Protti as Rodrigo, and Arturo Basile conducting.

The *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle* also recalled the *Don Carlo* performance mentioned above, focusing on Barrera:

American soprano, Giulia Barrera of New York. The poor girl crossed the high seas to show off her high C's, but singing her first role in Verdi's *Don Carlo*, she became fodder for the cannons. Upset by the volley of catcalls, Giulia broke down before the last shout was fired.⁷⁴

Barrera's misfortune apparently does not make a new case. Nevertheless, one detail here makes all the difference: Giulia Barrera was an inexperienced singer and was only 19 on her debut at Regio.⁷⁵ After seeing how many acclaimed and experienced singers faced a fiasco on the stage of Regio, one can only imagine how terrifying it was for an artist at the beginning of a career.

A few days later, on December 28th, 1961, another incident occurred involving a tenor, Ruggero Bondino, singing Alfredo in *La Traviata*. Although the conductor Arturo Basile also received his share of criticism with "Kill the conductor as well as the tenor!" only the tenor was fired after the premiere.⁷⁶ His substitute, however, initiated a long-lasting love

⁷³ Carlamaria Casanova, *Renata Tebaldi, the Voice of an Angel*, 145.

⁷⁴ Nino Lo Bello, "Parmasan Lions Eat the Singers Before Intermission," *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 24 July 1977, 40.

⁷⁵ Giulia Barrera was born in 1942.

⁷⁶ CdTRdP, 1961/62 Lirica.

story with the audience, which lasted until the 1990s. His name was Alfredo Kraus and, back then, he was unknown to the broader audience.

In *Time Magazine*, the portion of the article dedicated to *La Traviata* with Bondino was entitled “Fear of Tomatoes.” According to the report, there were some ill-tempered comments from the loggione, such as “Bleater!” and “Go back and join your goatherd!” addressed to the tenor right after he “screeched out an unwritten high C in the first act of *Traviata*.”⁷⁷ Later, police escorted Bondino to his hotel, and the following day, he fled to Rome.⁷⁸

Arturo Basile, the conductor, was neither the first nor the last conductor to have conflicts with the audience.⁷⁹ Basile, who conducted both *Don Carlo* and *La Traviata* and was not a novice, did not share Kraus’s success, and after being insulted enough, he confronted the loggionisti. Reasonably, the conductor asked for an explanation on why he was whistled even before the introduction of *La Traviata* without having had a chance to demonstrate his skills and preparedness. A spectator’s answer was striking and utterly disarming: “I think it was healthy.” Trying to defend the protested tenor, Basile reminded that Bondino was successful in the same opera in productions in Lausanne and Brussels. The reply revealed the impossibility of a constructive discussion: “Whistling is as spontaneous a reaction as applauding is. We can’t control it. We who love Verdi find that a *Traviata*

⁷⁷ Note: the unwritten high C is referred to the second act, at the end of the cabaletta “O Mio rimorso!” which until recent times was frequently cut.

⁷⁸ “Music: The Parma Affair,” *TIME Magazine* 79, no. 4, 46.

⁷⁹ For example, a foreign conductor in a *Tosca* was vividly contested for his slow tempi with “This year he’ll give us the first act and the next year the second,” thus showing their disapproval, which was not pertaining to the vocal or stage direction spheres. Stephen B. Tanner, *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*, 53.

performed badly is a provocation. Even the preludes were unacceptable to our ears....”

Basile reminded them that they protested even their compatriot, Carlo Bergonzi, in *Aida*, getting as a response, “Yes, but we also carried him in triumph after *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *La Forza del Destino*. You can't sing *Aida* the way Luciano Tajoli sings love songs.”

Right after, the conductor was also blamed for “skipping the high C” (it is a high C-flat, to be precise) in the aria “O Don Fatale” in *Don Carlo*, insinuating that the mezzo-soprano was not up to par.⁸⁰

One might argue that discussing with the public was pointless. Yet, these testimonies give us precious insight into the aesthetic positions and statements without which a constructive dialogue would barely be possible. As we learn from Basile’s argument with Loggionisti, a non-modal sound production (read falsetto or falsetto-like sound) was not (and still is not) acceptable unless explicitly indicated in the score.⁸¹ Moreover, it was, and is now, essential to expose one’s voice’s high register, as veering from high notes or, even worse, skipping them at all would be considered cheating and most probably would elicit a malcontent among the audience. Imagine what would have been a reply to a potential “Why cannot I sing *Aida* the way Luciano Tajoli sings love songs?” or “Why could the high C-flat in the aria of the mezzo-soprano not be short?” It would probably be something like “Because it is Verdi” or “Because it is Parma.” On the one hand, fantasizing about the possible answer in a discussion that never occurred might seem inapposite. On the other hand, after attending dozens of performances for many years, I heard similar arguments and

⁸⁰ Carlamaria Casanova, *Renata Tebaldi, the Voice of an Angel*, 145-146.

⁸¹ E.g., In Verdi’s *Falstaff*, Act II, Scene I, Ford and Falstaff duet, there is the composer’s indication “in falsetto” in reference to Ford’s phrase “Guai se mi tocchi.”

answers multiple times. Expostulating with statements such as “Because it is Verdi” or “Because it is Parma” would open a long, subjective, and, most likely, pointless discussion. On the contrary, analyzing more direct and stinging notions, such as “Bravo Tajoli” or “You skipped a high C!” reveals some critical points a singer should not ignore. As we see from the public’s reactions, offering an alternative reading or interpretation could be a more successful, or at least less harmful, strategy than trying to pander to the public's expectations without having the required skills.

It is understandable why Tebaldi does not mention the soprano’s overthrow in the same performance; it would appear as a foray from deontological correctness. *Time Magazine* instead continues, further reporting the operatic disaster: “Soprano Rosanna Carteri, who performed the title role in *La Traviata*, fainted from tension, wailed as she was assisted to her dressing room: ‘It's dreadful having to sing with the thought that every time I open my mouth, I might finish with an overripe tomato in it.’”⁸² According to the chronicles, Carteri's rendering was successful. Even so, a disastrous night for a colleague could make the public exceedingly critical of everyone sharing the stage with that unfortunate artist.

The following two stories raise questions and doubts since many versions exist. Several sources, often showing significant inconsistencies, bring up references to inaccurate characters on the one hand and apparent imprecisions on the other.

Let’s take as a reference the one which has less precise details, from Marilyn Horne’s *Marilyn Horne: The Song Continues*, which is found in the following extract:

The Parma fans are among the toughest; stories of their inhumanity to vocalists fill books. One of the most famous concerns was the tenor who sang his aria

⁸² “Music: The Parma Affair,” *TIME Magazine* 79, no. 4, 46.

three times because the audience kept calling for encores. At the end of the third round, the tenor stepped forward and cried,

“Thank you. Thank you. Please, please, I can do it no more!”

“You'll do it till you do it right!” screamed someone from the balcony.

Another time, porters at the railroad station refused to carry bags belonging to a baritone because they thought he sang so badly.⁸³

The first anecdote appears somewhat far-fetched also because it shows signs of mercy to a certain degree, which, looking at other testimonies, is quite improbable. Furthermore, a very similar story shifts its action away from Parma: according to Leo Slezak (1873 – 1946), a famous Moravian tenor and an acclaimed Met star, this actually happened after a soprano's aria during a performance of *Pagliacci* in Naples.⁸⁴ It is also true that believing Slezak's version would imply that the soprano repeated her aria “Stridono lassù,” which, to my knowledge, would have been the first time in the performance history of this opera.

The second anecdote from Horne's book, in turn, is subject to several versions and variations, all supposedly taking place in Parma. Harold Rosenthal, for instance, talks about a tenor who sang the Duke in *Rigoletto* and, the day after the fiasco, was heading to Milan.⁸⁵ Peter Dragadze in the *Los Angeles Times* proposes another version: “...the great Caruso, the day following a so-so *L'Elisir d'Amore*, was ordered out of a carriage by an indignant cabby who told the star to carry his own bags to the station.”⁸⁶ Probably, Dragadze refers to the *Time Magazine* article “Music: The Parma Affair,” dated January 26th 1962, and perhaps this

⁸³ Marilyn Horne and Jane Scovell, *Marilyn Horne: the Song Continues*, 205.

⁸⁴ Nathan Mordden, *Opera Anecdotes*, 6-7.

⁸⁵ Anthony Gishford, *Grand opera; the story of the world's leading opera houses and personalities*, 48.

⁸⁶ Peter Dragadze, “In Parma, They Eat Tenors for Breakfast,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 1975, 48.

source was quoted later by other newspapers, such as the *San Francisco Examiner*, on July 24th, 1977. Anyway, Caruso never sang in Parma. David Blum, in “Music: The Parma Affair,” tells a similar story but refers to an *Otello*, albeit without a name; meanwhile, Chris Kraul, again for the *Los Angeles Times*, on October 4th, 1992, brought up a more “complete” chronicle: “About 30 years ago, after a rough night as *Otello*, Bergonzi is said to have had to carry his own bags through the Parma train station because a porter recognized him, then remonstrated about Bergonzi's performance before dropping the tenor's luggage.” However, Bergonzi never managed to sing the role of *Otello* in public entirely. The only attempt dates to April 29th, 2000, a concert version at Carnegie Hall in New York, when the 76-year-old tenor withdrew after the second act.

So, what about the porter who refused to carry the bags of a singer who sang poorly the night before? If a theater impresario could end up in prison for offending the public's sensibilities, the porter's reaction, perhaps among Parmensi, could be classified as “appropriate,” considering the gravity of the artist's “crime” and also considering that “This is Parma.”

A more general statement with a somewhat severe allegation is found in Hugh Vicker's *Great Operatic Disasters*: “In Parma, tenors are regularly hounded to the station by dissatisfied connoisseurs, the fee they have paid to the local ‘claque’ humiliatingly returned to its leader, who then leads the booing...”⁸⁷ Among all the documents, testimonies, and resources that explore the nature of the public's relationship with the artists, this is the only one that alludes to an interest beyond the mere artistic aspect. Yet, even taking it for truth, it

⁸⁷ Hugh Vickers, *Great Operatic Disasters*, 42.

would confirm the deontological correctness of the loggionisti. It is reasonable to demote this anecdote to an apocryphal level. However, every time this story reemerges, it always has the same element in common: Parma.

As it transpires throughout this chapter, Parma's public distinguishes itself for its original mentality and often somewhat witty attitude, which is also reflected in a curious anecdote in Stephen B. Tanner's *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*:

Drinking their afternoon Campari sodas, a bored group of young fops in Parma wondered if there were any sort of non-boring pastime they could find that evening. One suggested a typical entertainment of Parma: "Let's go over to the opera and boo the tenor."⁸⁸

Nonetheless, not only the tenors but also sopranos and baritones often shared similar experiences. At the same time, in a way, this attitude parallels sports, and I have witnessed it several times: many operagoers know the operas by heart, and often, the same opera staging gets re-proposed, so they are familiar with that as well. At this point, the primary focus is on the interpreters and their artistic rendering, thus making the show even more challenging. "Let's see how he (or she) will resolve this passage" or "I wonder for how long the artist can hold the note" puts singers in competition with the memories of the audience, overlooking the aspect of uniqueness, so important in art. On the other hand, these memories represent the high standard and consequent expectations that make Regio so peculiar and prestigious.

As we will learn, the audience's expectations were frequently not met. Proceeding chronologically, we approach Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, which opened the 1964-65 season.⁸⁹ At the premiere performance, in the third act, the public openly disapproved of the

⁸⁸ Stephen B. Tanner, *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*, 59.

⁸⁹ CdTRdP, 1964/65 Lirica.

soprano's rendition of her aria "Morrò, ma prima in grazia," which irritated her colleague baritone, who, in turn, had to sing his aria right after. The baritone in question was Cornell MacNeil, already known by the public of Parma, having triumphed at Regio a year earlier in Verdi's *Ernani*. As MacNeil entered on stage, he confronted the remonstrators by exclaiming, "Basta, cretini!" ["Enough, idiots!"], which triggered the definitive interruption of the performance: a violent and physical confrontation, which led MacNeil and his family to flee Parma immediately.⁹⁰ The artist's temper here made a difference: had MacNeil managed his temper at that moment, all this disaster could have been avoided. Thus, at Regio, there might be instances where a psychological balance can change the course of the evening, and this is something a singer should seriously consider. However, like the Bergonzi affair, this incident includes some inconsistencies that will be discussed in the next chapter.

The 1968-69 season opened with Verdi's masterpiece, *Stiffelio*, which brings up another humorous story:⁹¹

A spectator in the third row was mightily perplexed: why on earth did his neighbor have a frying pan in his lap? A long quizzical stare brought forth this explanation: "Confidentially, some of my pals in the balcony plan to pelt the singers and the conductor with stuff and I want to be ready. You never know. They may throw some eggs too!"⁹²

The spectator's extravagant appearance or way of acting can also be regarded as a means of showing the audience unpredictability and preparedness to critique.

⁹⁰ Matt Schudel, "Cornell MacNeil, opera baritone celebrated for Verdi roles, dies at 88." *Washington Post*, 19 July 2011. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/cornell-macneil-opera-baritone-celebrated-for-verdi-roles-dies-at-88/2011/07/19/gIQA26bjOI_story.html

⁹¹ CdTRdP, 1968/69 Lirica.

⁹² Stephen B. Tanner, *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*, 39.

Most of the examples of conflicts and controversies regard the technical or, one could say, material aspects of singing. However, the emotional side also always had an essential value for the listeners at Regio: in 1970, in a *Rigoletto* performance,⁹³ the protagonist Giampiero Mastromei did not appear moved enough by his daughter's kidnapping, which caused comment from the audience: "You'd think they'd nabbed his mother-in-law."⁹⁴

Considering the public's tremendous interest in opera, it is no surprise that what was happening behind the stage was an object of particular and often morbid fascination. Discovering the "human" side of operatic idols was a succulent mouthful for the fanatics. However, the artists involved did not always support this kind of interest.

The opening night of *Il Trovatore*, on January 20th, 1971, remains in theater's annals for a singular incident: Renato Bruson, tackling the very challenging role of The Count di Luna, was on the edge of a nervous breakdown after his aria in the second act, when the theater's photographer, Giovanni Ferraguti, photographed him.⁹⁵ Given the intimacy of the moment, Bruson drew his sword, which was part of his stage props, and chased Ferraguti, trying to punish him for his misdeed. The show was interrupted, and Bruson eventually fled to his dressing room; only after a long insistence of the director, Dr. Giuseppe Negri, did he agree to continue.⁹⁶ *La Gazzetta di Parma* reported the day after that "the artist had suffered a sudden vascular collapse which prevented him from completing the act," without mentioning the *paparazzi* incident. Bruson's case shows that a singer at Regio can find

⁹³ CdTRdP, 1969/70 Lirica.

⁹⁴ Stephen B. Tanner, *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*, 49.

⁹⁵ CdTRdP, 1970/71 Lirica.

⁹⁶ Giuseppe Negri was the superintendent of Teatro Regio from 1959 to 1977 and the founder of the regional Orchestra of Emilia Romagna.

themselves under constant pressure, often to the detriment of their privacy, which one might take for granted.

The same performance was not trouble-free for a tenor, Richard Tucker, either: “First applauded, then disapproved,” says *La Gazzetta* in the same article. Meanwhile, Minardi and Martini claim that “Tucker was in a bad vocal shape and was whistled immediately by the public.”⁹⁷ “Bad vocal shape” can indicate a health condition and not necessarily point to vocal technique or musical preparation flaws. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Parma’s audience would hardly forgive a sick performer who cannot show their skills due to their health condition.⁹⁸

As for Tucker, the public is probably divided in assessing his performance since there are at least two contrasting opinions. I have attended several performances with a similar outcome, where loggionisti, known for their more “conservative” and “traditional” views (these terms will be discussed in the following chapters), are in contrast with the rest of the public, usually seated in the parterre. At this point, one could cautiously claim that being booed does not necessarily mean failure, but sometimes it means not satisfying the expectations of a part of the public, even if a minority.

While we are idling on the notorious operas, the knowledge of which is almost implicit and taken for granted, one might wonder how the public deals with lesser-known or

⁹⁷ Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 171.

⁹⁸ Still, there can be exceptions. I recall Leo Nucci's claim about a *Un Ballo in Maschera* "in the 80s" (according to the CdTRdP, it was the 1988-89 season); he had to perform while very sick and had to stop during the performance because he was unable to continue. Nucci unexpectedly received "one of the most appreciated and memorable ovations of his life" after admitting "Scusate, non ho più voce" ("Excuse me, I do not have any voice left.") His upfrontness, combined with his already-earned reputation at Regio, has turned a potential fiasco into a precious memory of the lenience and sympathy of Regio's audience.

unknown operas. The answer can be found in the words of the former superintendent of Regio, Giuseppe Negri, after a premiere of Verdi's "minor" opera, *Il Corsaro*, in 1972:⁹⁹ "You mustn't forget, we haven't put on this opera in over 50 years. They simply don't know it. Come to the second performance. By then, they're all experts."¹⁰⁰

For an operagoer in Parma, being familiar with the repertoire, which is not limited to Verdi's crowd-pullers, is often a point of honor. For example, should an artist perform in Verdi's *Alzira* (last productions at Regio dated 1981 and 2002), they should anticipate that many spectators will attentively consult the recordings of this opera before coming to the theater and will have concrete expectations.

As we have observed, the season openings in Parma were often a field of ferocious battles: reports of the opening night of the 1979-80 season in the theater's archive contain the following note: "December 26th, the unsuccess of the opera was such that the performance was interrupted in the third act due to continuous lack of restraint from the public."¹⁰¹

La Gazzetta di Parma, the day after, reported: "Violetta refuses to appear on stage in the fourth act," revealing that the dissent addressed to the soprano, Elena Mauti Nunziata, and the tenor, Beniamino Prior, was present from the very beginning. Even Renato Bruson's dignified presence did not save the show. Nevertheless, other artists replaced the protagonists and the conductor at the second performance.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ CdTRdP, 1971/72 Lirica.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen B. Tanner, *Opera Antics and Anecdotes*, 51. Tanner erroneously indicates 1970 as the year of this performance, but it must be the season of 1971/72, which corresponds with the period of Negri's superintendence.

¹⁰¹ CdTRdP, 1979/80 Lirica.

¹⁰² Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 185-186.

Until the formation of Festival Verdi, the season's opening had always been a special night when the public expected to see and hear the best of the best and would barely forgive a major imperfection. Today, it would be comparable with the season's opening at La Scala, which traditionally occurs on December 7th, the feast of the patron of Milan, Saint Ambrose, and is a major event in the city's cultural life.

Historically, this 1979-80 season opening is a memorable event because it was the last time a performance was not completed. The theater started to adopt different methods, alerting substitutes if similar conflicts arose. Nevertheless, an analogous event occurred in 2005's *Rigoletto*, when, already at the dress rehearsal, something was clearly wrong, and the audience made it understood in the "usual" way. The premiere just confirmed these expectations, and the story repeated itself. The "The captain goes down with the ship" rule was applied in this case, too, and the three protagonists, alongside the conductor, were replaced after the first show.

Today, with the facts described above, artists can be sure that, if not due to poor health conditions or an act of God, they will finish their role even in the most adverse conditions. However, it is also true that many spectators who attend the dress rehearsal will attend the premiere, too. Thus, re-proposing the same "product" after an unfortunate dress rehearsal is destined to be a fiasco.

A singular incident occurred during the performance of Verdi's *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* in January 2009. Greek soprano Dimitra Theodossiu was impersonating Giselda and, aware of the ongoing video recording, was making the best of efforts in her aria when the iron safety curtain started to go down softly. To prevent people from panicking, there is no acoustic signal in such cases, so the soprano only noticed the curtain when it was

halfway down. Undaunted, Theodossiu continued singing until the curtain was about to cover her face. Then, with all due thespian mastery, she kneeled and continued to sing...

Eventually, she ended up lying down and singing through the fissure, struggling for her aria till the very end, until the curtain touched the ground. Curiously, most of the audience stayed because “who would miss the soprano’s aria?” Backstage, many artists, including principals, realized the signal of danger and left the building. The performance was interrupted shortly after.

Luckily, nothing serious was happening, and the reason for this incident was artistic: it was caused by a person backstage who, enchanted by what was going on stage, inadvertently leaned with his elbow on the fire alarm button. The switch requires substantial pressure to activate the alarm, in order to avoid involuntary activation. The weight of his lean body was just enough to trigger it softly, and the person who activated it did not notice anything and continued to enjoy the outstanding performance.

After about 15 minutes to clarify and restore order, the performance was resumed and became a great success.

Theodossiu’s choice, which, however, was shared by most of the spectators, can seem foolish. This decision, nevertheless, reveals the importance and almost sacred status of performing at Parma, reminiscent of the scene of the orchestra playing on the sinking ship in Steven Spielberg’s *Titanic*. In hindsight, we can say that Theodossiu created a powerful memory of a glorious evening. Rationally, however, we can only imagine what would have been the outcome if the reason behind the alarm was a real danger.

For most of this chapter, we dealt with public contestations, conflicts, and controversial reactions. The last example of what can happen in Regio is a symbolic statement and an effort to close this chapter on a positive note.

On October 7th, 2021, an acclaimed American soprano, Lisette Oropesa, debuted at Teatro Regio di Parma in her solo recital. The concert elicited great interest among the public, resulting in a well-deserved triumph. As expected, the public requested encores, and the artist generously continued pleasing the audience with her Verdi interpretations. When it came to the fourth encore piece, the famous Violetta's cabaletta "Sempre libera" from *La Traviata*, Oropesa, as well as most of the audience were surprised by an unusual event:

Notoriously, the tenor performs a fragment of the love theme but, in practice, sings it from backstage so that the cabaletta conjures a memory of their first encounter and triggers the protagonist's continuous recollection. The concert performance practice of this piece does not necessarily require such an interjection, since the leitmotif in the piano part assumes this function, recalling the duet between Violetta and the tenor, Alfredo, and their reciprocal attraction.

After the first bar of the aforementioned leitmotif in the piano part, a spectator stood up and started to sing Alfredo's line, eliciting thus not only Oropesa's pleased astonishment but also the public's approval. Eventually, they discovered that the audacious spectator was a Chinese voice student, Liu Jianwei, enrolled in Conservatorio Nicolini in Piacenza, about 40 miles from Parma, and a fan of Oropesa's art.

In the blink of an eye, Liu became a star in his homeland and had to make many statements about this extravagant episode, such as: “I stood up to sing because Lisette Oropesa is a musician I love very much, and I happened to have learned this opera before.”¹⁰³

At the same time, understanding the controversy of his action, Liu later clarified his position on what happened by saying: “It is definitely not something worthy of pride, nor something worthy of being advocated” and “Please don’t interrupt singers when they are singing on stage. It’s impolite behavior,” and additionally “Don’t imitate me, and I will never do this again in the future.”¹⁰⁴

These last statements reflect the overall climate in the audience in Teatro Regio: it would be naïve to think that the Regio’s public is not acquainted with the norms and theatrical etiquette. They are, but things change when it comes to opera, especially Verdi, and the emotions it raises. In returning to the quote by the loggionista of the Basile incident, “Whistling is as spontaneous a reaction as applauding is. We can’t control it,” we discover the hidden side, that is, the motivation behind remonstrations. Whether valid or not, these remonstrations must be taken seriously by an artist since they can heavily impact the outcome of a performance.

In closing this chapter, we should remember where we started: we compared the lions from the biblical story to the audience that defended their views and beliefs ferociously. Drawing parallels to the story, where the lions represent the king, it does not take much time

¹⁰³ Maddy Shaw Roberts, “Incredible moment young opera fan stands up during soprano’s Verdi performance to sing tenor part,” December 13th 2021, <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/verdi/lisette-oropesa-tenor-audience-duet/>

¹⁰⁴ Michelle De Pacina, “Chinese student goes viral after he stands up during opera performance to sing male lead,” *Yahoo*, October 26th, 2021, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/chinese-student-goes-viral-stands-204057497.html>

to deduce who the king is for the audience of Regio. The king cannot be other than Giuseppe Verdi. From Daniel's (read "artist's") perspective, it does not always work this way: Verdi is the angel who, nevertheless, does not come to save you. Why? Because the public is always right. Or maybe not?

Chapter 4: Insiders' Observations

In the previous chapter, I dealt with contrasting aesthetic points of view, whether dictated by historical facts or artistic matters. I also analyzed the opinions and experiences of singers and conductors. However, I would like to go beyond this series of individual testimonies, which, even if they draw a relatively consistent idea of Regio, could be more thorough with a more general and inclusive perspective. The abovementioned and discussed testimonies are biased by nature and expectations, and we dealt with two juxtaposed perspectives: the listener's and an artist's. Thus, if possible, a point of view on the same events and issues of a figure that does not belong to one of these categories (i.e., collaborative pianist) but, at the same time, has sufficient competence and knowledge could help us to create a more objective and detailed picture.

In an opera theater, there is one figure who can easily be overlooked but is uniquely acquainted with the artistic choices of almost all of the conductors and singers over the years: the collaborative pianist. This figure assists and actively participates in opera creation and witnesses artistic research during rehearsals. A collaborative pianist not only accompanies all the rehearsals (both musical and stage) but also familiarizes himself with the conductor's gestures and the stage director's vision and witnesses discussions between artists, conductors, and directors. As often happens, in such discussions, the parties exchange their artistic vision for the middle ground. A collaborative pianist would most likely know the motivation behind "the skipped high notes" (as earlier, in Basile's case,) unexpected cuts, choice of tempi, and dynamic plans. An artist hardly shares similar information since it often means exposing their weak spots. Therefore, they unavoidably witness not only the creation of memorable

productions but are also aware of the tensions, artistic miscomprehensions, and artistic credos of those involved in the creative processes.

Although, in the theater, a collaborative pianist will rarely be asked about their personal views on musical aesthetics, they have an opportunity to mold their artistic identity through the theatrical experience, indications, and opinions of renowned conductors, the comments of famous singers, and the content of the discussions between the representatives of the latter two categories.

In conversing with three pianists representing three generations of opera performances, I was able to draw a unique picture of Parma, its theater, and its environment through their up-close view of production. Unsurprisingly, given that all three pianists are closely tied to this area, all three graduated from the Conservatorio di Parma, and all three worked at Regio, their answers might seem biased by their affection towards their land, their workplace, and, of course, Verdi. As in the previous chapter, bias is one of the main subjects of my research since I intend to show “what is going on in Parma” rather than “how things should be.” Nevertheless, I will include historical reflections and elements of musical analysis in order to address the latter question and to show tensions and discrepancies.

In the first interview, taking advantage of having a very experienced interlocutor in front of me, we frequently shifted the focus to the illustrious figures of the opera world. These forays eventually served to “humanize” the opera stars, revealing their sensibility and, sometimes, fragility outside their professional environment. By doing so, I intended to reduce the psychological pressure on singers unfamiliar with Regio’s environment. Also, these testimonies can serve as a reminder that even the most acclaimed singers were “no one” at

the beginning of their careers and had to hone their skills and earn respect on the path to fame.

By inquiring about the professional background of the interviewees, I wanted to produce an approximate map of professional connections and intersections that would connect Parma's environment to a bigger picture. As my interlocutors represented both the society of Parma, on the one hand, and Teatro Regio professionally, on the other, for extended periods, I also was hoping to get an idea about the evolution (if any) of Regio's audience, their preferences, and their means of expression. Knowing the direction of aesthetic development can be a precious resource for a singer who wants to keep a finger on the pulse of the operatic world.

For the sake of this thesis, controversies, conflicts, and misconceptions elicited particular interest, especially considering that the perspective of a third party is likely more neutral and, thus, perhaps the most objective.

Consciously and provocatively, I inquired about the meaning of the "Verdian voice," which is a controversial term. Again, acknowledging the existence of the stereotype is a step towards understanding it, which, in turn, helps to draw a clearer picture of the practical state of things, which is the ultimate goal of this text. In this chapter, a partial delegitimization of the term "Verdian voice" helps shift focus to the less uncanny and pragmatic challenges, such as the approach of the musical text, understanding of the musical form, compositional architecture, and technical challenges.

Lastly, I was curious to discover their experience and points of view on alterations in Verdi's music since this phenomenon is closely related to the "traditions," i.e., expected (by the audience) and "standardized" interpretative deviations from the musical score. Moreover,

I wanted to raise one technical question with all three pianists regarding variations in the second round of Verdian cabaletta. My reasoning lies in the fact that there is no consensus on whether the variations should be done or not, and if so, to what extent.

In relation to the claim from the previous chapter, i.e., that if one succeeds in major opera houses around the world, it does not imply an assured success in Parma, whereas, however, it works the other way around (if one succeeds in Parma, most likely they will succeed elsewhere,) a set of skills and knowledge that takes into consideration the peculiarity of Parma's audience and their expectations, can be seen as somewhat universal and applicable anywhere.

Eugenio Furlotti (1930-2023)¹⁰⁵

Eugenio (Gianni) Furlotti. In Parma, this name is familiar to any singer and musician and elicits respect and even envy to a certain extent. I believe it would not be an exaggeration to call him a living legend: a pianist who has collaborated with such singers as Luciano Pavarotti, Mario Del Monaco, Magda Olivero, Aldo Protti, Jose Carreras, Alfredo Kraus, Cecilia Bartoli, Mirella Freni, Carlo Bergonzi, Cesare Siepi, Fiorenza Cossotto, Elena Obraztsova, Anna Moffo, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Leo Nucci, and Luca Salsi, to name a few.¹⁰⁶

After graduating in piano performance and composition from Conservatorio di Parma, he continued his studies with Antonino Votto in Milan, where he studied alongside Claudio Abbado (who is also connected to Parma because he taught chamber music at

¹⁰⁵ Interviews were taken via telephone on October 15th and 17th, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Sadly, Maestro Furlotti passed away in March 2023, when this portion was already written.

Conservatorio di Parma from 1959 to 1962).¹⁰⁷ After completing his studies, Furlotti worked at Teatro Regio di Parma for more than 50 years, from 1952 until the mid-2000s. It is important to mention his activity as a professor: Eugenio Furlotti taught at Conservatorio Rossini di Pesaro (where one of his students was Roberto Abbado, current director of Festival Verdi in Parma) and at Conservatorio di Parma. I list these names with the aim of creating an idea about the professional and cultural environment in which Furlotti had an active role. In this chapter, I would like to bring out several facts and observations that would further enrich our understanding of the dynamics and spirit of musical and theatrical life in Parma.

In our interviews, Furlotti discussed several topics related to the development and evolution of opera, its production, and interpretation, as well as some curious and possibly controversial events and incidents associated with Teatro Regio di Parma.

VJ: How did you start your career in the opera world?

EF: Like many pianists, I began a solo career but became attracted by the opera world. The same happened to one of my younger peers, who entered Conservatorio di Parma a year later - a promising pianist, Leone Magiera, who also started as a soloist. I remember when, one day, Magiera confided his intention to impress a gal who would come to attend his concert at the Small Hall of Teatro Regio di Parma.¹⁰⁸ She did attend the event, and eventually it worked out, and that gal became his wife soon after.

¹⁰⁷ Antonino Votto (1896-1985) – Toscanini’s right-hand man and professor of other conductors and musicians, such as Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti, Guido Cantelli, and Maurizio Pollini.

¹⁰⁸ “Small Hall” is translated from Italian; Furlotti called it “Sala Piccola,” probably referring to the Foyer Hall.

She was a promising soprano destined to become an opera star: Mirella Fregni.¹⁰⁹

[Note: Around the same time, Magiera became Luciano Pavarotti's accompanist, or "maestro" as the world-famous tenor called him, even though they were childhood friends.]¹¹⁰

VJ: Did you work with Pavarotti?

EF: Yes, Pavarotti, too, at the beginning of his studies, often came to Parma to study at La Corale Verdi, where I accompanied him.¹¹¹ As you know, he studied with Campogalliani, but privately, not at Conservatorio in Parma. Then, there was his Modenese friend, Leone [Magiera]... However, Pavarotti did not get the same appreciation and opportunities in Parma¹¹² as his colleagues, especially Carlo Bergonzi and Franco Corelli.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Later on, she became famous by her stage name: Mirella Freni.

¹¹⁰ Magiera's activity was not limited to only accompanying Pavarotti, however: he performed in more than a thousand concerts and conducted the tenor's last public exhibition at the opening of the Winter Olympic Games in Turin in 2006. Magiera is also a composer, conductor, pianist, and professor. He collaborated with H. Von Karajan, C. M. Giulini, O. Klemperer, C. Kleiber, C. Abbado, G. Solti, and Z. Mehta. Meanwhile, his students include Ruggero Raimondi and Peter Glossop, besides the aforementioned Pavarotti and Freni.

¹¹¹ Founded in 1905, La Corale Verdi (Verdi Choral Society) is still one of the most vibrant choral groups in Parma. Initially, the best choristers from local territorial choirs could join La Corale, and the best of La Corale joined the Choir of Teatro Regio.

¹¹² According to the annuals, Pavarotti never sang at Teatro Regio, which is technically accurate. However, Pavarotti sang *for* Regio but not *at* Regio: on April 4, 1980, Pavarotti appeared as tenor soloist in Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*, under the baton of Claudio Abbado, which was included in the theater's 1970/80 season program. However, the venue was not the Regio but the Cathedral of Parma. Further discord was added by the fact that the orchestra and the choir were those of Teatro Alla Scala and not Teatro Regio, despite the choirmaster being a Parmense, Romano Gandolfi, and the fact that almost all the protagonists had strong connections with Parma: Claudio Abbado, like his father Michelangelo and brother Marcello, had taught at Boito; Freni, Pavarotti, and the bass Ruggero Raimondi studied with Magiera, a graduate of Boito. Above all, it is crucial to recall that the voice teacher of both Pavarotti and Freni was Ettore Campogalliani, a legendary professor at Boito. Nevertheless, many of the impulsive loggionisti did not accept this performance as *theirs*.

¹¹³ Freni, Pavarotti and Magiera come from Modena, less than 40 miles south from Parma.

VJ: Speaking of Bergonzi, do you remember that Aida incident?

EF: I do. After that phrase [pauses, trying to recall] ...Oh, yes, it was “Il ciel de’ nostri amori” in the third act, in the duet between Aida and Radames. Someone shouted, “Bravo Tajoli!” but probably you already know the whole story...

VJ: Apart from a jump-in (last-minute substitution) in Verdi’s La Forza del Destino, he no longer returned to Regio, bearing a grudge over an unsolved matter against the public.

EF: Carlo was one of the kindest people I have ever known and a good friend of mine. He was always kind, always. However, I have to say yes. He suffered for that *Aida*, and despite restoring relationships with the loggionisti and being literally venerated at home, this is something that remained.¹¹⁴

VJ: They say that many things could only happen in Parma. Do you have interesting or peculiar memories of the “golden era” of opera¹¹⁵?

EF: I remember when Mario Del Monaco, after quite a long break, had to perform a title role in *Otello* on tour somewhere in Canada. He wanted to repass this role and regain his confidence and asked to concede the whole Regio for his private use. They closed the theatre and let in only him, his wife, and me. He had the exact timing plan for his role, knowing how many minutes and seconds were between his entrances. With a watch in his hand, he was able to confront the vocal challenges and simulate a real-time performance. He wanted to have a natural theater feeling and acoustic response.

¹¹⁴ Bergonzi returned on stage of Regio in 2004, during a gala concert in honor of his 80 years, where he sang ‘Niun mi tema’ from *Otello*.

¹¹⁵ It is usually referred to as the period from the late 1950s until the early 1980s.

That tour, which involved the choir of Regio, was organized by a Canadian swindler-impresario, and, eventually, I don't know whether the performances actually took place. Choristers from Parma got stuck in Canada without being paid and without having return tickets. Renata Tebaldi organized a concert to raise funds for their comeback and eventually paid their travel expenses.

Another curious episode is about a very famous singer. I am not disclosing the names of involved artists, also because I believe that the incident deserved more attention than its protagonists:

There was this foreign conductor who was coming for some symphonic music concerts, which was his specialty. At a certain point, they asked him to conduct a concert where a famous opera singer would participate. During the rehearsal, I was accompanying on piano, and the conductor and I noted that the singer was significantly altering music in a couple of bars. Right after, the conductor politely asked the singer if it was his intention and got an answer: "I sang this aria as you have heard everywhere!" The conductor did not want to create tension or start an argument. When it came to the orchestral rehearsals, the conductor asked the entire orchestra to make corrections to the score so that they could accompany the famous artist in singing *his* version of the aria.

Superficially, this could appear as a lack of professionalism; however, the relationship dynamics were different, and a singer in his position of power seemed untouchable. Somehow, these dynamics appear fascinating to the modern eye. However, and this is something that I return to a lot, during my time at Regio, many things changed, and the rigor and respect in delivering a composer's ideas gradually gained more ground, in conjunction with the development of the philological versions [critical editions].

VJ: Do you recall any specific moment of tension regarding the interpretation of Verdi's music?

EF: Yes, the conductor was Molinari Pradelli: he was very strict and had very clear ideas in his mind.¹¹⁶ I remember, though, that there was this American baritone, Leonard Warren... No, it was Cornell MacNeil, who asked Molinari Pradelli if he could make a variation in the cadenza of his aria in Verdi's *Ernani*. The answer was a sharp "no." Nevertheless, during the break, MacNeil insisted, saying, "Maestro, listen to this cadenza at least once." Molinari Pradelli grudgingly agreed, and after the break, MacNeil finally sang his version of the cadenza. The conductor replied: "Well, sung this way, it convinces me, let's keep it."¹¹⁷

[At this point, Furlotti recalls another memorable episode involving the American baritone. This time, there are controversies.]

After such a triumph, MacNeil was hired for *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and the soprano was Luisa Maragliano. At the end of her aria, "Morrò ma prima in Grazia," the baritone entered, and the public started murmuring. Bothered by this fact and convinced that the crowd was disapproving him as he entered, MacNeil, known for his temper, remonstrated by saying, "You are booing me when I yet have to sing?" and flipped the desk set on the stage,

¹¹⁶ Francesco Molinari Pradelli (1911-1996) was an Italian conductor who appeared on the stages of La Scala di Milano, Teatro Regio di Parma, San Francisco Opera, Wiener Staatsoper, Metropolitan of New York, and others, conducting singers such as Maria Callas, Montserrat Caballe', Mario Del Monaco, Joan Sutherland, Giuseppe di Stefano, Anna Moffo, Birgit Nilsson, Franco Corelli, and others.

¹¹⁷ Luckily, a recording of this production has been made, showcasing MacNeil's challenging cadenza in Don Carlo's aria "O, De' Verd'Anni Miei." Hardy Classic – Verdi, Ernani (Teatro Regio di Parma, Coro e Orchestra del Teatro Regio di Parma, Cond. F. Molinari Pradelli; G. Limarilli, C. MacNeil, I. Vinco, M. Roberti. December 1963 2CD B079VV1QQ2.)

with all the papers, inkstand, and feathers that were on it. Miraculously, only the feathers, the ink top, and lighter items, but not the desk itself, end up in the orchestra pit. The show had been interrupted and was not resumed.

[Note: It is interesting to juxtapose this article from *The New York Times*, which quotes MacNeil's version:

Though not known as a temperamental artist, Mr. MacNeil was remembered for a spectacular public outburst when he stormed off the Parma Opera stage in Italy on Dec. 26, 1964.¹¹⁸ It happened during *Un Ballo in Maschera*, when the Parma audience, notorious for rude displays of disapproval, hissed at the soprano Luisa Maragliano just as Mr. MacNeil was about to sing the aria "Eri tu."

"I was getting more and more angry as the rumbling and noise got worse," he told *The New York Times* the following day. "I couldn't stand it any longer. "Basta, cretini!" I shouted and walked off the stage." (His words meant "That's enough, you idiots!")

The situation grew worse in his dressing room, where the stage director warned him to return to the performance because he had his family's safety to consider. Refusing to go back onstage, Mr. MacNeil sent his wife and children to their hotel. But when he made his way to the back entrance, he was assaulted by theater employees. "During the scuffle, I got socked on the jaw," Mr. MacNeil said, displaying a bruised chin during his *Times* interview. The following day the MacNeils fled Parma.¹¹⁹

Without attempting to attribute a moral judgment to any of the versions, Furlotti's version appears more accurate: the soprano's five-minute-long aria that addresses the baritone precedes the aforementioned aria, "Eri Tu," and technically would require a baritone to remain on stage. However, considering the structure of the opera, this requirement is often disregarded: the third act opens with a relatively short but extremely demanding vocal scene

¹¹⁸ According to the archives of Teatro Regio, it was November 26th, 1964, CdTRdP, 1964/65 Lirica.

¹¹⁹ Johnatan Kandell, "Cornell MacNeil, Verdi Baritone at the Met, Dies at 88," *The New York Times*, 17 July 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/18/arts/music/cornell-macneil-operatic-baritone-dies-at-88.html>

of Renato and Amelia (the baritone and soprano characters, respectively). The soprano's aria follows this scene. The following scene with Renato starts with a recitativo that addresses Amelia and continues with "Eri Tu," one of the most challenging (and most attended) moments of the opera, which is immediately followed by the next scene with Tom, Samuel, and Amelia and then the quintet with Oscar and the already-present characters.

In *Un Ballo in Maschera*, in order to save energy, the baritones often prefer to be offstage during the soprano's aria since it is the only moment of rest before tackling a long and difficult portion of the opera. As Furlotti stated, MacNeil was no exception. Being offstage while Maragliano was singing would heavily affect the assessment.]

As we see, MacNeil's version leans toward his [MacNeil's] desire to defend the soprano, which is in stark contrast to Furlotti's, to say that the American baritone misunderstood who was the addressee of the audience's contestation. In Furlotti's testimony, MacNeil appears to be an error-prone and humane singer, and it is legitimate to suppose that the singer himself, once he realized the causes of the conflict, has reiterated his version to a nobler and less vulnerable one., i.e., the one that appeared in his memoirs.

VJ: What happened to Parma's public? Did it change over the years?

EF: There is a simple trend. When I started in the early 50s, 90% of the public were Parmigiani, so the appraisal and disapproval were much more expansive and rapturous. With the advent of modern logistical solutions and multimedia tools, when traveling is easy, it takes a click to learn what is going on at an opera stage across the ocean. Teatro Regio attracts thousands of opera tourists, which, in turn, changes the public's demographics noticeably. Today, the Parmigiani will probably constitute less than half of the theater's

audience. Subsequently, the public's interaction altered over the years, conserving, however, its renowned characteristic traits.

VJ: What about the variations in cabalettas? Were there attempts to bring something new into them?

EF: Well, no. Frequently, the entire cabalettas were cut. If not, just one time, without repetition, sufficed. However, I remember an attempt at some minor variations in Violetta's "È Strano" from *La Traviata*... The conductor who allowed such liberty was Angelo Campori. Nevertheless, it did not achieve success. In my opinion, it was not a matter of the variations; instead, it was the overall quality of a singer on that specific occasion.

Raffaele Cortesi (1963)¹²⁰

Like Furlotti, Raffaele Cortesi is a legendary collaborative pianist whose skills and knowledge made him famous far beyond Parma's musical environment. At 18, he graduated from Conservatorio di Parma with honors in piano, after which he focused chiefly on piano accompaniment in opera. Cortesi performed in numerous prestigious venues, such as Teatro alla Scala and Auditorium di Milano, Accademia di Santa Cecilia and L'Università La Sapienza in Rome, Teatro San Carlo in Naples, Dresdner Musikfestspiele, St. John's Smith Square in London, Vienna Hofburg, Bunka Kaikan and Ima Hall in Tokyo, Symphony Hall in Osaka, Seoul Arts Center, Teatro Monumental in Madrid, and Rossini Festival in Pesaro. He has accompanied recitals of singers such as Raina Kabaivanska, Cecilia Gasdia, Sonia Ganassi, Fiorenza Cedolins, Barbara Frittoli, Vincenzo La Scola, Giuseppe Sabbatini, Michele Pertusi (with whom he recorded Verdi's songs), and Renato Bruson. Cortesi made

¹²⁰ Interview taken via telephone on November 15th, 2022.

recordings for Radio and TV channels, including RAI Radio 3, TSI, ZDF, France 2, Radio España, Arte, KBS, and NHK.

He currently works as a vocal coach in various theaters, such as Teatro Regio in Parma, Teatro Carlo Felice in Genova, Arena di Verona, and Comunale di Bologna. In addition, he has worked at Teatro San Carlo in Naples, Teatro de la Maestranza in Seville, Sao Carlos in Lisbon, Nederlandse Opera, Fondazione Toscanini, Dijon Auditorium and prestigious international competitions such as Neue Stimmen, Giuseppe di Stefano, Maria Callas, Voci Verdiane in Busseto, Renata Tebaldi, and Riccardo Zandonai. For the Festival Verdi in Parma, he interpreted the world premiere of *Album Piave* and *Il Corsaro* by Giovanni Pacini. He held masterclasses at Universität für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Wien, Tokyo and Osaka College of Music, Gnesins Academy of Music in Moscow, Haydn Konservatorium in Eisenstadt, Musik Akademie Basel, Scuola dell'Opera Italiana di Bologna, and Istituto Monteverdi in Cremona.¹²¹

However, even considering the plethora of opportunities a pianist of such caliber has, Cortesi remained faithful to his native city, to its conservatory, where he currently teaches, and actively continues contributing to Parma's musical and cultural life.

VJ: Did the public of Regio change over the years?

RC: Throughout the years, several things have changed; now, it is possible that a show which, in the past, would not have been accepted would go through today. I believe that the era of controversy has come to an end. However, at least from how I remember, this fascination with theater, where the veins of the wrists trembled even in celebrated singers

¹²¹ "Raffaele Cortesi," *Conservatorio Arrigo Boito di Parma*, accessed 29 March 2024, <https://www.conservatorio.pr.it/en/docenti/raffaele-cortesi/>.

when they had to fight for a positive outcome of the show desperately, often created already with some issues [technical, directorial, or a result of multiple substitutions]; and especially when everyone was expecting that those singers would sort out the fate of a show that started on the wrong foot, perhaps with stage direction, that initially was not appreciated. Those were different times when the celebration of the protagonist, a highly regarded divo, was the most critical central element. Regio had seen the pillars of the history of opera in terms of vocality [Tebaldi, Callas, Bergonzi, Corelli, to name a few] and, principally, for their professionalism. Today, instead, the opera world is flattened by a generic efficiency. In my opinion, that local charm has vanished; now, it could be defined as industrialized, probably with the complicity of economic crisis.

VJ: What kind of studies have you pursued, and how did you end up in the opera world?

RC: I studied at Conservatorio di Parma and graduated when I was 18. I did not pursue other kinds of studies besides a couple of years of composition, and I was lucky to be absorbed almost immediately by the job market; in my case, it was a job in the theater. Truth be told, I have pursued other piano courses with Bruno Canino, Piero Guarino, a legendary director of our Conservatorio, and Roberto Cappello. Nevertheless, a passion for opera exploded in me almost immediately, and I felt compelled to deepen my knowledge. Back then, there were no courses for collaborative pianists; you learned and acquired skills in the field, with all the risks that came with it. On the contrary, today, entry into the job market is much more gradual, and there is no risk of burning your feathers, as they say in jargon.

VJ: When did you start working at Regio, and for how long did you work there?

RC: I do not remember precisely because I worked there in alternating phases and did not participate in all the productions. However, I do remember that the last production was Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* a couple of years ago. As for my debut, my first opera was Verdi's *Luisa Miller* in Busseto's town square. One of the protagonists was Carlo Bergonzi, with young Michele Pertusi in the role of Wurm. And then I started... I think the first production I took part in was Salieri's *Falstaff*. I have to say, it was quite a harrowing experience because I did not have any idea of what it meant to be directed by a conductor, so when they told me: "I will beat this in two and the other one in four," I remained petrified. I have to say that my senior colleagues working alongside me did not make significant efforts to help me out in parrying the blows. It was a working environment where helping fledglings was definitely not a priority.

VJ: Have there been particular interpretational controversies at Regio?

RC: I would say that a primadonna or the primo attore felt entitled to play up or complain about the lack of professionalism in others. The stage directors were undoubtedly the most targeted because they had to put up with those celebrated artists. For example, when a singer's interpretation—a result of various productions that matured over time—did not match the director's ideas. These were the situations where two worlds collided. Therefore, a stage director, often young and with excellent ideas, who faced an opera grandee felt intimidated. However, in trying to do his job and propel their opinions, they often caused conflicts.

VJ: Had there been an evolution in interpretation and casting singers?

RC: Absolutely. And in parallel to lowering the fees. There had been a leveling in interpretation due to the economic leveling. This means that no flagship artists would make the opera season more appealing. In turn, they started to aim for teamwork.

Nonetheless, having celebrated singers in many Verdi productions was almost unavoidable. Perhaps in the repertoire of the 18th century, baroque, as well as modern and contemporary, it was possible to appeal to vocally less exceptional singers, whereas in the nineteenth-century repertoire, having acclaimed artists was almost taken for granted. For instance, I think of Renato Bruson interpreting Verdi. I remember the production of Verdi's *Il Corsaro*, which certainly is not among Verdi's most alluring operas. However, the role of Said Pasha sung by him was well-rendered and transformed. He was able to illuminate the rest of the opera and made me understand how a prominent interpreter, thanks to instinct, musicality, and flair, can fill with meaning a part that, both musically and theatrically, even when representing Verdi's not-so-memorable pages.

Then, we can pull out the story of the *pianissimo* B-flat in Radames's aria in *Aida*. Sometimes, the public would settle just for the effect of a *mezzo-piano* or a similar spurious outcome from a tenor. They would have tolerated a note taken in a full voice every so often. It is the same story as in the tenor aria "La Fleur" in *Carmen*, which is also written *piano*. Sometimes, the public would settle for a simulated *mezzo-piano* or a similar effect. If I am not wrong, even Bergonzi had been booed years ago. As a great expert of technique, he dared to sing the B-flat in *filato* on *pianissimo*. Now, it is part of the theater's annals.

I want to emphasize the level of passion that hovered around theater life. You could also notice it in choristers, who were not the most skillful, compared to the fully state-funded opera theaters. However, I remember the tenor section when I started to work with Maestro

Egaddi and with Maestro Tanzi, which was constituted by the ex-members of La Corale Verdi; it was awe-inspiring.¹²² They had a *squillo*, which today's conductors would probably dream of encountering.¹²³

I will explain the evolution better: in the local newspaper, *La Gazzetta di Parma*, the premiere at Regio does not figure on the first page anymore; it is relegated to the last page of the entertainment section. There were times instead when a premiere was longed for with spasmodic fervor by the *loggionisti*. I think about them when they stood in line at the box office during Christmas time, cold, in the snow, to find a spot in the *loggione*. This fervid passion also came from the narrow streets of the old town of Oltretorrente.¹²⁴ Back then, knowing Verdi's operas was a personal cultural heritage, often also because parents or a grandfather were impassioned with opera. It was not only a cultural phenomenon but also social and customary.

I recall the improvised choruses in taverns and the passionately sung accompaniments that were part of the city once. I remember once assisting in such a spontaneous event: it was at L'Osteria del Sordo, and there was a group of people who suddenly started to sing Verdi's chorus. I do not recall which piece it was, but I do remember that they had a good pitch and voices. Knowing Verdi was a part of personal knowledge and patrimony. Many who perhaps

¹²² Edgardo Egaddi (1925 – 2000) was an Italian pianist, conductor, and composer. He was the Choir Master at Regio from 1965 to 1982. Adolfo Tanzi (1944 – 2008) was an Italian conductor and educator. He taught harmony at Conservatorio di Parma and was the Choir Master at Regio from 1982 to 1987.

¹²³ "Squillo is recognizable by a distinctive brilliant, ringing quality in the timbre of the voice." Source: Wikipedia.

¹²⁴ A creek divides Parma into two parts; Oltretorrente is the part of town on the opposite side of the creek, relative to the Regio. Oltretorrente was historically considered a poorer area, since it was (and still is) more subject to floods.

did not know the whole opera would remember the words of an aria or a chorus. Or, those who were not operagoers were very familiar with Verdi's music anyway. There was this affection because the *Genius Loci*, the local genius, was the one to influence the city's cultural life.

VJ: Do you recall any particular indication or consideration from a conductor?

RC: Back then, during my first years at the theater, being inexperienced, I was much more attentive to the teachings of the conductors and choir directors. For instance, a person who helped me a lot in my career and from whom I have learned a lot was Romano Gandolfi, the lionized choirmaster at La Scala and probably the best Verdi choirmaster ever. I still remember the *pianissimo* effect he required from the choir and how it helped conjure the effect of suffering in Verdi's music not in an exterior or superficial manner. It was a way of interpreting rooted in a theatrical mentality.

Speaking of which, I recall another small debut at La Corale when I was still a rookie. There was a conductor, Vladimir Delman, who conducted the whole of [Verdi's] *Requiem*. As a youngster, I started with the first notes whispered and murmured in cellos, and I played too loud. He beat the pants off of me. But then, he spent his time with me until I could play that passage in three *p*. I also remember that the piano was fair to middling, so I said: "Maestro, I struggle playing on this piano." He got mad at me...

Another professional relationship that significantly educated me was with the conductor Angelo Campori. He was from Brescia but worked a lot at Regio, as was often the case when a conductor was underrated. I mean that he did not strive for a career, which affected his personal life, too. He often could not prevent his private struggles from coming into his professional activity. Combined with his vulnerability as a person and often

exasperated sensibility... I do not try to justify him, but to me, he represented the model of interpreting Verdi through the *legato* he required from the orchestra, through the beauty of his gesture, which he inherited from his teacher, Leonard Bernstein. Campori was never schematic or mathematical but always very personal, with darts of his musicality and sudden flashes of inspiration, which left you with your mouth open. This allowed him to suffer together with the characters; I still remember Gilda's death in *Rigoletto* when you saw him with tears in his eyes... He was not a typical nerdy know-it-all conductor who would know all the operas by heart. Another episode that comes to my mind is when he intervened, saying: "So, ladies and gentlemen, let's start from "Mi chiamano..." then he took off his glasses to better read the score: "Mi chiamano Mimì," probably making fun of himself..."¹²⁵

VJ: What can you say about the variations in the repetition of Verdian cabaletta?

RC: In Parma, I only remember a few cases of variations. Nonetheless, I do not recall any particular case of variations because years ago, in many cases, the cabaletta was ultimately cut. If not, consulting my working musical scores, I see that in ninety percent of cases, the cabaletta was performed only once as standard practice. In my experience, specific composers, such as Rossini, had more, let's say, canvas-type ways of writing, leaving space, even if reluctantly, to make variations. In Parma, variations were not made even in authors whose music lent itself better to variations than Verdi's. In early Verdi—perhaps cabalettas for female voices, which bear traits of *bel canto* heritage and have many semiquaver figures—it can make sense to venture to do variations. However, Verdi's music is so concise that I do not feel it needs any additions. The same issue in Mozart: by adding something, there is

¹²⁵ Referring to one of the most famous soprano arias "Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì" from Puccini's *La Bohème*.

always a risk of crippling something that already functions well and is not essential to what is written. Still, I am not convinced there is a need to change notes. I lean more on the side of the variations in colors, agogics, and dynamics.

VJ: Is it correct to state that interpreting Verdi in Parma is somewhat authentic?

RC: Creating Festival Verdi at the beginning of the 2000s, which celebrated the performance of Verdi's operas, diverged other Verdian titles to the period in September and October, which, subsequently, eliminated a certain amount of patina of *parmigianità* ["parmesanity"] also in the theater because, for obvious reason, the theater allures public from the outside as well... Often, speaking with my colleagues from other theaters, this Verdian patent of Regio is seen as a folkloristic element related to an inordinate passion. Some loggionisti felt entitled to make good or bad weather of it, and this system was not accountable, analyzable, or controllable. After a while, some superintendents tried to tame it. I remember, for example, a very shrewd Mauro Meli, who spoke to the loggionisti and musical associations occasionally.¹²⁶ Or, when Parma Lirica, the society of opera lovers, asked Maestro Faggiani to lead an open rehearsal at the society's venue, transforming it into enthralling lectures on Verdian interpretation.¹²⁷ It was fascinating, but it is improbable that a loggionista sells his soul to the devil. It is like a lion put in a cage, for whom it does not take much to roar and who does not forgive a singer easily on an off night. Meanwhile, they would express admiration for Alfredo Kraus, Leo Nucci, and Mariella Devia, who delighted us with almost perfect interpretations at every show.

¹²⁶ Mauro Meli was the artistic director of Regio from 2005 to 2012.

¹²⁷ Martino Faggiani (1962) has been the Choir Master of Regio from 2000. In 2008 he was also appointed as Chef des Choeurs at the La Monnaie Theatre in Brussels. Faggiani has recorded all Verdi's operas.

I also remember that Alfredo Kraus did not leave right after the last performance, preferring to stay for another two to three days, thus giving his body time to recuperate from stress and fatigue. This makes you understand how much they cared about providing the maximum when singing in a theater such as Regio.

Yet, being a star did not mean that one was unassailable. I remember this very famous conductor who represented the top-tier global elite conducting at Regio. He arrived pretty unprepared and eventually, it was a fiasco. This shows that the public's competence goes beyond pure vocal aspects. Then I remember Macbeth, directed by Liliana Cavani: during one of the ballet scenes, a sort of Charlie Chaplin popped out, and I am still wondering how the conductor managed not to stop the performance for how intense and loud was the public's dissent. The most impressive, almost astounding thing was how long the boos went on, at least for five minutes! A fury! Truth be told, the show itself was not memorable.

VJ: Does a Verdian voice exist? How should Verdi be sung?

RC: The Verdian vocality represents a determined color, specific weight, and caliber of voice. Now, indeed, there is a trend toward lighter voices. Many conductors today, Riccardo Muti, first of all, lean towards casting lighter voices, especially when it comes to tenors. Verdian voice is, above all, a solid, stable, and mature one, because Verdi is perilous if tackled with insufficient technical skills. In early Verdi, particularly in female parts, there are impervious passages, challenging even expert singers. In these parts, the music's character exposes the singer as an absolute protagonist; subsequently, any deficiency, also on an interpretative level, will not be forgiven. The roles of basses and baritones cannot be affronted at a young age, even if an apt voice color suggests a similar repertorial choice.

VJ: Is there a return to the performance of Verdi deprived of its "traditions"?

RC: Festival Verdi poses some problems on a musicological level, too—issues they have yet to deal with, as Verdi is not as subject to discoveries as Rossinian or Baroque repertoire can be. What we know about Verdi is pretty dyed-in-the-wool.

Perhaps, some aspects to consider are the performances with original instruments from the time an opera was written or the research of a philological sound. This could be a fascinating area to explore. As for the voice, probably using the original instruments, voices should refrain from resorting to an excessive volume. I mean that, for example, in the 1800s, wind instruments were much lighter and much less potent than they are today. Then, clearly, it is up to the conductor to find the right balance. Perhaps there are conductors capable of covering voices even using the instruments from the 1800s! [laughs] Everything is possible!

VJ: What can you say about “accento verdiano,” the Verdian accent?

RC: There is also a need for this word carving, which Pertusi has, for instance, acquired through talent and experience. At times, in some good interpreters, there is a lack of such an approach, which means that there is no bravery to go beyond a superficial reading of the text, searching for an individual interpretation and trying to illuminate one part of the text rather than another. There lies a path of progressive maturation.

VJ: Any advice to a singer intent on singing at Regio?

RC: Consider dealing with a role only after a long and deep study, and, better, after having made a debut elsewhere—because the stress can be unbearable, even singing in a second cast. It is still a theater where, when it comes to Verdi, they await you, so to say, with the gun drawn. It is not easy to get a chance to sing here, so you better play your cards well when your skills are at the peak of development.

Given that Cortesi is an experienced professional and has worked in many other prestigious theaters, his advice suggests that working at Regio di Parma may be more stressful and require a more thorough and attentive preparation.

Claudio Cirelli (1972)¹²⁸

Along with Furlotti and Cortesi, Claudio Cirelli is a crucial figure at Teatro Regio di Parma. Cirelli also graduated from Conservatorio di Parma in 1995. Initially active as a chamber music interpreter, he approached the opera field two years later after masterclasses with Vincent Scamera and studying operatic repertoire with Eugenio Furlotti. Cirelli returned to Conservatorio to master his skills, graduating in 2001 in vocal chamber music for pianists. The same year, he was selected as a collaborative pianist at Teatro Regio di Parma, thus initiating an intensive, continuous, ongoing collaboration.

With 82 operas and more than 180 opera productions in his portfolio, Cirelli's artistic commitment brought him to stages like Teatro Argentina in Rome, Bellini in Naples, Teatro della Pergola in Florence, Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, Palacio de Festival de Cantabria in Santander, Spain, Teatro El Matadero in Madrid, and NCPA in Beijing, working with conductors such as Riccardo Muti, Bruno Bartoletti, Daniele Gatti, Yuri Temirkanov, Michel Plasson, Nicola Luisotti, James Conlon, Roberto Abbado, and others.

In 2015, he recorded an episode "Verdi and singers" for the documentary series "Sempreverdi" for Sky Classica TV channel.¹²⁹ He was invited as a guest to "La Barcaccia" at Rai Radio3, the most famous Italian radio program dedicated to opera music.

¹²⁸ Interview taken via WhatsApp correspondence service and on November 25th, 2022.

¹²⁹ "Sempreverdi" is a pun that literally means "evergreen" in the plural, but can also be translated as "Always Verdi."

Starting in 2018, Cirelli taught the interpretation of Verdi's repertoire at the Accademia Verdiana of Teatro Regio. In addition, from 2022, he has also been the Musical Director of the Corale Verdi in Parma. Besides the aforementioned activities, Claudio Cirelli teaches collaborative piano at Conservatorio *Luca Marenzio* in Darfo.¹³⁰

VJ: What does Verdi mean to you?

CC: Verdi means a lot to me. He is an author who made me approach the operatic repertoire, which allowed me to accumulate precious experience within the confines of Festival Verdi and tours in Italy and abroad, starting with *Aida* and *La Traviata*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

VJ: What can you say about your experience at Teatro Regio through the observations of conductors and singers who interpret Verdi?

CC: The word in Verdi's art is the very inspirational agent in music and sound itself. Every single note in the interpretations of good singers and conductors always has a deep significance and dramaturgic weight. Frequently, singers and conductors compare and discuss their points of view on the psychological insight of the characters with us, the collaborative pianists, as well, searching for various possible hermeneutical solutions in definite musical passages.

VJJ: Has there been an evolution in approaching and interpreting Verdi through your experience at Regio?

CC: I cannot talk about evolution in interpretation. Every conductor brings their vision, and twenty years is not a sufficiently-long time frame to delineate an out-and-out

¹³⁰ "Claudio Cirelli" *Conservatorio di Brescia*, accessed 29 March 2024, https://www.consbs.it/docente/cirelli-claudio/#modal_docente.

evolution. The sense of tradition and the conductor's *métier* has probably waned due to the renovations brought by younger conductors. Though often talented, they do not always grasp the profound sense of the Verdian sign. Voice-wise, there is a progressive "lightening" in specific roles, in comparison to the voices of the past, and not only in Verdi.

VJ: Can you share some experiences related to the Regio, Parma, and its figures?

Are there some peculiarities one can find only in Parma?

CC: In Parma, the public is particularly passionate about their theater's musical life, especially regarding *their* Verdi. Historical musical associations contribute to making live opera in a very remarkable way. In these associations (not only the Club of the 27,)¹³¹ there is no shortage of figures who are authentic living encyclopedias of memories and anecdotes, seasoned with genuineness and folkloristic spirit.

Another peculiarity of Regio is behind the stage: technicians, coiffeurs, make-up artists, prop masters, dressmakers, and so on. Considering the (limited) resources of the theater, I deem Regio one of Italy's best theaters. Many stage directors have recognized and highly valued their sensibility and quality of work: Hugo de Ana, Graham Vick, and Joseph Franconi Lee, to cite a few. These directors, like many others, love working at Regio because

¹³¹ Founded in 1958 as a tribute to Giuseppe Verdi, the Club of 27 is an association of critical importance for promoting and preserving Verdi's artistic legacy. There are 27 members of the Club and each member represents a work of the Maestro following the criteria established by the Club itself. These criteria are entirely subjective and do not take into consideration the re-visitation of certain works which Maestro Verdi undertook during his lengthy career. In particular, the Club does not consider "autonomous operas" those re-workings, even though published with different titles, such as "Jerusalem" and "Aroldo", respectively rewrites of "I Lombardi alla prima Crociata" and "Stiffelio". Included, however, amongst the works of lyric opera is "Messa da Requiem", an absolute masterpiece. When an opera becomes 'available', for a whole variety of reasons, the new member takes over from the previous holder and assumes the mantle of the name until he leaves the Association. From www.clubdei27.com/en/il-club

whatever—even the most difficult things to realize—are realized with mastery at Regio, resulting in an exceptional outcome. I remember some very complex and challenging, almost impossible-to-realize productions, after which those directors said: “Nowhere else could I have achieved such results as here, in Parma.”

Everyone who works at Regio does it with absolute passion: I remember instances when, for some reason, the conditions had been changed at the very last moment, so we did not have time to rehearse. When closing the curtain, for example, to a technician with whom I am confident professionally, I could say: “Go with music; follow your feeling.” It always had been right and organic in a given context. In addition, I remember the words of one of the technicians who spent some time working abroad, in Berlin and elsewhere: “It is true that abroad they have much more sophisticated machines and technologies, but here we still feel art, music, without relying on automation, here we leave space for interpretation even where it seems inapplicable.”

Then, but you already probably know about it, there was this curious incident during Lisette Oropesa’s recital at Regio...

VJ: Yes, that was quite a surprise, and I have already written about it...

You are also the Music Director of La Corale Verdi. What is Corale’s role in the city’s musical life?

CC: Formerly, the choristers of La Verdi acceded to the choir of the theater. From 2001, things changed: singing at Regio became a full-time job. At La Corale, luckily, there are still younger singers, and many of them end up studying music at a higher educational level. In Parma, the role of music associations is essential because they diffuse opera in contexts accessible to everyone, with the spirit of straightforwardness and interaction. In

recent years, there has been a substantial rejuvenation caused by many newcomers, not necessarily referenced, but passionate and seriously motivated. I feel responsible for this amateur-operatic patrimony, which can barely be found elsewhere.

VJ: Throughout your employment, has there been an evolution in the listeners of Il Regio?

CC: Yes, the listener has changed, and it is not necessarily for the better. The positive thing is that the theater's outreach projects have a great response from a younger audience, both in numbers and enthusiasm. However, the spirit of the critics is the prerogative of the veterans of the loggione. In my opinion, the loggione maintains good sensibility and the ability to judge the performances quite competently. They are excessive in certain manifestations of dissent, but it is renowned that in Parma, loggione has always been the protagonist of the opening nights. It is a bugbear for any singer, even the most venerable. To my mind, however, this critical ability is gradually becoming shallower. Often, there are instances of disagreement between factions of the public: more vehement up in the loggione and more moderate in the orchestra stalls. Stage direction has assumed an essential weight for the outcome of a performance. Even though the theater's public loves traditional, old-school direction, the public recognizes its worthiness when an innovative, sometimes even revolutionary direction is proposed and well-executed. Otherwise, they do not forgive, often showing their disapproval quite picturesquely. Still, when raptured by a performance, the public of the Regio remains extremely generous and enthusiastic.

VJ: Variations in Verdi's cabaletta: what is the common practice now?

CC: Few conductors and even fewer singers propose variations in cabalettas. With Verdi, one performs as it is written in the score. If variations take place, they are restrained

and concern few notes. It is an interesting case when variations are obtained not through the notes but through dynamics, and different characters between the exposition and repetition. Reinforcing and emphasizing different dramaturgic significances can make the same music sound different when repeated.

VJ: How would you advise a young singer who wants to perform at Regio, especially in Verdi's repertoire?

CC: To the singers who are going to perform for the first time at Regio, I would suggest arriving exceptionally prepared because the public knows Verdi very well. Technical and musical mastery allows interpreting with heart what is being sung. The public will reward it with infinite generosity.

Chapter 5: Traditions or Habits? A Technical Insight on Vocality in Verdi's Time and Today

In what follows, I turn back to this question of ‘tradition’ to summarize the technical issues involved for practicing singers. What does “tradition” in opera mean? The word “tradition” itself implies the transmission of a custom or a set of customs from one generation to another. In reflection of my study, we now see how it is a widely accepted custom—often a deviation from the original score that aims to “improve” the rendition of a determined fragment or the whole opera—which has become a common practice over the years. In most cases, these variations are more likely to be heard in a performance or a studio recording, whereas an execution of the original writing of the same passages still today might raise clamor and even disdain among listeners, critics, and singers.

The legitimacy, aesthetic, and artistic value of traditions in opera were and still are a subject of livid arguments. On the one hand, we can find quotes such as “Tradition is the memory of the last bad performance,” argued Wilhelm Furtwängler¹³² or perhaps Gustav Mahler.¹³³ On the other hand, John Fleming, former president of the Music Critics Association of North America, stated, “Tradition is the heart of classical music.”¹³⁴

Tradition seems to be something that is inherited without consciously noticing it. A listener attending an opera or a young artist at their debut in a role frequently has a precise idea about the opera they will encounter. Obviously, that precise idea comes from previous aural experiences—operas seen live as well as recordings. There is a humorous quote,

¹³² Riccardo Muti, *Verdi. L'Italiano: Ovvero, in musica, le nostre radici*, 37.

¹³³ Neal Goren, “Beyond the Aria: Artistic Self-Empowerment for the Classical Singer,” 75.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

widespread among professional singers in Italy and often attributed to Italian conductor, Tullio Serafin,¹³⁵ which states: “*La Traviata non si studia, si sa*” [“You don’t study *La Traviata*, you know it”].¹³⁶ Even considering its witty nature, this quote also implies that considerable baggage is acquired in one’s aural memory before even opening a musical score.

As a singer, like many of my peers, when approaching a debut, I often already have a solid aural memory of the relevant opera. When first dealing with *Rigoletto* as a performer, I discovered that the musical score had several significant discrepancies with “my” aural idea of *Rigoletto*. As a performer, I have perceived such differences as a margin for artistic interpretation, where artists could expose their particular vocal skills. Accepting the aesthetics of these alterations, my proposals of adding high notes were warmly welcomed in several *Rigoletto* productions.

Nonetheless, I have discovered firsthand that these margins are often rigid and highly polarizing. It is not an invitation for extremely open interpretation, and in fact, the original writing of the score is often associated with just a *few* specific performed variations. Over time, after I became aware of this binary interpretation model, I tested the ground in several productions of *Il Trovatore*. With my acquired work experience, not surprisingly, I faced reluctance and resistance when I suggested performing the cadenza of the aria “Il Balen Del Suo Sorriso” as it is printed in the score. The same happened when I proposed variations in

¹³⁵ Tullio Serafin (1878 – 1968) was one of the most important and influential Italian conductors. Serafin played viola at La Scala under Toscanini. Later, he became Toscanini's right-hand man and music director of La Scala.

¹³⁶ Many of my colleagues claimed to have heard this quote from other Italian conductors, such as Nello Santi (1931 – 2020) or Maurizio Rinaldi (1937 – 1995).

the repeat of the subsequent cabaletta, “Per Me Ora Fatale.” These two proposals, as discussed in previous chapters, represented a controversy: in the case of the aria, I suggested following the original score; in the case of cabaletta, I proposed adding some slight variations to the score. Simply put, the core problem I faced is that over the years, in Verdi, some alterations have almost become a requirement, whereas a similar attempt in other areas (such as the repeat of cabalettas) is usually frowned upon.

Analogous problems occurred with cuts: for instance, in one production of *Il Trovatore* I sang two repetitions of a cabaletta, the tenor sang only one (the famous “Di Quella Pira”), while the soprano’s cabaletta in the fourth act was entirely cut. In this case, the decisions were made both by singers and the conductor. On the contrary, in a production of *La Traviata*, I was advised by the conductor against performing Germont’s cabaletta at all, while the co-protagonists kept theirs.

Browsing through the most common “traditional” alterations found in audio recordings, one might argue about aesthetics, but certainly not about how an alteration gets standardized and becomes a new feature, or even a symbol of a particular musical excerpt. Thus, after a series of repetitions, an alteration often becomes a part of so-called “traditions,” i.e., something that is not written or intended by the composer but at the same time is often closely associated with them. As my study has explored, it seems that compared to Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, Verdi’s operas represent more fertile ground for analyzing these innumerable “traditions.” On the contrary, operas of verismo composers like Puccini, Mascagni, and Giordano have much less space for alterations, as in Verdi’s latest operas, where the “tradition” phenomenon seems to disappear.

Before we shift to a more detailed analysis of variations and alterations in Verdis' music, I would like to stress that there is no intention to put a performer, a listener, or a scholar in a bad light or impart any negative or judgmental connotation by using adjectives such as "unorthodox," "compromising," or "depriving." Alterations and traditions have always been an opportunity to make a greater impact and to impress with one's notable vocal skills. The given adjectives should rather be seen as instances of shifting from the original (in its more literal sense, in this case). A deeper study into every possible alteration can reveal its value: often, it is not only a matter of mere musical integrity but also of changing the perception of the drama or a character on a bigger scale. Therefore, in light of recent scholarly studies and the development of musicological awareness, abandoning alteration practices in their "traditional" form can be seen as the product of prior research into the means of expression and refinement of interpretation.

Such musicological awareness does not necessarily imply agreement with the scholars and their latest achievements in music history, nor unquestioningly accepting the results of their research as the final operatic dogma. It can rather be seen as a condition for free and conscious artistic choice, with a clear understanding of the pros and cons. In academic study of music, there can be a noticeable leaning towards "wrong" or "right" about structural details: for example, parallel fifths in 18th-century music was seen as "wrong," a four-movement symphony in the 19th century reflected the 'right' structure, or, as it had been discovered, claiming that Salieri poisoned Mozart would be "wrong."¹³⁷ Instead, when it

¹³⁷ As an example, see Jennifer Snodgrass' *Teaching Music Theory: New Voices and Approaches*, where leaning towards "wrong" and "right" stimulates learning. Similarly, William Stafford's *Mozart's Death: A Corrective Survey of the Legends*, leaves a little space for doubts regarding Mozart's cause of death.

comes to performance, things change noticeably, and almost any listener can have a difference in opinion, unavoidably falling into the area of subjectivity. This is also why I have chosen not to discuss agogic or dynamic alterations, which would be more likely a subject of interest for conductors or scholars, but not singers.¹³⁸

It is crucial to remember that subjectivity is a direct byproduct of diversity. Fighting against subjectivity, especially in performing arts, can have severe consequences and would lead to a dialectic impasse. With a plethora of deep and thorough research available today, a modern singer can easily retrieve accurate information regarding the composer's production and intent, as well as information about performers of the time. Assuming that the phenomenon of "traditions" already existed in the 19th century, we will notice a significant difference between testimonies and chronicles that involve singers who were contemporary to Verdi and today's performance practices.¹³⁹ Therefore, the contribution of scholars today is vital to performers, as they create a solid link between the modern artist and a composer, as well as with the artists of the past. In acknowledging differences between generations and

¹³⁸ Such an argument would inevitably be biased due to the need for more reliable data reflecting objective values of the tempi and volume in the 19th century. This data would allow for making comparisons to nowadays. Claiming that these points are less relevant to singers, I infer that a singer has some objective limits, such as maximum or minimum volume, range, and breath, which implies a specific adaptability of the orchestra to a given voice. Thus, the volume and choice of tempi are subjective, according to several factors (the balance between orchestra and voice dictates volume; meanwhile, tempi are directly related to a singer's breath capacity). However, there are some "traditions" in the latter category as well (such as the first four lines that are sung on one breath in Germont's aria "Di Provenza" in *La Traviata*, or in *Don Carlo*, in the death scene of Rodrigo di Posa in "Io morirò, ma lieto in core." Given the extreme challenge of such an operation, attempted successfully by few, these instances did not form a "fossilized" standard, i.e., an unspoken requirement.

¹³⁹ See Hilary Poriss' "Making Their Way through the World: Italian One-Hit Wonders," where she deals with the phenomenon of the trunk aria, which had a significant impact on the musical integrity of operas.

their respective artistic interpretations, an artist will inevitably acknowledge cultural changes, subjectivity, and an individual imprint. Thus, I argue that the individual interpretational imprint should be applied first in operatic passages subject to “traditional” alterations. It does not necessarily imply that those traditions do not have the right to exist. Instead, reevaluating a determined passage's artistic function and expressive potential would benefit a singer's artistic integrity. Furthermore, it would foster the spirit of individuality and diversity in arts.

Finally, singers should not forget that they are the ones to bring to life the final “product.” Eventually and factually, *they* are the face of alterations, artistic choices, and interpretation, even if there is often a conductor or a coach behind specific decisions.

Deviations from the Original Musical Writing in Performance (Forays into the High Register)

Let's bring back the case of tenor Ruggero Bondino and his tough night in *La Traviata* when his high C in the conclusion of the cabaletta “O Mio Rimorso” (Act II, Scene I) did not convince the theater public. Those familiar with the score know no high Cs are written in the tenor's part and that the added C in question is “traditional.” According to Cortesi, in the past, the cabaletta was usually cut, and in the case of this particular fragment of *La Traviata*, this practice is still followed today. “O Mio Rimorso” can hardly be the most beautiful passage of Verdi's masterpiece, especially in comparison to the other portions of *La Traviata*. Perhaps “O Mio Rimorso” appears more as a tribute to the conventional form for the solo numbers, i.e., recitativo-aria-recitativo-cabaletta. In addition, the cabaletta's perfunctory purpose also suggests a determined obligatory theatrical development, making it thus omittable in the eyes of many singers, conductors, and especially directors.

Furthermore, it is technically challenging because it gravitates chiefly around the *passaggio*, with frequent and uncomfortable forays into the high As. But the score has no high C at the end of the cabaletta. As a matter of fact, there are no high C in the tenor's part in *La Traviata* at all. Nonetheless, it represents two mutually exclusive "traditions." Conventionally, a listener, especially in the twentieth century, expected "O Mio Rimorso" to be cut. However, if the cabaletta *was* executed, the expectation was to hear a (non-written) high C at its conclusion. That is why one can hardly find a recording (until the 1980s) of this cabaletta without the "traditional" high C at the end.

One might wonder whether the compulsion to close on a high note is a phenomenon that characterizes Verdi to a major extent compared to other composers. High notes in *bel canto* composers' music find their place in the score more likely on the dominant chords preceding the closure on the tonic. (E.g., Figaro's cavatina "Largo al Factotum," Rodolfo's cabaletta "Tu non Sai con Quei Begli Occhi" from *La Sonnambula*, or Adina's "Benedette Queste Carte" from *L'Elisir d'Amore*.) Among the few "traditional" alterations with forays into the high register on the resolution, it is worth mentioning Lucia's Madness Scene in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which closes on a high E Flat.

In most cases, in *bel canto*, a high note on the dominant chord implies a fermata and dynamic flexibility in the orchestra, i.e., the volume goes down to give space and opportunity for the voice to stand out. Consequently, the following resolution in the tonic calls for greater volume and a definitive character.

The reason for shifting the placement of the high notes from the dominant chords might have a technical explanation, which brings us to a significant developmental turning point on September 17th, 1831. That night, during the Italian premiere of Rossini's *Guglielmo*

Tell (the Italian version of *Guillaume Tell*), in the fourth act's caballetta "Corriam, Voliam, lo Scempio s'Affretti," French tenor Gilbert Louis Duprez performed a high C, executed in a new technical manner.¹⁴⁰ It entailed a more powerful sound and a major chest resonance in comparison to the falsetto that was usually used in higher registers at that time. Like Alfredo's cabaletta from *La Traviata*, Rossini's "Corriam, Voliam" is also in C major and closes on a central C in the score, but "traditionally" requires a closure on a high C.

This technical notion of the "pre-Duprez era" could also suggest why singers conventionally were more likely to show off their high range in cadenzas. In a cadenza, the orchestra stops playing, giving *carte blanche* to the performer, who, in turn, does not have to compete with the orchestra for a moment. For the same reason, a closure on a lower note, sung in a modal voice register, gave the composers various dynamic choices.¹⁴¹ Closure on a high note, by contrast, presented obstacles. Since the volume of falsetto in the high register is weaker than in the modal voice, this option appeared problematic for sound balance. Assuming that the downward resolution is associated with the *bel canto* era also explains why the music of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, stylistically and chronologically part of the pre-1831 period, did not undergo such a significant series of alterations, whereas, in Verdi, alterations took deeper roots, and in some cases seem ineradicable.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Simply put, it consisted of holding the larynx in a low position, thus making the vocal cords adduct (close) completely.

¹⁴¹ "Modal," a term used by James C. McKinney alongside the more common term "normal" voice, implies the full vocal cord adduction during the phonation process. James C. McKinney, "The Diagnosis & Correction of Vocal Faults." 100.

¹⁴² Although Bellini died in 1835 and Donizetti in 1848, their compositional approach remained relatively the same after the advent of the new vocal approach. *Guillaume Tell* was the last Rossini opera. He never accepted the aesthetics of *il do di petto*, defining it as "the scream of a slaughtered capon."

Undoubtedly, the most notorious alteration regards another part written for tenor: Manrico in *Il Trovatore*. Like the cabaletta from *La Traviata* mentioned above, Manrico's cabaletta is also in C major. The added high C at the closure of this cabaletta, "Di quella pira," became a touchstone and perhaps the most anticipated moment of the whole opera. Not only is this alteration still expected by the public, it has also become a sort of symbol of the entire part. In addition, on many occasions, in the past and nowadays, they have lowered the tonality of the entire piece to B or even B-flat major rather than omitting the closure on a high note. For instance, at his debut in the role at Regio in 2010, a well-known Argentinian tenor, Marcelo Alvarez, executed Manrico's cabaletta in B major. This choice did not compromise the positive outcome of the show. In addition, considering the "sacredness" of the high note, Alvarez, like many others, not only cut the first round of the cabaletta but also omitted most of the passage in the section that precedes the final C in the original score (for instance, he sang one bar out of 23 bars in his line). Summarizing provocatively, the "tradition" allows you to cut, sing partially, and transpose the entire piece as long as you sing the high note.

Reviewing key historical recordings, it is impressive how, in this example, these "traditions" have become widespread. Jussi Björling (Metropolitan, 1941), Franco Corelli (Regio di Parma, 1961), Placido Domingo (Metropolitan Opera, 1973), Luciano Pavarotti (Metropolitan Opera, 1988), Jonas Kaufmann (Bayerische Staatsoper, 2013), Francesco Meli (Covent Garden, 2016), and many others opted for a lower key and a substantial cut in their line from the preceding section in order to keep a formidable high note. It requires a perfect pitch or scrupulous attention to determine the actual key in a given performance. Obviously, common operagoers do not take the trouble (nor should they probably) to verify this and, in

most cases, live in blissful ignorance, remembering a glorious *do di petto* [The chest C], even if it was actually a B or B-flat. As they say, two birds with one stone or being “fooled and happy,” as Riccardo Muti explained: the public is satisfied, and the “tradition” is respected.¹⁴³ However, this comes at the expense of musical integrity and intellectual and historical fidelity to the composer’s original vision.

The figure of Muti is probably the most important and influential when it comes to Verdi and the performance practice of his operas. For years, he fought for cleanliness and fidelity to Verdi’s score. He made significant contributions as a writer and educator in an effort to free Verdi’s operas from the “incrustations” created over the years of performance practice.

For Muti, “Di quella pira” represents “the emblem of intention to remove the performance practice which had been consolidated throughout the years”:

For example, “Di quella pira,” in *Il Trovatore*, written in C major, is very often performed a half-step or, even more often, in B-flat major, which is a step lower. This is because, in the end, the tenor wants to sing that ill-famed high note that has to last half an hour. However, Verdi was very attentive to the relationships between tonalities: changing the color of an entire cabaletta only to sing a high note cannot be made. It is a crime. On the other hand, in all the operatic literature, the arias that terminate on a high note are seldom found. An aria can contain many of them, but the resolution of the phrase always goes down. Even Rossini, in all of his cadenzas, drives a voice high bound, but in the finale, he brings it back down. The castratos too, when approached in great virtuosic improvisations, lead the voice to unimaginable heights with trills, *gruppetti*, scales, and warbles. Still, the solution was always down because so is life’s path.¹⁴⁴

Further, Muti thoroughly explains why this kind of intervention, i.e., closing on a high note, is destined to fail, pointing out the problems that arise both contrapuntally and in

¹⁴³ Riccardo Muti, *Verdi. L’Italiano: Ovvero, in musica, le nostre radici*, 38.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

terms of theatrical expression. Mentioning trills and scales, which are standard features of *bel canto*, he explicitly refers to the repertoire that preceded and was contemporary to Verdi.

Nonetheless, Muti, an advocate of Verdian writing and its inherent theatricality, seems to fall into contradictions. In *Il Trovatore* at La Scala in 2000, Muti omitted the high C of the “Pira” for the tenor but took liberty in several artistic choices, such as dynamics and tempi. There is a detailed analysis of this performance by Marco Beghelli, with historical insight into the motivations of Muti’s alterations.¹⁴⁵ Another of Muti’s artistic choices can be found in his *La Traviata* at La Scala in 1992, which induces some perplexity. The tenor’s high C in the cabaletta is omitted despite having Roberto Alagna in Alfredo Germont’s role, whose high register was excellent. At the same time, at the closure of the first act, in Violetta’s cabaletta “Sempre libera,” Muti gave the soprano Tiziana Fabbricini liberty to sing a high E-flat that is not written in the score.

Muti expressed his firm and negative point of view on alteration at the end of “La Pira.” Contemporarily, he was not so orthodox in following the composer’s agogic and dynamic indications, and in *La Traviata*, an addition of a high note in the soprano’s cabaletta did not bother him. What guidelines, if any, did Muti follow in making his choices?

Analyzing the nature of the high note in question, we will discover that, as it is the closure of the act, it does not interfere with the theatrical flow; it does not unbalance the harmonic structure; it fits the writing and adds dramatic expression, stressing the protagonist’s excitement. In addition, in 1852, when *La Traviata* was written, some specific vocal liberty was taken for granted, especially in closing passages. Muti would have hardly

¹⁴⁵ Marco Beghelli, “Per fedeltà a una nota,” 295-316.

allowed a similar alteration in a *Simon Boccanegra* or *Falstaff*. In this case, rather than call it “an exception to the rule,” I would define it as the “rule (or set of rules) of an exception.” If it does not alter the essence, if it comes from a period that accepted some vocal freedom, if it does not affect the show’s flow, and if enriches the interpretation—should not the alteration be tolerated and considered as an integrating part that fits aesthetic standards? Probably, if a singer would assess the possible advantages and harm of every intervention to the musical score, we would have fewer but much more justified and artistically convincing alterations in the operas.

Keeping this in mind, once again, we return to the (in)famous high C from *Il Trovatore*. Apparently, it does not alter the essence: it is plausible in terms of harmony, it is at the end of the act, so it does not interrupt the development of the plot, it energizes the closure, and it is dramatically justifiable. We have two almost identical excerpts assessed differently by the same person—why? Without bothering Maestro Muti, we should consider one more element: the “traditionality” of such alteration. In the case of *La Traviata*, it is executed very often, but not always. Not singing the high note would probably disappoint some spectators, but it would not trigger more than that. The case of Manrico, as we have already amply discussed, is almost iconic. Some consider it the most important note of both his part and the whole opera. Thus, Muti, by fighting this very alteration, fights for the freedom of singers—a possibility to choose whether to sing a given note or not. The same freedom allows him to make his own agogic and dynamic interpretations, even if not in complete accord with the written score. Imagine just for a moment if tempi and dynamics one day became an objective value: every *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, or *Otello* with

the same dynamic plan and identical tempi. I doubt any spectator, musician, or scholar would be happy with such “objectivity.”

In fact, Muti's omission of the high C in *Il Trovatore* ignited a furious debate among opera lovers, singers, scholars, and journalists. Here, once again, we find polarized positions:

“Il do di petto? [The chest C?] *Il Trovatore* is a crippled opera without it.”

— Franco Corelli, Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, December 7th, 2000

Corelli's opinion confirms the exaggerated importance of a single note in an opera. At the same time, it describes his position and reflects his values as a singer. Franco Corelli was known for his brilliant top register, and of course, by omitting a top note, he would deprive himself of an opportunity to express his skills to the maximum.

One of Corelli's illustrious colleagues had a different view on this case:

“I agree with Muti if he took off the high note to be loyal to the Verdian score, but it makes me angry if he says that this note does not fit the cabaletta at all.”

— Carlo Bergonzi, *La Repubblica*, December 9th, 2000

Bergonzi, considered by many to be the Verdian tenor of the century, expresses a tension in his statement: on the one hand, fidelity to the score is essential, but at the same time, there should be reasoning and some flexibility in certain artistic choices. Knowing Bergonzi's art, one would say that singing or not singing the high C would not change much the perception of his interpretation since his strong side lay in skillful accentuation and approach to the literal text.

However, Muti, in his strong opposition to the “incrustations” is not alone: a vocal coach and conductor Neal Goren make a similar stand and also points out the case of Manrico as being iconic for the opera:

It should be noted that some of the traditional interpolated high notes often became the single highest priority when casting the opera, at the expense of the role as written by the composer. The most egregious example is the role of Manrico in *Il Trovatore*, which Verdi composed for dramatic tenor (as evinced by its low tessitura). It is rare for a dramatic tenor to possess a ringing high C, which is the note interpolated in Manrico's cabaletta “Di quella pira.” After the tradition took hold, opera houses were often guilty of casting the role on the basis of a tenor’s high C, generally at the expense of the role itself, which requires a more dramatic sound, to the detriment of the opera.¹⁴⁶

Thus, still today, they expect a solid high C from a tenor who sings Manrico. A solid high C in a role where the highest note written is a B-flat. This fact opens an argument about what kind of voice we could hear in the theatres, should the casting managers not consider the “traditional” interpolations, and how many singers remain unemployed because they fulfill “only” the composer’s will but not the public’s expectations.

At this point, one must justly question Verdi’s position on the high notes and similar alterations, as well as whether a high C was added in “Di quella pira” and how this matter was handled back then. Before we move to quotations and testimonies, it is worth emphasizing that Verdi’s primary concern always leaned toward the theatricality and meaningfulness of dynamic or musical choices. That is why there are instances in which the composer opts for an ending on a high note. The composer’s aesthetic views are widely discussed in Roger Freitas’ *Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy*. Verdi expressed concerns about “nuance over power,” “demanded mastery of

¹⁴⁶ Neal Goren, “Beyond the Aria: Artistic Self-Empowerment for the Classical Singer,” 77.

dynamic control,” and “assumed his singers would possess [...] flexibility, evenness, shading.”¹⁴⁷

It is believed that the first interpreter of Manrico, Carlo Baucardé, who started and finished his career as a baritone, was the first to interpolate the high C’s into the cabaletta. An anecdote from another tenor, Enrico Tamberlik, supports and shares Baucardé’s position.¹⁴⁸ According to Tamberlik, after successfully showcasing his high C, followed by the public’s acclaim, Verdi himself said: “Far be it from me to deny the public what it wants. Put in the high C if you like, provided it is a good one.”¹⁴⁹ In the light of present research, Verdi’s quote appears illuminating and solves a series of doubts regarding the possible alterations. A more detailed analysis is found in Will Crutchfield’s “Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonographic Evidence,” where he argues about the legitimacy of the high C and documents Verdi’s position (and reasoning behind it) on the transposition of the cabaletta in his letter to Tito Ricordi in April 1863.

A surer indication of Verdi’s attitude is found in his behavior when next he came to write for the apparent perpetrator of the crime, Enrico Tamberlik. The occasion was the premiere of *Forza* at St. Petersburg, and for Tamberlik Verdi composed another martial C-major cabaletta with chorus, this time writing in the high C himself. Furthermore, when he came to prepare the score for publication and other performances, he did exactly the practical thing so often condemned as an enormity in *[Il]Trovatore*: he transposed the cabaletta into Bb, not because the muses had urged

¹⁴⁷ Roger Freitas, *Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy*, 241.

¹⁴⁸ Enrico Tamberlik (or Tamberlick) (1820 -1889) was an Italian tenor, known for his powerful and extensive voice.

¹⁴⁹ Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, 126. Gosset is referring to Julian Budden’s *The Operas of Verdi: Volume 2*, 98-99, adding that it comes from a public lecture of Giovanni Martinelli (1885 – 1969, an Italian tenor, active at the Metropolitan of New York for 33 seasons in a row.)

another key sequence on him, but because “nobody will be able to sing what was written for Tamberlik.”¹⁵⁰

This testimony legitimates the transposition, making the role of Manrico accessible to a broader pool of singers. However, such an operation is to keep a high note at the end because of its dramatic impact. However, with all the previous considerations and reasonings, this note is not present in the score. Verdi could have added it in any second moment. He could have written in the high C as he did in *La Forza del Destino*. Does the fact that it is not written mean something in the modern world of opera? This brings us back to the problem of the implied obligatoriness of such alteration.

The “traditionalization” of such alteration without allowing for key transposition significantly restricts the pool of singers, thus making *Il Trovatore* less accessible in the theaters. A Wagnerian *heldentenor* or even a high baritone could aspire to perform Manrico as it is written, but the “tradition” ruthlessly clips their wings.

Considering Muti’s claim that the implied final resolution has to go downwards, let us look at the sources. Examining the scores of Verdi’s operas, one notices that closure on a high note is present already in his first opera, *Oberto il Conte di San Bonifacio*, in the protagonist’s cabaletta “Ma tu, superbo giovane,” which ends on a high F. Other examples can be found in Zamoro’s cabaletta “Risorto fra le tenebre” from *Alzira*, Egberto’s cabaletta “Oh gioia, inesprimibile” from *Aroldo*, the eponymous protagonist’s cabaletta “Oltre quel limite” from *Attila*, Rolando’s cabaletta “Ahi scellerate alme” from *La Battaglia di Legnano* and others.

¹⁵⁰ Will Crutchfield, “Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonographic Evidence,” 16.

The more Verdi shifted away from cabaletta as the formal convention, the more closures in the higher registers shifted to arias: for instance, in *Il Corsaro* (1848), three cabalettas close on a high note, whereas in *La Forza del Destino* (1862), five soloist pieces (a song, an aria, a cabaletta [the only one in the opera], an aria buffa, and a melodia) close in high register. This juxtaposition shows the formal development in Verdi's music and the composer's research of different sonorities as a means of dramatic expression.

Several other examples can be found in addition to *La Traviata*: at the end of Violetta's "Addio del passato"; in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, in which Renato, in his aria "Eri Tu," ends on a high F; Jago's monologue in *Otello*, and others. There are some instances of similar closure in early Verdi, too, such as Jacopo's prayer "Non maledirmi, o prode," Lucrezia's aria "Più non vive!.. L'innocente" from *I Due Foscari*, and Giovanna's romanza "O fatidica foresta" from *Giovanna d'Arco*. After briefly referencing the musical scores of Verdi's operas, I found at least 29 examples similar to those cited before. Considering the number of solo pieces in his 27 operas (roughly five pieces per opera, which equals 135), closure in the high register would probably constitute around 20% of the total. Thus, throughout all Verdi operas, the dominating tendency in closing arias and cabalettas remains the same, from high to low, "because so is life's path," recalling the words of Riccardo Muti.

The cabaletta itself is a form in which a variation should be legitimated. The secular practice of performing variations in the second round of cabalettas, originally rooted in Baroque opera, conventionally is a *carte blanche* so that a performer can showcase their strengths and skills, such as coloraturas, *messa di voce*, *picchiettato*, and other techniques. Instead, when it comes to Verdi, this variety of choices seems taboo, as seen in the interviews discussed in the previous chapter. The only commonly accepted variation is adding high

notes: Violetta and Alfredo in *La Traviata*, Manrico and Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, Il Duca in *Rigoletto*, Nabucco and Abigaille in *Nabucco*, and the cabalettas of many other characters bear this type of alteration. The problem arises when these pitch variations change from “accepted” to “required,” limiting artists in their expression and making them valued by one particular skill in these variations: high notes.

Shifts to the high register also negatively affect Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, where the tendency to drive the voices to the limits of their ranges not only creates additional vocal challenges, but also impacts the theatrical structure.



The opening bars of Rigoletto. The Curse Theme.

Before moving to the “traditional” alteration practices in this opera, it is crucial to recall probably the most important musical element in it: The Curse Theme. A historical fact emphasizes its importance: the first title for the opera was *La Maledizione di Saint-Vallier*, and the opera opens with this theme and returns to it many times, occasionally with slight variations.¹⁵¹ It is in C minor, and the note C itself in *Rigoletto* plays a symbolic and thematic role.

¹⁵¹ “If they could not retain Victor Hugo’s original title [*Le Roi s’amuse*], the opera should be called a *La Maledizione di Saint-Vallier* since the whole plot devolves on the working out that curse.” Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Volume 1*, 478.

Arguably, this theme has the strongest expressive significance in Verdi's entire production. It is persistent throughout the opera and evolves along with the dramatic progression. Riccardo Muti, speaking about it in his "Verdi. L'Italiano," articulates it accordingly:

Studying this opera thoroughly, I understood that this theme is developed musically, in a scientific manner. *Rigoletto* is practically structured on one note: a C, with which the opera begins and on which the theme develops. In this case, we could nearly define this opera as "epicentral." Every person that enters the circle of the curse enters in this note, which sponges up everything into itself. It is a circle of evil from which there is obviously no way out; it is a horrendous place where everything gets lost.¹⁵²

The curse theme starts to torment Rigoletto from the opening duet with Sparafucile, following the scene set in the ducal palace. In "Pari siamo," Rigoletto's first solo scene, the curse theme appears again two times, always in C minor. The first time, at the beginning of the arioso, it is identical to one of the duets, thus marking the inception of Rigoletto's obsession with the curse. Later, it evolves along with Rigoletto's growing anxiety: the rhythm becomes sharper and more mind-penetrative, thus showing the curse's growing power, afflicting the protagonist's lucidity and serenity.

¹⁵² Riccardo Muti, *Verdi. L'Italiano: Ovvero, in musica, le nostre radici*, 83.

Rigoletto (wrapped in his cloak).

(Quel vecchio ma - le - di - va - mi!)
(He laid a father's curse on me!) Solo

morendo

The Curse theme at the beginning of the duet between Rigoletto and Sparafucile.

R. Quel vec - chio ma - le - di - va - mi!
He laid a fa - ther's curse on me!

morendo

Clar. In

The Curse theme reappears at the beginning of Pari Siamo.

R. Quel vec - chio ma - le - di - va - mi!...
He laid a fa - ther's curse on me!

morendo

morendo

Evolved Curse theme at the end of the arioso.

The final bars of Rigoletto's introspective arioso are often altered by inserting a high G at the closure instead of a double-dotted half note on E and an eighth D on the word "follia." By doing so, three elements are compromised.

First, the high note is more potent by its nature. It drives the character out of his introspective dimension, controversially externalizing something he is saying to himself in

R. *Mi co-glie-rà sven-tu-ra?... Ah no! è fol-li-*
Is it an e-vil o-men? Ah no! that were fol-

Allegro vivo. (♩ = 132)
 (enters the courtyard)

R. *a!*
ly!
Wind & Str.

(Gilda comes from the house and throws herself into her father's arms.)

R.

Final bars of Pari Siamo

the middle of the night. Keeping in mind that a reminiscence of the Curse Theme appears a few bars before the point in question, dramatically, a foray into the high register in such a powerful way would signify or allude, at least, to the breaking of the curse itself.

Secondly, opting for a high G removes a harmonic tension. In the bar we are examining, there is only one element of orchestral intervention: a dominant chord, performed *pizzicato* in the strings. The dominant does not occur on the downbeat, as expected in strong closures, but

Rigoletto.

End of Act I.

Closing bars of the first act of Rigoletto.

on the third beat.¹⁵³ But there is more: it is an eighth note, almost inaudible, seemingly there only to represent a formal but not dramatic conclusion, leaving Rigoletto's torments suspended in the air. From a harmonic point of view, the long E is dissonant with this dominant harmony. Thus, a "traditional" substitution deprives Rigoletto of a means of expressing his psychological tension. Instead, this dissonant and subtle juxtaposition depicts an almost imperceptible and spine-tingling presage.

¹⁵³ In one of Verdi's autographed manuscripts, an eighth note on the second beat appears in the lower strings and on the third beat in the higher, which, however, does not alter the desired effect. Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, 66.

In moving from merely musical and dramatic grounds, a third complication arises: a well-executed high G, in most cases (also in my experience, both as an artist and as a listener), elicits an immediate reaction of approval from the public. As it happens often, the applause covers the abrupt change in musical development, which mirrors Rigoletto's effort to turn the page and forget the incident he dealt with earlier on. Thus, the contrasting theme that opens the following duet does not receive due attention.

Rigoletto.

Rigoletto, Act II

The Curse Theme appears again in the final bars of the first act: this time, it is expanded, burdened by despair and helplessness. Musically, one might feel an urgency to break the tonal lock of C-minor. Rigoletto, however, fails in this, not going beyond a high E-flat, harmonized in the minor mode. The closing on E-flat is quite unusual: Verdi stresses the failure to achieve closure by disregarding formal expectations in the melody, musically alluding to the fact that the curse is yet to be accomplished.

After insisting on the importance of this detail in *Rigoletto*, let's glimpse at its alterations. These few bars in Rigoletto's line constitute a response to Monterone's last words before being led to jail:

*Oh then, 'twas in vain in my anger I curs'd thee!
 No thunder from heav'n hath burst to strike thee.
 With pleasure triumphant thy days yet are crown'd.*

Monterone refers to the impunity of the Duke, triggering Rigoletto's rage and desire for revenge:

But 'twill not be long thus, th'avenger is nigh.

This phrase is also subjected to a "traditional" alteration: the last C often is substituted by a long E-flat, which serves as a preparatory dominant to a following A-flat, which initiates a subsequent duet between Rigoletto and Gilda. Furthermore, the semibreve rest with a fermata in these cases is often ignored.

Like the closure of the first act, closing on an E-flat in C-minor would create a feeling of suspense, implying a consequent development. In this case, ending on a C with a musical break creates an unexpected moment of stasis. Not only does this alteration ruin the meticulous thematic developmental design of the composer, but it also deprives listeners of a "calm-before-the-storm moment." A fermata over the rest is also an excellent opportunity to show an artist's acting skills and the character's shift from rage to the thirst for revenge.

Eventually, when the curse is accomplished, a more extreme alteration pattern emerges again: the very ending of the opera is read as a cadential conclusion by the unorthodox performers.

The score for the opera's conclusion has a fermata on the first high F-flat, followed by a punctuated rhythmic figuration, explicitly recalling the Curse Theme.

Because the curse has taken its toll, for the first time it is not in C-minor. Curiously, both in writing and aurally, it is "almost" in C-minor, seemingly showing Rigoletto's effort in returning to a time when the curse was yet to be realized. Previously, the Curse Theme bore the premonition and anxiety regarding the impending disgrace every time it appeared. Now, this having been accomplished, the C-minor key center is dissolved, remaining in Rigoletto's

part as a remembrance of unhappiness and pain, with the rhythmic and partially melodic pattern from the original theme. This passage closely resembles the closure of the first act. However, as noted earlier, in the first act it appears in C-minor and ends with the chordal third in the melody, which is unusual but, at the same time, suggests a continuation.

Here, Rigoletto must end on the tonic, thus affirming the fatal ending and death's triumph. Listening to the final page of the opera, one would conclude that it is written in C#-minor. Perhaps wanting to break the bond with the "cursed" C-minor even on paper, Verdi instead opted to use a non-existent D-flat minor and thus avoid a nominally close tonal relationship, the more enharmonically appropriate C-sharp minor. Possibly, it was a conscious choice, since slightly modifying the ascending chromatic scale (two bars before Rigoletto's last phrase) would not only suffice to modulate to a formally expected tonality. Still, it would also make the writing more accessible and less complex. With the loss of his daughter, "his cult, family, fatherland, universe," quoting a line from the duet of the first act, the figure of Rigoletto is deprived of the very sense of existence: he is left with nothing, cut out of the world—represented symbolically with a non-existent tonality. Curiously, *La Traviata*, written two years after *Rigoletto*, also ends in a non-existent D-flat minor.

G. *Allegro. (♩ = 84)*

rò... per voi pre-ghè...
wait, my fa-ther, for...

R. non mo-rir!.. È mor-ta!..
oh my child! Gil-dal mia Gil-dal! I've lost her!

Allegro. (♩ = 84)

Ah! la ma-le-di-zio
Ah! 'twas a father cursed

col canto
pp *ff*

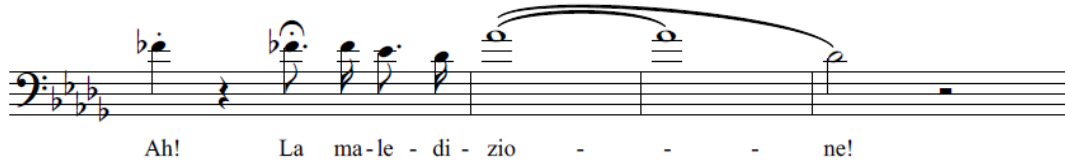
(Tears his hair, and falls swooning on the body of his child.)

ne!
me!

End of the Opera.

The last page of Rigoletto

Browsing through recordings from the past one hundred or so years, it is astonishing to discover how seldom this writing is respected. These final bars became subject to an alteration analogous to “Pari siamo.”



The “traditional” version with a high A-flat

By making this alteration, a singer attributes a major force to the character, which, in this case, is inappropriate: Rigoletto has lost, he is desperate and weak. With a foray to A-flat, he would reinforce the dominant sphere in a situation where the word “dominant” itself is ill-suited. Furthermore, as is shown, the dotted rhythmic pattern on the same note is also regularly altered. Nevertheless, this version of the finale is the most common in the recording history of *Rigoletto*: Lawrence Tibbett, Giuseppe Valdengo, Riccardo Stracciari, Tita Ruffo, and Tito Gobbi can serve as an example.¹⁵⁴

At this point, when a singer approaches the very end, he can afford to make a final effort and expend all remaining vocal and physical resources for the final high note. This is why this page has become a sort of field of battle and competition for baritones.

For instance, the alteration shown above was insufficient for many outstanding singers, such as Giuseppe Taddei, Aldo Protti, Cornell MacNeil, Leonard Warren, Leo Nucci, Robert Merrill,

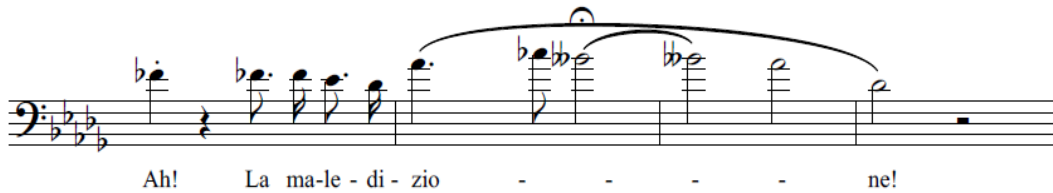
¹⁵⁴ Respectively: Metropolitan Opera, 12/28/1935; Palacio de las Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 6/22/1948; Teatro alla Scala (studio recording for “Columbia Records”), 1930; Milan (studio recording for Gramophone), 11/23/1908; Rome (Production of Excelsa Film), 1946. Gobbi, however, usually opted for the version that adhered to the original score, thus avoiding a foray into the high register (such as La Scala, 1955 and London, 1955).

and others. They made an “alteration to an alteration” by applying the following variant:



An alteration with a high B-double-flat

Eventually, another group of singers, including Sherill Milnes, George Petean, and Gerard Kim, opted for an alteration to an already altered alteration. This pun suggests a certain degree of humor, but the decomposition of the musical plot and tissue is rather tragic. With the following alteration, Rigoletto reaches a C-flat, which is enharmonically equivalent to the highest note in the part of the Duke, a high B.



An alteration with a high C-flat

Assuming that a powerful note in the high register has a major dramatic impact would explain such a vocal contention among singers, even if perhaps chiefly driven by a desire to exhibit vocal skills. If it is true that moving a voice to the extreme limits of its range can be perceived as a parallel to the growing dramatic expression, it is also true that this is not the only means of expression that fulfills such a mandate. Will a high note produce a greater dramatic effect than recalling the curse theme’s rhythmic figuration? How often do singers attempt the “traditional” ending with the confidence to satisfy expectations? In this case,

“traditions” should stand for an alternative solution rather than a desired, or worse, an obligatory solution.

To approach the next type of musical alteration and shift from *Rigoletto*, it is necessary to go back about ten years, so that the parallels and analogies between Verdi and his predecessors can be drawn with an awareness of cause and consequence. Additionally, it is essential to remember that singers employed in Verdi’s operas had been trained and made their careers on Rossini and Donizetti, thus reducing the distance often set between Verdi and the *bel canto* masters in terms of vocal technique and vocal weight. This argument will also be discussed later in this chapter.

For several years, Verdi composed contemporarily to Donizetti. In 1842, when Verdi composed *Nabucco*, Donizetti wrote his *Linda di Chamounix*; in 1843, Donizetti’s masterpiece *Don Pasquale* saw the light; meanwhile, a year later, Verdi produced *Ernani* and *I Due Foscari*. In addition, let us remember that Rossini, who did not compose opera anymore, passed away in 1868, when Verdi was already a mature and widely-renowned composer (considering that his *Don Carlos* premiered in 1867). Drawing these parallels helps us understand how much Verdi was aligned with the *bel canto* tradition and style on the one hand and, on the other, continuous research into theatricality and especially the text’s dramatic expression. There is a more detailed analysis of Verdi’s artistic bond with his predecessors, found in *Storia dell’opera Italiana* by Rodolfo Celletti, with a close analysis into every type of voice (i.e., bass, baritone, tenor, mezzo-soprano etc.).¹⁵⁵ *Bel canto* stands for “beautiful singing,” which places Verdi outside it conceptually. In his letters, there are

¹⁵⁵ Rodolfo Celletti, *Storia dell’opera Italiana*, Vol. 2, 473 – 478.

numerous instances where the composer states how little he cares about the voice and the singing itself. At the same time, his main concern was always the “accent,” expression, and dramatic sense of the work carried by the music.

Especially in his early years, Verdi focused more on beautiful melodic lines and smooth *legato* phrasing, which emphasizes the beauty of the voice, as well as *cadenzas*. Throughout these years, these elements evolved significantly in his art: melody became more elaborate and imbued with a dramatic sense through its development. The term “melody” itself, applied to the later Verdi, sounds reductive and inconsistent. While in Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, the melody represents a statement, Verdi embeds melody within the development and character evolution, bending the musical growth to the requirements of the word’s dramatical function. The smooth *legato* and the beauty of the voice, which are matters of aesthetic assessment and not related to writing alterations, will be discussed later.

Verdi’s shift towards a more theatrical expression goes hand in hand with the increasing interpretative and technical challenges for performers. In the most conventional terms, many opera singers would agree that Verdi is technically more difficult to sing than Donizetti and generally requires a deeper insight into the characters. Stating “more difficult” and “requires a deeper insight” implies a common scale for both composers, on the one hand, and a different position of each composer on this scale, on the other.¹⁵⁶

Discussion about Verdi’s strong bond with *bel canto* serves as a footing for the following consideration regarding alterations in Verdian scores: the execution of typical *bel canto* features such as trills and coloraturas. Performing both *bel canto* and Verdi involves trills and

¹⁵⁶ Rodolfo Celletti, *Storia dell’opera Italiana, Vol. 2*, 478.

coloraturas; nevertheless, the practical execution of these elements differs significantly in each context.

Examining the score of Azucena's cavatina "Stride la vampa" from *Il Trovatore*, listeners and singers might be surprised by how this excerpt abounds in trills and dynamic variations. Stereotypically, Azucena's role is entrusted to a powerful, dark, and heavy mezzo-soprano, as *Il Trovatore* is "traditionally" considered one of Verdi's most dramatic operas. Nevertheless, leaving aside the stereotypes, the writing presents a simple and bare character. The accompaniment itself would rather recall Bellini and Donizetti, but the vocal line, with its numerous instructions by the composer, brings the music back to its Verdian character. Throughout most of the piece, the *pianissimo* and dozens of trills are the core elements that create a contrasting atmosphere and dreamy effect in Azucena's narration. However, these features are often treated with little attention, if not wholly ignored, to create space for a vocal show-off: the theatricality in writing is substituted by often exuberant, expressionistic acting.

As the word embellishment itself implies, in *bel canto*, a fioritura, trill, or coloratura usually renders a determined note or passage more attractive and appealing. In Verdi, embellishments transcend their nominal function, acquiring a precise and dramatically significant role. The following statement from a book on Verdi's vocal expression, written by Giancarlo Landini and Marco Gilardone, might appear provocative to many. It points out a significant difference between what we are used to hearing in the theaters and the abundance of regularly overlooked expressive marks and instructions by the composer:

Azucena's cavatina "Stride la vampa" had not been completely defined, at least from the invention of the disc till nowadays, if not by the one who can be considered the most excellent interpreter of Rossinian and baroque vocality: Marilyn Horne, who was the first to execute the page as Verdi wrote it, with trills and all the required

modulations. Verdian vocality requests trills, which, in turn, are demanded by dramaturgy, and given that the state of trance Azucena is experiencing is realized through the effect of those trills. Suppose we want to go further into this problem's detail. In that case, we will notice that Verdi's dramatic result, represented by indications of the character's psychological state, is obtained from Verdian vocal accent in terms rooted directly in *bel canto*. However, it is not used in a new context, compared to *bel canto* from which it derives. Due to its adaptability to a different linguistic codex, contrasting to the one of its proveniences, it rises the effect we are aware of.¹⁵⁷

Alongside trills, coloratura passages are regularly executed without due precision and accuracy and often are flattened or wholly ignored. This phenomenon regards the roles of so-called *soprano drammatico d'agilità* particularly, such as Abigaille in *Nabucco* and Odabella in *Attila*. The problem, however, is also rooted in the field of vocal aesthetics.

“Traditionally,” for such roles, directors typically cast big, dark, and powerful voices, which inherently do not usually have coloraturas as a strength.

The cadenza was the third *bel canto* element used by Verdi, but then later cast aside in his mature operas. This cameo of *bel canto* was present in every work until the first “cadenza-free” opera, *Aida*, in 1871. We can argue about cadential passages or cadential characters that resemble cadenzas or have similar functions. However, the cadenza in its initial form and function has by this time been left behind. Taking for granted that a cadenza, by nature, is a passage subject to alterations and variations depending on the performer's skills and strengths, in Verdi, more than in the music of his predecessors, a cadenza had nearly lost its function.

Let us take as an example the cadenza in Di Luna's aria from *Il Trovatore*:

¹⁵⁷ Giancarlo Landini, and Marco Gilardone, *Dal labbro il canto: il linguaggio vocale delle opere di Verdi*, 21.



Cadenza at the end of Di Luna's aria

Although it is written in the score, average operagoers would hardly be familiar with this cadenza. Instead, they would expect a “traditional” cadenza, which presents a controversy in the name itself. A singer in a cadenza is expected to showcase their individual skills and



A “traditional” cadenza of the same aria

strengths. In this case, the term “traditional,” which indicates a pattern or a set of patterns, limits them in such expression, thus annihilating the very function of the moment.

Unfortunately, a cadenza is often treated as an area of absolute freedom, thus forgetting the crucial necessity of keeping it bound to its main part, which in this case is the aria. Going through the aria that precedes the cadenza, a singer has an excellent opportunity to demonstrate their high G. Why, a few bars later, must one reintroduce the same feature of their skills? Why, even today, is the original cadenza—which allows the performer to show fluency in sound and mastery of scales, leaps, and the low register (the low A in cadenza

would be the entire role's lowest note)¹⁵⁸—substituted by the ostentation of showcasing their high register, twice on the same page?¹⁵⁹ Moreover, in most instances, performers' idling on the last three notes (marked with fermatas on purpose in an attempt to reflect the actual performing practice) often results in an aimless disruption of the music's developmental flow, without showcasing any particular vocal feature.

Sper-da il sole d'un suo sguar-do, Ah! La tem-pes - ta!

La tem-pes - ta del mio cor.

A cadenza with a high A.

The limited evolution of such cadenzas presents a curious controversy: some variations could be made. However, the “traditional” cadenza is used as a starting pattern, not the original one. In a way, this alteration of an already altered cadenza makes more sense: a singer with a brilliant upper register might want to go higher than an already challenging G to elicit the public’s approval. This variation, however, brings us back to the same observation: the “tradition,” in most cases, stands for high notes.

Arguably, the most bizarre “tradition” of Verdian opera is the one of non-alteration, addressed in interviews with collaborative pianists in the previous chapter, which concerns the repetition of cabalettas. All three pointed out how seldomly and without particular

¹⁵⁸ In the finale of the second act, there is a low A-flat in the Count’s part. However, it does not give an opportunity for showcasing it, because it is just a quarter note. Further, it is synchronized with five other soloists and the choir.

¹⁵⁹ E.g., Leonard Warren (Recording for RCA Victor, 1955); Ettore Bastianini (Tokyo, 1963); Cornell McNeil (Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, 8/11/1963); Piero Cappuccilli (Wiener Staatsoper, 5/1/1978.)

success was the variation in the second round of cabaletta executed. Again, considering the composer's strong bond with *bel canto* aesthetics, where a repetition implied a *carte blanche* for the performer, this is an opportunity to showcase their mastery and skills. However, variations in Verdian cabaletta have remained taboo for over a hundred years. This fact brings light to a curious paradox: in Verdi, one can modify the musical text where it is not ethically correct; however, it does not occur where the composer left space for such alterations.

Formal Alterations

Today, making a cut in a score represents a challenge. Since it has become less acceptable to both artists and the public, this alteration is often seen as a shortcut to avoid specific technical difficulties for singers or theatrical lulls for directors. By theatrical lulls, I mean sections of an opera where nothing relevant happens and which can be omitted without noticeably affecting the intelligibility of the plot. The aesthetic value of preserving musical integrity is also a relatively recent phenomenon, developed to offer a “cleaner” and more complete version of an opera by more rigorously following the written score.¹⁶⁰ Many scholars, such as Philip Gossett in *Divas and Scholars* and William Rothstein in *The Musical Language of Italian Opera, 1813-1859*, have dedicated their attention to operatic cuts, their function, and the possible complications they entail.

In the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth, the practice of cutting “undesirable” sections was considered natural and could closely affect any passage of an opera. Depending on the situation and an artist's needs, these cuts could be decided and approved on the spot.

¹⁶⁰ The first critical edition of a Verdi opera, *Rigoletto*, edited by Martin Chusid, was published in 1983.

Some significant and curious testimonies come from the chronicles of Verdi's operas in Parma premieres.

It might seem surprising, but cuts were often made for practical reasons, such as an artist's presence of medical conditions or absence. Being a full-time professional musician in the eighteenth century was challenging. In many cases, musicians played in an orchestra or sang in the choir as a secondary job, whereas their primary job was more well remunerated and often not related to music. Even today, due to the seasonality of the job, the choristers of Regio (or "choir artists" as they are now called, complying with new standards) are employed for no more than eight to nine months out of the year. Among them are mail carriers, nurses, bed and breakfast managers, schoolteachers, and people from many other professions. Those who do not have a primary job struggle year after year to find employment in summer festivals, such as Arena di Verona or Macerata Opera Festival. Today, these choir artists regularly audition in attempts to obtain permanent, full-time jobs in the theaters that can guarantee year-round employment, such as La Scala, San Carlo, Carlo Felice, Comunale di Bologna, and others.

Obviously, smaller theaters could not demand much from their musicians and choir artists, because their wages were not comparable to those of bigger theaters. At the same time, for musicians, it offered an excellent opportunity to get some extra income. Of course, the leading orchestral musicians were more skilled (and paid more as a result) and bore heavier burdens of responsibility. This is why it was rarely possible to find substitutes for skilled musicians who were unable to perform.

“May 10th [1843], the Zaccaria’s prayer in the second act was omitted because the first cello Carlo Curti got sick.”¹⁶¹ Today, it would be incomprehensible to cut the principal aria of one of an opera’s protagonists, simply because of a problem in the orchestra. Back then, it did not elicit any clamor. The public was used to such cuts and improbable additions: the evening could start with an opera written by one composer and end with a ballet by a different one. Often, the public had the power to change the night's program. Instead of a new or unconvincing opera, they could demand (often with success) that the opera was substituted with another one on the spot. The orchestra was a sort of expensive jukebox at that time.

Substitutions and interpolations, however, resulted from an artistic choice by a conductor or a singer. There are testimonies of the combination of both kinds of alteration: a conductor would make cuts and additions to an opera; meanwhile, if the public disagreed with these choices, they would, in turn, demand immediate substitutions. Speaking of the first appearances of Verdi’s *Attila* at Regio in 1846, Minardi and Martini state that on January 26th, February 13th, and February 14th, the conductor Giuseppe Alinovi, who replaced the sick De Giovanni, conducted only the prologue. On February 14th, he added, however, the last three acts of *Ernani* to it. Nevertheless, the public protested and asked for Mercadante’s *Il Bravo*.¹⁶²

In a *Rigoletto*, during the 1852-53 season, Paolo Samengo’s ballet scene “Il Conte Pini” was added. Considered “ugly,” it was substituted by “Il Saltimbanco,” written by Giovanni Casati. In the same production, on January 23rd, the tenor Bernardo Massimiliani, following the advice of a physician, skipped the second act’s aria, “Parmi veder le lagrime.” On March

¹⁶¹ Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 49.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 112.

5th, the performer of Gilda, Luigia Bendazzi, in whose honor was the performance, interpolated an aria “Vieni, t’affretta!” from *Macbeth*.¹⁶³

These interpolations and cuts were common in any nineteenth-century Italian opera theater. Riccardo Muti brought up an interesting example that regards the so-called “symbol” of *Il Trovatore*: Manrico’s cabaletta “Di quella pira,” (whose alterations have already been discussed):

In a playbill of *Il Trovatore* at La Scala in 1854, which followed the premiere in Rome, I read the program of one of the performances, a potpourri of many things, which was typical for those times: the first act was followed by a ballet scene, then the second act, and various divertissements after it. The third act (the one with the cabaletta “Di quella pira l’orrendo foco”) was not performed at all, which means that back then, it was not a reference point of *Il Trovatore*.¹⁶⁴

The above examples of formal alterations in Verdi’s operas show that rigor and respect for musical integrity were values still to be adopted. However, these examples are rather isolated, one-time incidents or events. In contrast, the twentieth century marked a persistent tendency for conscious and widespread cuts and alterations, which then became “traditional,” i.e., acceptable and expected.

As the collaborative pianists I interviewed stressed several times, and according to the recordings and testimonies from the past century’s stagings of Verdi’s operas at Regio, multiple excerpts and even significant portions of operas were deliberately cut. Different needs motivated such operations: a cabaletta could be cut because it was considered not beautiful enough, e.g., Germont’s cabaletta “No, non udrai rimproveri” or Alfredo’s “O mio rimorso,” both from *La Traviata*. Another cabaletta, “Tu vedrai che amore in terra,” sung by

¹⁶³ Gian Paolo Minardi and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 158-159.

¹⁶⁴ Riccardo Muti, *Verdi. L’Italiano: Ovvero, in musica, le nostre radici*, 35.

Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, is regularly omitted today because of its particular technical difficulty. A more serious problem arises in *Don Carlo* due to its (comparably) excessive length: this opera is frequently subject to the cut of entire scenes, such as the scene of Fontainebleau in Act I.

It may be surprising to us today that making cuts and formal modifications was seen as natural and obvious in the past. In the following testimony of William Weaver, we get a glimpse of the aesthetic motivations and power dynamics in the operatic world in the middle of the twentieth century:

But we met finally on one other occasion. The Chicago Lyric Opera, with the support of some Chicago patrons, sponsored an international conference of Verdi studies, at which I and many musicologist friends were invited to speak. And Callas, who was to be in the city at the time, agreed to participate in a roundtable discussion of Verdi one afternoon. The roundtable consisted of the late Mario Medici, head of the Verdi Institute in Parma (who spoke no English), Callas, and me. In effect, I was to be the moderator.

On the day of the event Carol Fox, dynamic head of the Lyric Opera, invited me to lunch with Callas, Di Stefano, and Medici. It was a lighthearted occasion. The two singers were resting before another leg of their tour (I believe it meant a trip to Japan). [...]

The most significant question concerned cuts in Verdi's operas. Asked to comment on them - to an audience largely of serious scholars, musical purists - Callas said blithely, "Oh, they don't cut nearly enough!" One scholar wanted an example; her reply was prompt: "Why, the baritone aria in *Traviata*. It's so boring, and it goes on and on." It was noticed that she didn't suggest any reduction of Verdi's soprano parts. To conclude, she said, "I nearly died when I read how some scholars had found even more music for *Don Carlos*. The opera was far too long already."

I looked at the front row of the little theater and saw the three scholars chiefly responsible for the addition of another half hour of music to *Don Carlos*: Ursula Gunther, David Rosen, and Andrew Porter. Three tactfully blank faces.

I felt that, for once, Verdi needed a spokesman, so I said hesitantly: "Mme. Callas, if I may disagree with you ..."

"You have a right to disagree with me, Mr. Weaver," she said with imperious generosity.

I couldn't help myself. "I know I have the right," I said curtly; "I'm not sure I have the nerve."¹⁶⁵

Back then, who would dare make war with Callas? This power was often interpreted as competence, and (non-)artistic decisions of opera stars were unquestionable. Nonetheless, let us imagine Callas taking the opposite stand: considering her grandeur and influence in the opera world, perhaps the phenomenon of performing operas in their entirety would have occurred much sooner. However, returning to reality, Callas perfectly represented her time and customs, when the opera world was singer-centered.

The artists of the past century could make cuts and alterations arbitrarily, depending on the situation and the venue. For instance, on October 4th, 1963, at The Chicago Lyric Opera, Tito Gobbi, one of the most prominent Italian baritones, was performing the title role in Verdi's *Nabucco*. Nabucco's principal scene is the fourth act's recitativo, aria, and cabaletta "Son pur queste mie membra... Dio di Giuda... O prodi miei". The aria "Dio di Giuda" is structured as an ABA ternary form, where the B part is a short foray into an F minor key area that contrasts with the F major key of the A parts. Not only did Gobbi cut the B section entirely, depriving the scene of musical contrast, but he also transposed the aria a half-step down. Predictably, the consequent cabaletta underwent substantial cuts too (though remaining in the original key, A-flat major). Truth be told, on other occasions, such as a performance at La Scala in 1955 or the studio recording from Vienna in 1965, Gobbi was more faithful to the original writing, singing the aria in the original key without cutting the middle section. Nonetheless, in all these recordings, a sizeable cut to the cabaletta was still made.

¹⁶⁵ William Weaver, "Remembering Callas. Some Confessions of a Fan," 497-498.

In this portion of the chapter, the cuts from ballet scenes have not been considered, since it would involve a broader consideration of French grand opéra customs and their (in)adaptability in the Italian context, which has already been the subject of scholarly research, such as Knud Arne Jurgensen's *The Verdi Ballets* (1995) and "Grand Opera and the Decline of Ballet in the later Nineteenth Century: A Discursive Essay" (2015), by José Sasportes. Verdi's *Aida* stands out as an exception, whereas Italian versions of *Don Carlos* inevitably derive from the French original. Three short excerpts from studies dealing with this matter provide an idea about the uneasy role of ballet in Italian opera:

It took some time for the Italian theatres to submit to grand opera, but when, in 1871, Verdi voluntarily accepted this model, for *Aida*, the last defenses collapsed, because his unassailable prestige and authority made the law, and all subsequent Italian composers then turned their creative attentions to opera-balli. Previously, Verdi might very well have taken a different view, agreeing with the following criticism of the ballet *La Pelegrina* in *Don Carlo* at La Scala in 1867:

"To my mind this subjection to the demands of the grand opera should be the last one, since we, the Italians, assume a logical position when we invariably rebel at this kind of French hybridism that is seen in the opera-ballo."¹⁶⁶

As long as this position reflected the general opinion, independent ballets were safe, but once Verdi himself adopted the formula, real dangers arose.

The three dances composed for *Aida* in 1871 occupy a special place among Verdi's ballets in that they represent a deliberate artistic choice on the composer's part. That year it would seem that Verdi had reached the conclusion that a ballet in the form of minor separate character dances could provide a useful dramaturgical addition to his opera while a full-length ballet divertissement en bloc after the French tradition would only halt the progress of action and interrupt the dramatic flow.¹⁶⁷

By retaining the divertissements in imported opera-balli, Verdi no longer needed to concern himself with free-standing ballets, which threatened to steal some of his thunder. When he became sufficiently powerful, Verdi altogether forbade the

¹⁶⁶ Corinno Mariotti, quoted in Marcello Conati, "Ballabili nei 'Vespri.' Con alcune osservazioni sul Verdi e la musica popolare," 27.

¹⁶⁷ Knud Arne Jurgensen, *The Verdi Ballets*, 12.

performance of ballets with his operas, except in the form of divertissements integral to them.¹⁶⁸

Summarizing this discussion about formal alterations, it is necessary to recognize how much the attitude towards integrity has changed over time: today, cutting a cabaletta or a portion of a singer's part does not pass unobserved and is not always tolerated. As for ballet, since it belongs to a different artistic field, there is a certain, perhaps excessive, allowance.

Non-Musical Interpolations and Interpretations

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new tendency manifested in opera: non-musical interventions and additions were introduced. In previous pages, much has been written scrutinizing the alteration of the musical text. In these cases, the text was modified with an "alternative" passage or melody, if not completely omitted. Now I will consider instances in which singers and sometimes composers themselves have overstepped the merely musical frontier, looking for new means of expression. The idea itself is riveting: if a protagonist in an opera is happy or excited, why could not he or she laugh, scream if desperate, cough if sick, or even speak instead of singing? Often, beyond these practices, there is a consolidated performance "tradition" that is not supported by the Verdi's indications or, at least, by his conscious "non-intervention" (see how little he cared about the high C in "La Pira" in *Il Trovatore*). Some cases, however, go beyond an assessment of stylistic or historical coherence and present a singular juxtaposition: Verdi *vs.* Verdi. These are controversial examples where, on the one hand, we have letters from Verdi in which he

¹⁶⁸ John Rosselli, "Sull'ali dorate. Il mondo musicale italiano dell'Ottocento," 111. Rosselli complains that in the multi-volume work *Storia d'Italia*, published by Einaudi, no reference is made in the volume about nineteenth century culture to Rossini or Verdi; but in his own book on the same period, ballet merits only a brief, dismissive mention (61-62), as if dance were not an intrinsic part of the operatic scene in Italy.

condemns such interventions in one opera and, on the other hand, examples of him giving dispensations for this kind of addition in another opera. Curiously, this is not reflected in the score.

An early and simple example is Lady Macbeth's letter scene in *Macbeth* (1847), "Nel dì della vittoria io le incontrai," where the interpreter should read and not sing the letter. Verdi wanted to achieve a realistic effect; he cared very little about the voice in this instance (the vocality of Lady Macbeth will be discussed later), and a foray into prose was a wise move in an attempt to evade the musical texture. Curiously, this has led singers to apply the same treatment to another letter – "Teneste la promessa," from *La Traviata* (1853). However, the composer wrote a vocal line in this instance, suggesting declamatory singing, not reading. Knowing Verdi's intransigence, it is improbable that his choice was casual or not carefully considered.

The following story exemplifies how solid and long-lasting an urban legend can be: a quite amusing example of a non-musical alteration is found on the first page of the closing concertato in the first act of *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1858), "È scherzo od è follia," where the tenor, Riccardo, having heard the prophecy, is making fun and joking about it:

Riccardo: It's a joke or it's madness
Which from that lip comes out
But how to laugh
Their credulity!

While there is no such direct indication, nor any possible similar suggestion in the score, in a recording of Columbia Electric in 1926, Alessandro Bonci, a renowned Italian tenor, "embellished" this passage by filling the breaks between notes with laughter and giggling. A

legend about the origin of this intervention, attributed to Bonci, is still alive. In 2018, in a press conference dedicated to the production of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, soprano Raffaella Battistini stated:

Our tenor Alessandro Bonci made it [the opera] famous with laughter, in the first act, when performing Riccardo in front of Giuseppe Verdi, who attended the show. The author was so enthusiastic to say that this modification was a positive twist for the opera and thanked the singer. This event elicited such clamor that all the protagonists repeated similar laughter.¹⁶⁹

The passage below, by Italian musical critic Elvio Giudici, demystifies two myths by making reference to Verdi's letter to the French music critic and publisher Léon Escudier:

Naturally, Verdi was vice versa, inflexible in rising up against ill-tasted showcasing, frequent then as unfortunately still today. Writing to Léon Escudier regarding the preparation of the Paris premiere of *Macbeth*, he says: "Here we are at the *Sleepwalking scene*, which is always the high point of the opera. [...] Ristori¹⁷⁰ made a rattling noise, a death-rattle. In music this must not and cannot be done; just as one should not cough in the last act of *Traviata* or laugh in the "E' scherzo od e' follia" of *Un Ballo in Maschera*.¹⁷¹

Personally, I have always attributed chief importance to this page: it displays how clear was Verdi's refusal of the "ameliorative" interventions that abounded in the so-called performance tradition, as despicable as ineradicable. Studies of Arnaldo Marchetti and Peter Southwell-Sander made a precious contribution to this matter: they, respectively, in 1973 and 1978, demonstrated the falsity of the excessively-quoted letter that Verdi was to have written to Alessandro Bonci, the interpreter of Riccardo in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, congratulating for the wretched invention of introducing laughing and giggling in the vocal line of "È scherzo od è follia" (which contradicts the comfortable oblivion of the letter to Escudier, which, in turn, is authentic, and contains the passage mentioned above).¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Pietro Pasini, "Un Ballo in Maschera," 19 April 2018, <https://www.romagnauno.it/cesena/un-ballo-in-maschera/>. Battistini is from Cesena, where Bonci was born; Cesena's opera theater is named after Bonci.

¹⁷⁰ Adelaide Ristori (1822-1906) was a prominent Italian actress, famous for her interpretation of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth.

¹⁷¹ English translation of the letter from Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, 324.

¹⁷² Elvio Giudici, "Il teatro di Verdi in scena e in DVD," XXII-XXIII.

The letter quoted above not only dismantles Bonci's legend but also deprives him of the authorship of this questionable invention: Verdi was already talking about giggling in *Un Ballo in Maschera* already in 1864-1865; Bonci was only born in 1870.

To the joy of scholars and philologists, Bonci's invention seems to have been almost completely forgotten in the last decades. As for laughter in Verdi, the first example that comes to the mind of an opera lover is undoubtedly the finale of Jago's monologue "Credo" in *Otello*. After the last line, "Heaven is an old tale!" a baritone "traditionally" laughs openly and loudly, showing his contempt towards everything sacred to a human being. However, in the score, no markings suggest such an action. Nevertheless, listening to the 1947 recording of "Credo" by Giuseppe Valdengo and conducted by Arturo Toscanini, one finds this demonic and arguably excessive outburst anyway.¹⁷³ Toscanini, an advocate of Verdi's art, worked alongside Verdi himself. Why would Toscanini, whose performances were like the NBC performances in their freedom from the singers' "idiomatic" distortions that Verdi fought against all his life, allow such liberty in the opera of a mature Verdi?

If we do not question Toscanini's artistic integrity and consider that he was playing in the orchestra at *Otello's* premiere, we might suppose that this laughter was present already in the first place. In fact, the answer to this conundrum can be found in the production practice of opera staging, from a time when the figure of the stage director did not exist yet. A manual with technical details and instructions was produced when working on a new opera, often supervised by the conductor and composer. This document, called "Disposizioni Sceniche" ["Stage Instructions"], was a set of guidelines designed to aid in subsequent settings of an

¹⁷³ Giuseppe Valdengo (1914-2007) was an Italian baritone. He made his operatic debut in 1936 at Regio di Parma and was Toscanini's favorite baritone.

opera. In the case of *Otello*, it was also a commercial product: Verdi's editor, Giulio Ricordi, lent the opera's staging manual alongside the orchestral parts.¹⁷⁴

Famously, Verdi was present at the rehearsals of *Otello* and at its premiere in 1887. This means that all the stage directions were approved by the Maestro himself, thus ascribing to them an aura of sacredness. Stage directions for *Otello* show that Jago laughs after the final line of his "Credo," therefore, the closing laugh contradicts Verdi's score but simultaneously conforms to his stage directions.

Nevertheless, the Toscanini case raises a question: does a conductor have to be familiar with such documents? Why would they not limit their focus to the score or materials pertaining to the music? I could not find evidence that Toscanini considered the "Disposizioni" to be supportive material. However, Toscanini played the second cello at La Scala in the premiere of *Otello*, where Verdi was present. Perhaps, knowing that every detail of the show had to pass the composer's "censorship," Toscanini rightly identified Verdi's will behind Jago's laughter. This is not the only contradiction between the musical score and the "Disposizioni Sceniche": James Hepokoski has written a critical study that analyzes incongruencies that arise when comparing these two sources.¹⁷⁵

Making a series of simplistic assumptions might incline us to consider the "Disposizioni Sceniche" of a lesser and more subjective value than the musical score:

What should we do if "Disposizioni" indicates that a character enters from the left side, accompanied by four extras, but there is not enough space for them to enter from that specific

¹⁷⁴ James A. Hepokoski, "The Disposizione Scenica for Verdi's *Otello*: A Critical Study," 5. <https://jameshepokoski.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1986-The-Disposizione-Scenica-for-Verdis-Otello-A-Critical-Study-English-original-book-published-only-in-Italian.pdf>

¹⁷⁵ James A. Hepokoski, "The Disposizione Scenica in Verdi's *Otello*: A Critical Study."

side in a given theater? Or if they do not have enough financial resources to afford extras? How serious is the transgression if a performer does not consider the suggested singing positions? Are we supposed to recreate the same costuming in every new production?

In treating the “Disposizioni” like a suggestion, not like a law, the margin for subjectivity grows significantly, giving space to individual means of expression. There is no direct account about who, when, and why the note about Jago’s laughter was added. Is it possible that the first performer of Jago, Victor Maurel, took the liberty to make this addition and convince Verdi, who was at the rehearsals. Would any singer convince the Maestro of such an arduous undertaking? Finally, recalling an observation made by Hepokoski, three people had the power to add any additional indication to the score: Verdi, Boito, and Ricordi (to a lesser extent). None of these are responsible, thus allowing us to deduce that the “Disposizioni” was of practical and not critical value.

Setting aside the practicality of the matter, another question arises: should we only refer to the printed score that is authorized by the composer to be the final source, or should the additional statements and considerations of Verdi that are not present in the score also be considered as reflections of the composer’s will?

The fact that we acknowledge such tension today suggests that, fortunately, the research and efforts to “decontaminate” the past music have reached a level that was not imaginable forty or so years ago. The verb “decontaminate” does not necessarily imply that an artist should discard everything that is not “original.” Instead, it suggests a developed awareness of what was written and what was added later in order to arrive at a clearer image of the margins and interpretive options available in the past and, possibly, the reasoning behind those interpretive decisions.

Considerations on Vocality and Sonority

There is no single and infallible position when it comes to casting or assessing vocal qualities in a singer when dealing with Verdi operas. However, we have testimonies and facts about the singers of the nineteenth century, the productions, orchestral settings, etc., which do not suggest any significant accommodations for Verdi's operas, relative to the mainstream repertoire requirements of the time. In other words, a singer performing a Verdi opera also sang Donizetti, Rossini, and Bellini, spanning pretty much all of the early nineteenth century repertoire. There was no clear expectation from singers regarding tone or volume as the singers were somewhat "universal," if they fit the technical parameters (such as range and agility) and demonstrated sufficient dramatic connection to the character.

On the other hand, in contrast to these historical motivations and reasonings, there is a strong tension of the stereotype of *Voce Verdiana*, or the Verdian voice, a matter we touched on briefly in previous chapters. Although this term is now rarely used among music historians, scholars, and musicians, it still is profoundly rooted and has a tangible value on the other side of the stage: the expectation of hearing in Verdi, a dark, massive voice with the impressive top register, is still something it is hard to contest with argumentation or historical insights.

Yet, it is essential for singers to be aware of their artistic choices when approaching specific operatic roles and in ways not limited to voice alone. Historical awareness offers a reliable tool for tackling Verdi, especially when a performer's voice does not fit the standards of the Verdian voice.

In browsing through Verdi's letters and the testimonies of his contemporaries to address the question "What kind of voice did Verdi want for his operas?", we would find a simple answer: he did not care about the voice that much. Instead, he was sometimes obsessed with

the performer's acting and interpretative skills, which are crucial for an appropriately deep reading of Verdi's score.

An example of a nearly anti-vocal vision of a character says a lot about the composer's concern with conveying theatricality. Verdi's position appears extreme in one of his most quoted statements regarding the figure of Lady Macbeth; in a letter to librettist Salvatore Cammarano dated 23 November 1848, the composer complained:

Tadolini¹⁷⁶ has a beautiful and attractive appearance; and I would like Lady Macbeth to be ugly and evil. Tadolini sings to perfection; and I would like the Lady not to sing. Tadolini has a stupendous voice, clear, limpid, powerful; and I would like the Lady to have a harsh, stifled, and hollow voice. Tadolini's voice has an angelical quality; I would like the Lady to have a diabolical quality.¹⁷⁷

Let us reflect a moment on the role of Lady Macbeth and consider the matter from different perspectives: besides the composer's idea, which we know now, what kind of voice was actually employed for this part, which today is considered an extremely challenging role? The second question is a logical consequence of the previous one: what kind of voice do they expect today from Verdi's Lady Macbeth?

As we talk about expectations, we will unavoidably stumble into categorization. Today, many qualities and voice characteristics seem to be implied and evident in reference to a specific role or repertoire. If we talk about a Wagnerian tenor protagonist, we imagine a powerful, dark voice that does not have to have extremely high notes—a solid high B-flat would suffice. The role of Jago in Verdi's *Otello* would also require a dark, heavy, and powerful voice with a solid top register. In *Nabucco*, a singer dealing with the role of

¹⁷⁶ Eugenia Tadolini (1809 – 1872) was an Italian operatic soprano, who created several roles in Donizetti's operas as well as Verdi's *Alzira*.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Carlo Vellutini, "Adina par excellence," 8.

Abigaille should also have considerable vocal weight and a brilliant top. In contrast, when approaching Gilda in *Rigoletto* or the part of Violetta in *La Traviata*, a soprano is expected to have a bright, light, and flexible voice. Provocatively, by saying “we imagine,” I point out the stereotypes reflected in operatic culture. Stereotypes that could (and probably should) be ignored by music historians and scholars since they usually represent the “consumers” of art and not the producers—the artists or composers. However, it would be naïve to forget that overlooking these stereotypes and expectations could be risky and elicit a controversial (and undesired) response.

Today, to contrast the stereotypes, we have plenty of modern tools, technologies, and thoroughly organized archives, that allow us to access almost any source. However, not surprisingly, many sources are biased, not based in fact, or come from unreliable sources. With the advent of the latest technologies, we can now draw an approximate (and frequently very accurate) picture or give a response to complex questions.

An impressive example that has certainly gained incredible popularity nowadays is ChatGPT. According to the latest research, this tool can be highly competitive at the academic level and is also used as a co-author in scientific works.

Considering that “ChatGPT is an AI language model that was trained on a large body of text from a variety of sources (e.g., Wikipedia, books, news articles, scientific journals),” one can assume that it reflects a position representative of the majority of sources, which, however, is not necessarily true.¹⁷⁸ The AI is not able to discern authoritative sources from

¹⁷⁸ “Frequently asked questions,” *Scribbr*, accessed 29 March 2024, <https://www.scribbr.com/frequently-asked-questions/chatgpt-information/>.

non-reliable ones. Considering these factors, it was interesting to discover its response to inquiries about the Verdian voice:

Question (with an attempt to avoid the implied bias in using the term Verdian voice):

“What kind of voice fits Verdi's repertoire?”

Answer:

Verdi's music is known for its dramatic intensity and emotional depth, and the voice that best fits his repertoire is often referred to as a "Verdian voice." This type of voice is characterized by several qualities, including:

Power and projection: A Verdian voice must have the power to project over a large orchestra and be heard in even the largest opera houses without amplification.

Richness and fullness of tone: A Verdian voice should have a rich, full-bodied sound with a warm and resonant tone that is capable of expressing a range of emotions.

Flexibility and agility: A Verdian voice should be able to move easily and quickly between registers, with the ability to sing both the lower and upper ranges of the voice with ease.

Excellent breath control: A Verdian voice must have exceptional breath control to sustain long phrases and produce powerful, sustained notes.

Dramatic intensity: A Verdian voice should be capable of expressing the full range of emotions demanded by Verdi's operas, from intense passion and longing to quiet reflection and contemplation.

Clarity of diction: A Verdian voice must have clear, precise diction to convey the meaning of the words and communicate the story to the audience.

The specific vocal range and type of voice that fits the Verdi repertoire can vary depending on the specific role and opera. For example, Verdi wrote roles for a variety of vocal types, including basses, baritones, tenors, mezzo-sopranos, and sopranos. However, generally, the Verdi repertoire is best suited for full-voiced, powerful singers with a rich, dark timbre, particularly in the baritone and tenor range.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Experiment made on May 4th, 2023, on www.chatgpt.com.

It is curious to discover that the most central qualities, often mentioned by Verdi himself, are the last two points in the ChatGPT list: dramatic intensity and clarity of diction.

Here are a couple of references in support of the previous statement: In his “Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy,” Roger Freitas states, “Of all the virtues a singer might possess, clear enunciation was most important to Verdi.”¹⁸⁰ A passage from *Encounters with Verdi* by Marcello Conati gives a clear idea about the second point, dramatic intensity: “Indeed, Verdi’s conception of singing seems to have been so closely tied to the dramatic that he could sometimes abuse his vocalists, as when he demanded a run-through of the long Lady Macbeth duet “for the 151st time” - minutes before the public dress rehearsal.”¹⁸¹

Chat GPT claims that the order of the lists is arbitrary and does not imply going from the most important to the least relevant. Anyway, it is interesting to note that the points with historical foundations are the last two. There are more references to the statement that a voice for Verdi has to be powerful than the ones claiming that diction and dramatic intensity are essential in Verdi. In light of the common academic knowledge regarding the voice in Verdi—remembering that Verdi did not require a particular voice or vocal technical qualities for his operas and insisted on dramatic rendition and total adherence to the text—the first four points inescapably depict a deeply entrenched stereotype, which, let us not forget, reflects the opinions of humans, not machines. Having a powerful voice with a “full-bodied sound,” capable of being “heard in even the largest opera houses without amplification,” still today

¹⁸⁰ Roger Freitas, “Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy,” 239.

¹⁸¹ Marcello Conati, *Encounters with Verdi*, 26-27.

reflects stereotypes and involves vocal categorization.¹⁸² But, when we compare this notion to actual testimonies and chronicles, it is clear that this phenomenon did not exist in the 1800s.

One might be curious to consider a specific singer (who sang at Regio, of course) from the perspective of vocal categorization in the nineteenth century. Take, for example, Fanny Donatelli-Salvini, the interpreter of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*'s first production in Parma, in 1849. According to the local reviews, the opera "did non displease," which suggests that she was convincing as Lady Macbeth.¹⁸³ The name of Salvini-Donatelli certainly is not new to music historians and Verdi connoisseurs: a few years later, in 1853, this very soprano was destined to be the first interpreter of Violetta in *La Traviata* at La Fenice in Venice.

In dealing with the "standards" of the Verdian voice, the "Salvini-Donatelli case" introduces a certain tension: consulting the available recordings of *Macbeth* and *La Traviata*, one will immediately notice that, in merely technical terms, the voices of those interpreting Lady Macbeth are almost opposite to those singing Violetta. My experience as a singer and a listener, informed by the multitude of recordings that I am familiar with, led me to the following "stereotyped" statements: Lady Macbeth "requires" a massive, dark, powerful, and somewhat cumbersome voice, whereas Violetta is light, agile, and more projected toward the top register. Leaving aside the phenomenon of Maria Callas and purportedly leaning onto Verdian stereotypes, one would conclude that the same voice cannot sing both roles.

¹⁸² This categorization has found a more pragmatic approach in the German-speaking world, significantly impacting educational practice in the American academic environment.

¹⁸³ Gian Paolo Minardi, and Giuseppe Martini, *Le prime di Verdi a Parma*, 133.

It may be a common assumption that a voice develops, becomes more mature, resonant, and darkens with age and experience, which, in most instances, is true. However, almost without any exception, it does not work the other way around: the voice does not become lighter and brighter in its course of development.

Salvini-Donatelli, as we see, sang a “lighter” Violetta four years after a “heavy” Lady Macbeth (from our stereotyped, “modern” point of view); this was not a singular phenomenon, nor an exception. Instead, this fact raises the question of whether there was a tone change at all, most probably suggesting that she sang Violetta with the same tone with which she performed Lady Macbeth. If we leave aside the assumption that the dramaturgy of the role should be reflected in the tone, we discover how misleading it can be to assess the singers of the past using today’s standards. In the nineteenth century, there were manifold examples of such an approach to a vast repertoire that would be considered unorthodox today. These examples, however, are a rule rather than an exception, which again suggests that voice categorization is a practice developed much later, precisely towards the end of the nineteenth century.

In describing the voices heard on recordings, using such adjectives as “light,” “dark,” “agile,” etc., we (un)willingly create categories and introduce a certain distance and mutual exclusivity as a consequence. After creating these definitions, we would probably think it would be wrong to entrust a role “written for a dark voice” (Lady Macbeth) to a brighter and lighter one. This categorization found a practical development in the German-speaking world and is commonly known as the *Fach* system.

The German *Fach* system [...] is a method of classifying singers, primarily opera singers, according to the range, weight, and color of their voices. It is used worldwide, but primarily in Europe, especially in German-speaking countries and by repertory opera houses. The *Fach* system is a convenience for singers and opera

houses. It prevents singers from being asked to sing roles which they are incapable of performing. Opera companies keep lists of available singers by Fach so that when they are casting roles for an upcoming production, they do not inadvertently contact performers who would be inappropriate for the part.¹⁸⁴

Considering historical precedents and performance practice before the 1920s, this definition raises many concerns and issues: Verdi roles have a close correspondence with the Fach system, which classifies performers “according to the range, weight, and color of their voices.” How legitimate is using such categorization, considering Verdi’s disinterest in the voice qualities, i.e., color and weight? Regarding the matter of vocal range, in most cases casting directors still expect the range to include “traditional” interpolations and alterations.

It is essential to clarify that the term Fach is somewhat unfamiliar in Italy and non-German-speaking countries in Europe. However, the categorization itself is widespread and is very much in line with the Fach system. In Italy, there are no repertoire opera theaters with a permanent ensemble of soloists, and there is therefore no need for any categorization. In contrast, it is essential in the repertoire opera theaters, where a singer is obliged to commit to the theater’s requirements. The Fach system establishes limits that are beneficial for both parties.

Bearing in mind this consideration of vocal categorization and assuming that the reader is familiar with it, let us go back to the figure of Fanny Salvini-Donatelli and her 1849-50 season at Teatro Regio di Parma. During that season, Salvini-Donatelli appeared on the stage of Regio in several productions: besides the role of Lady Macbeth, she interpreted the title role in Donizetti’s *Linda di Chamounix*, Rosina in Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*, Elaisa in

¹⁸⁴ “Fach,” *Wikipedia*, accessed 29 March 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fach#Contralto_F%C3%A4cher.

Mercadante's *Il Giuramento*, Giselda in Verdi's *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*, and Elvira in Bellini's *I Puritani*.¹⁸⁵

In the Fach system, roles such as Elvira and Rosina stand very far from those of Giselda and Lady Macbeth, and we could hardly find a singer in the last hundred or so years who has sung two similar roles (one from each group) in the same season.

It would be reductive to claim that voice categorization is the only factor that limits singers' repertoire options. A more complex and multifaceted issue is the development of the orchestra: the evolution of instrument fabrication, with string instruments moving from animal gut strings to metal strings, as well as the general increase in orchestral forces, unavoidably created an environment where singers had to deal with a larger sound mass than in earlier times. The matter becomes even more complex if we consider the subject of tuning: many claim that the standard in the nineteenth century was around 418Hz, others indicate the value of 432 or similar. However, most scholars agree that the orchestral pitch increased over time, further challenging a singer and impacting their repertoire choices. In *Divas and Scholars*, Philip Gossett discusses these problems more broadly, providing some valuable considerations about the matter.¹⁸⁶

Thus, in searching for answers about the right voice for a Verdi opera and the right acoustic balance, one might not find a satisfactory answer, and this is probably the factor that puts Verdi in a unique position among his colleagues: the voice itself and its qualities are secondary to dramatic expression and theatricality.

¹⁸⁵ CdTRdP, 1849/50 Carnevale.

¹⁸⁶ Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, 407 - 444.

Riccardo Muti, a fervorous defender of Verdi's art, whose contribution to cleaning Verdi of obsolete and extraneous alterations of any type, replied adamantly to a question about the Verdian voice:

“I don't know what Verdian voice really means [...].”¹⁸⁷

His unquestionable competence would not leave space for such an omission in his musical preparedness and knowledge. Rather, by replying in such a way, he emphasized that the matter of mere vocality in Verdi is not only unworthy of discussion, but is not even a consideration. Nonetheless, knowing the expectations and ingrained stereotypes helps a performer tackle a role with awareness. Even admitting a “traditional” passage in searching for a peaceful compromise can become different if the decision is made consciously.

Stylistic Influences

From a historical point of view, stylistic development and evolution is a natural process. Aesthetic values change with time, influenced by social dynamics, politics, and prominent individuals. By observing the events and lives of contemporaries, we can track, to a certain extent, how they influenced Verdi, both as a man and an artist.

When we dealt with the High C case in *Il Trovatore*, Muti, in his argumentation, tried to make a more solid connection between Verdi and his predecessors, pointing out the similarity of their aesthetic codes. It seems logical, considering that a *bel canto* composer, Donizetti, wrote his *Caterina Cornaro* in 1844, the same year when Verdi's *Ernani* and *I Due Foscari* saw the light. Furthermore, the same artists who sang Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti were hired to sing Verdi operas. In the nineteenth century, this reciprocal influence was

¹⁸⁷ Giancarlo Landini and Marco Gilardone, *Dal labbro il canto: il linguaggio vocale delle opere di Verdi*, 19. A complete quote will follow in conclusion chapter.

significant, not limited by region or language. Although an old, enduring, and somewhat obsolete polarization, see how much two contemporary composers have in common: Verdi and Wagner.¹⁸⁸

This topic is brought up by Roger Freitas in his “Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy”:

“...one faces a central issue in this investigation: notwithstanding his reputation as the arch-enemy of *bel canto*, Verdi seems to have preferred singers trained in this traditional style.”¹⁸⁹

Freitas also quotes Verdi: “In the teaching of singing, I would like the old-fashioned studies, combined with modern declamation.”¹⁹⁰

Thus, summarizing simplistically, one could argue that Verdi demanded a more theatrical approach, which, however, was solidly rooted in *bel canto* tradition and technique.

Over a long historical period, we have witnessed many alterations in Verdi and their subsequent transformations of musical expressivity—thus creating a new set of aesthetic principles that, due to repetition over time, should arguably apply to his music. Why did Verdi’s music undergo such a drastic transformation? What was the driving force of this awkward metamorphosis?

¹⁸⁸ For a deeper and more comprehensive analysis, see *Analyzing opera: Verdi and Wagner*, by Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker.

¹⁸⁹ Roger Freitas, “Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy,” 231. On Verdi as an enemy of *bel canto*, Freitas is referring to Rodolfo Celletti, “L’interpretazione di Verdi nel secolo XIX,” *Atti del Primo congresso internazionale di studi verdiani*, edited by Mario Medici, (Parma: 1969).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, referring to a letter on 4 January 1871 to Francesco Florimo; as reproduced in Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi, Volume III*, 356: “Nell’insegnamento di canto avrei voluto pure gli studj antichi, uniti alla declamazione moderna.”

Unfortunately, time and evolution take their toll. Some developmental dynamics do not change, and a glimpse back to an event mentioned in a previous chapter will give us an answer.

As mentioned before, a French tenor, Gilbert Louis Duprez, is considered the “inventor” of the *do di petto*, a powerful and full-bodied high C produced with the full adduction of vocal cords. This technique slowly got the upper hand and was standardized by roughly the mid-1800s; meanwhile, the falsetto used before gradually disappeared from performance practice. This means that before 1831, when Duprez proposed a new way of tackling the high register, the applied vocal technique differed from what we know today as classical vocal training.

All Rossini operas (with the exception of his last opera, in which Duprez made his “experiment” for the first time), a significant part of Donizetti and Bellini operas, Mozart, Gluck, etc., all implied a different technique.¹⁹¹ Consequently, their sonorities and performance styles were different too. Leaving aside the categories of countertenors and sopranists, in theaters today we hear full-bodied phonal emission in all operatic voice categories, from Mozart to Strauss, from Gluck to Puccini. This example shows how a technical breakthrough has been applied retroactively.

Exactly the same mechanism and logic lay behind the evolution of Verdi throughout the years: starting from the 1920s, singers began to apply the aesthetic standards of a new genre to its direct predecessor—the standards and means of expression inherent to *verismo* began to be applied to late romanticism and beyond.

¹⁹¹ Rodolfo Celletti, *Storia dell'opera Italiana, Vol. 2*, 473.

In 1890, when *verismo* is commonly considered to be born, the orchestras significantly evolved: new instruments were added and composers endeavored to find harmonically dense sonorities apt for creating a more direct impact on the spectator. Many of the stereotypes of the Verdian voice are a direct consequence of the aesthetic principles of *verismo* being applied retroactively to his music.

A powerful voice, full-bodied sound, and the ability to “cut through” the orchestra and to fill large opera houses somewhat justly reflected the needs of *verismo*. But there is more: non-musical interpolations discussed earlier, such as coughing, screaming, rasping, and speaking instead of singing, are also an integral part of the stylistic code of *verismo*. Consequently, by applying the more extroverted *verismo* expression to Verdi, one not only unsettles carefully articulated dynamic indications in Verdi’s music, but also creates a noticeable tension between the produced sound and the musical writing. Not to mention, again, that this practice drastically restricts the pool of singers who fit Verdi according to the composer’s demands, which would be much richer if many casting directors did not pander to the stereotypes dictated by the aesthetics of *verismo*.

The necessity to fit these standards often represents a dangerous path for an artist. Trying to artificially darken the voice and make it appear bigger than it is can entail technical hardships, vocal deterioration, and end up compromising a singer’s entire career. This argument is delicate, since it discusses subjective terms such as artificial, natural, big, dark, etc. In many professional singers, the development of their skills and their artistic maturation often results in their voice becoming darker and often bigger, in terms of volume.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Speaking of sound darkening in the voice of Victor Maurel, first interpreter of Jago in Verdi’s *Otello*, Roger Freitas in his *Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from*

However, even subjectively, this assumption must not be taken for granted and is not universal. Furthermore, to what extent does pandering to a set of aesthetic expectations mean renouncing one's individual views?

Speaking of the conflicting artistic codes of particular periods, I believe that the same logic can be applied in analyzing the hypothetical alteration of the aesthetic codes in the operas of Mozart, Gluck, Rossini, and Donizetti, which have been retroactively influenced by Verdi. As stated before, Verdi required a declamatory approach to singing, which apparently was not common in the music of his predecessors. This principle and approach possibly "tainted" the music written before Verdi, such as the music of Mozart, Gluck, etc., which today is stylistically altered. However, this supposition would be an argument for another broad discussion and analysis that is outside the scope of this research.

In discussing alteration types earlier in this chapter, I emphasized tensions between a "original" writing and an "alternative" version. In most cases, the juxtaposition is one-on-one, such that what is written in the score is altered in only one specific way (as the high C in *Il Trovatore*.) If not, there are a short series of modifications with the same source pattern (*Rigoletto*'s last page or the cadenza in "Il balen del suo sorriso" from *Il Trovatore*).

However, I consider this polarization to manifest as a series of tensions that go beyond just "original vs. modified" to include a wide range of artistic values: theatrical intent vs. exhibition of skillfulness, composer's will vs. liberty of interpretation, historical coherence vs. a broader insight with awareness of the aesthetic codes of *bel canto* and *verismo*. All these

Modern Orthodoxy, states: "Maurel and Garbin, clearly distort certain vowels: sadly, the ageing Maurel darkens many beyond recognition, thereby compromising the diction that Verdi had held to be one of the singer's finest qualities" (239).

values are essential, and none of them can be overlooked. At the same time, somehow, they mutually exclude one another.

Chapter 6: Finding the Balance in the Light of Verdian Dualism

In the previous chapter, we analyzed different types of alteration and the tensions they might elicit. In this chapter, I would like to focus more on the driving force and reasoning behind the decisions of whether or not to make deviations from the original score and its markings. In addition, I would like to make some observations from the public's point of view, where I roughly identify the philological path as an "alternative" to the "traditional" one, which not only accepts alterations but considers them binding. In simple words, I juxtapose a strict observation of the musical score with the "freer" approach, which would allow a singer's skills to be showcased by deviating from what is written by the composer.

As I have previously discussed, the main point of tension is the matter of alterations. This could involve stylistic (in)coherence (interpreting Verdi in the style of *verismo*), vocal weight (again, applying retroactively to Verdi the vocal aesthetics of *verismo*, which requires a massive and dark voice), and other aspects that create tension between the public's expectations and interpretations, that often are supported by historical facts and aesthetic integrity. Also, we should notice that in Verdi's productions, the closer we come to his last opera, *Falstaff*, the fewer problems we encounter regarding alterations. As discussed, it is the result of the composer's developing compositional approach, which gradually left less space for possible alterations as his operas became richer, more complex, and more profound. Verdi's orchestration also matured and shifted far away from a mere accompanying function.

Massimo Mila and Verdian Dualism. Past vs. Present

By stressing the development of Verdi as a composer, we unavoidably fall into comparing his starting and arrival points. It does not take an expert to notice differences between , for example, *Attila* and *Simon Boccanegra* (the second, 1881 version). The choice

of the subject, the libretto and its structure, theatricality, form, harmonic inventiveness, orchestration, and sonorities – through over fifty years of production, Verdi evolved in every aspect of his art. This critical detail raises a question, raised by Italian musicologist Massimo Mila, that is essential for a singer who wants to find their place in Verdi’s music: how can we judge something so diverse and barely comprehensible? Inevitably, an attempted assessment will be very general and lacking specifics. Thus, we can achieve a more transparent and detailed understanding by defining at least two contrasting periods of Verdi’s art. Not only does this allow us to approach the matter of “traditions” more consciously, but it also brings into question the legitimacy of the term Verdian voice as a model applicable to any of the composer’s operas.

Massimo Mila masterfully develops this topic in *L’Arte di Verdi*, arguing that unity in Verdi’s art is far less stable than in Verdi, the man.¹⁹³ As an example, Mila rhetorically questions: taking Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Verdi’s *I Due Foscari* and *Falstaff*, which operas bear more similarities, more stylistic relationships, and more unity? Without saying it explicitly, Mila suggests that Verdi’s *I Due Foscari* would resemble Donizetti more than Verdi’s own late opera.

Mila also considers the questions a scholar might raise at the end of the third millennium after discovering a series of Verdian scores such as *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *Il Trovatore* from his first period, and *Requiem*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff* from his last period, without seeing operas from the middle period which would show the evolution of the composer’s writing. Knowing the composer’s name, a scholar would probably think of two Giuseppe Verdis,

¹⁹³ Massimo Mila, *L’Arte di Verdi*, 336-349.

perhaps a father and a son, representing different epochs, styles, and values. Mila further develops this argument by pointing out that Verdi's artistic figure, like that of Titian, is uncommon compared to other composers. Verdi's creative lifespan was 54 years, and no composer could write for so long, keeping pace with changing times. Auber, for example, wrote his most famous operas, *La Muette de Portici* and *Fra Diavolo*, in 1828 and 1830, respectively, after which the French composer wrote a series of other operas (his last one, *Rêve d'Amour*, premiered at the end of 1869 when the composer was 87) without ever regaining a success similar to those cited before. A similar fate met Italian opera composers like Mascagni and Giordano. Meanwhile, Rossini, aware of his incapability (or unwillingness) to change, chose not to write anymore.

By recalling these facts of common knowledge, Mila suggests that while we can argue about stylistic and artistic unity in Auber, Mascagni, or a few other composers, a similar approach is destined to fail in Verdi due to the diversity of his art. Eventually, Mila asserts that we need to speak about the dualism of Verdi's art, where, in simple words, early Verdi - with its very clear affinity to the *bel canto* aesthetic- is juxtaposed to his period of artistic maturity with a more complex structure, denser orchestration that transcends a mere accompanying function, and a profound dramatic sense. In pointing out this tension, Mila refers to how this dualism has elicited the numerous (and often contradictory) views of composers, musicians, and critics long after Verdi passed away in 1901, when discussing stylistic and/or artistic unity.

For instance, Verdi's *Requiem* earned praise and approval from such symphonist as Brahms and previously pugnacious critics such as Hans von Bülow and Eduard Hanslick. Whereas later, Stravinsky and Italian musicologist Bruno Barilli argue for a richer musical

inventiveness and freshness in *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* compared to the “cold, prudent, indirect and evasive” writing in *Falstaff*, while still acknowledging the skillfulness of the old Maestro.¹⁹⁴ For my purposes, questioning the reasoning behind such statements is irrelevant; the relevant fact is that outstanding figures of the musical world assume diametrically opposite positions, suggesting that there is a juxtaposition and polarization between *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto* of earlier Verdi and his mature works, such as *Requiem* and *Falstaff*.

By applying Mila’s suggested position, we might be able to consider the tensions this thesis discusses from different perspectives (from the points of view of the public, singers, conductors, and more), which would allow us to resolve many of these tensions and acquire a more inclusive and complex point of view of Verdi’s art.

Public: Conservative vs. Inclusive

In Parma, Verdi’s understandable veneration has produced a sort of osmosis between Verdi’s art and his figure as a man. While Verdi as a man is associated with what his legacy has become - an old, wise, strong, skillful, somewhat grumpy composer who could be demanding and uncompromising, but also complex and irreverent - his art cannot imply a similar set of adjectives without falling into contradiction. As pointed out before, trying to find unity in Verdi’s art is a questionable operation that risks undervaluing the composer’s developmental path and the diversity of his production. At the same time, for spectators, refusing the idea of unity might appear as a weaker position or even disrespectful towards Verdi. In contrast, by applying Mila’s perspective and acknowledging the diversity of Verdi’s art and its means of expression, it would be possible to create a new, more flexible,

¹⁹⁴ Massimo Mila, *L’Arte di Verdi*, 339-340.

more profound perspective, giving the initial aesthetic expectations a more precise allocation on the scale of values in Verdi's music.

Even today, there is a massive margin for change in performance practice of Verdi: we have not witnessed significant variations in Verdian cabalettas (see interviews with collaborative pianists in Chapter III), "Di quella pira" ending in the lower register, or a soprano singing Abigail after having sung, for example, the protagonist's part in Bellini's *I Puritani* in the same season. Any of these examples, if realized, would signify a step towards reassessing the Verdian aesthetic code. Yet, contemporarily, it goes directly against what we know as "traditions," which are considered somewhat "sacred" and untouchable by the public of Regio. This traditional argument assumes an extreme position—and though it is much easier, as it does not leave any margin for discussion, at the same time, it provides inaccurate answers to specific questions, such as "What kind of voiced is required for Verdi?" and "How should Verdi be sung?"

In the first chapters, we discussed the public of Regio and its predecessors – Teatro Farnese and Teatro Ducale. History shows that the problematic temper of the audience in Parma has roots going back to the ambitions of Duke Ranuccio I in the seventeenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, this temper had become directed through association with Verdi's figure. Aware of how meticulous their compatriot was in fighting to obtain tangible and dramatically convincing results in his operas according to his ideas and musical expectations, the public felt entitled (often rightly) to defend the composer's art through contestations, thereby safeguarding the neatly defined values of Verdian operas.

In light of Mila's considerations, an evident problem arises: would it not be reductive if we apply the same requirements and expectations in terms of voice, interpretation, and

expression to a *Un Giorno di Regno* as to an *Aida*? Since early Verdi had always been more subject to alterations (as we stated previously) and the audience expects these alterations, does not it automatically imply that the later compositions come with different expectations? Thus, I believe there is inherent and unexamined polarization inside this group: because some standards apply to early Verdi but not to late Verdi, it would be erroneous to claim that those are “universal” standards that could be used for Verdi as a whole.

Singer’s Voice vs. Dramatic Expression

Being a singer allows me to point out an existing tension in our sphere, between the physical characteristics of a singer’s voice and their capacity for dramatic expression. Calling it polarization would be inaccurate since there can be an interaction between these categories and they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, I would call it two gravitational points. Roughly speaking, the singer’s voice, in merely physical terms (if it is big, dark, and powerful), is often sufficient to compensate for a lack of dramatic expressivity. This division into two categories is rarely spelled out and might seem nonexistent, but it is real. However, I believe this unspoken assumption goes hand in hand with similar tensions in Verdi (stereotypes of Verdian voice vs. the composer’s concerns about expressivity). Moreover, it is essential to keep in mind that Verdi’s artistic evolution brought him from his earlier operas, influenced by *bel canto* (which, if not represented *bel canto* directly, were at least not in conflict with *bel canto*’s values), to an artistic code focused on theatricality in his later years, where, for the composer, the voice and its physical expression meant little, if they were not in service to the drama.

How often have I heard whispered comments such as “He or she does not have the voice for Verdi!” At the same time, I recall only a few instances of remarks such as “He or she did not dig deep enough into a character,” a comment that would barely be addressed to someone

with “the voice for Verdi.” Does this mean there is no need for a deeper and more detailed interpretation of Verdi? Or, perhaps, does the voice still prevail over other qualities on the scale of values among singers?

As discussed in Chapter V in the example of the continuous alteration of the Curse Theme in *Rigoletto*, there are several instances where a deviation from the original score shifts towards instances of vocal “show-off,” and how those modifications were directly proportional to the detriment of dramatic expression in the passages in question. Yet, besides several conductors and colleagues, I have heard firsthand world-class opera stars saying things like “Everything the public wants is the high notes” or “In Verdi, the main aspect that counts is the voice...”¹⁹⁵ I am talking about prominent Italian opera singers with a long history of success at Regio and the world’s top opera theaters. By mentioning this, I want to stress that this mentality is still deeply rooted, accepted, and justified in the opera theater of Parma. For obvious reasons, these opera stars (whose names I will not reveal for ethical reasons) would never publicly express similar opinions, as they are aware of the possible (and unproductive) arguments they can trigger. So, these statements rightly remain at the level of bar-talk, but simultaneously show a fixed mentality among some singers and conductors. This phenomenon is not limited to Parma or Italy; I have had to deal with such mentalities working with singers and conductors from Russia, Brazil, the USA, etc.

In terms of mentality, the opposite party represents those stressing the importance of interpretation. Often, focusing on the interpretative side of singing is an effort to compensate for a voice that is not “big enough” or “beautiful enough.” However, betting on interpretation

¹⁹⁵ This example is from a conversation that took place at the bar of Marriott Hotel in Beijing, China, during the tournee of Teatro Regio di Parma with *Rigoletto*, in August 2011.

often results in victory. Consider two great singers: Franco Corelli and Jon Vickers. Corelli possessed a spectacular technique, beautiful tone, astounding high register, and appealing figure. Vickers also had a solid technique, but a less captivating tone, and he could not compete with Corelli regarding handsomeness. Both are top-tier tenors but with different stylistic and artistic expressive codes.¹⁹⁶

Corelli is remembered first of all for the roles where vocal expression (and often exuberance to a certain extent) coincided with the character's nature: expansive, direct, eccentric, and extroverted. He was particularly loved in Parma, where he sang on many occasions, including a historical performance of *Tosca* in 1967 (of which there are several video testimonies online). Vickers aimed for more profound interpretations, giving life to complex characters and stressing their multifaceted nature. He is remembered as one of the greatest Otellos and arguably the finest interpreter of Britten's *Peter Grimes*'s eponymous character.

It is worth remembering that Corelli never took on the role of Otello (although he sang some excerpts in concerts), due to its complexity. On the other hand, Vickers's Cavaradossi from *Tosca* did not allow him to express the whole range of his interpretive palette, nor could he compensate for this with a vocal appeal.

It is interesting to notice the interpretive choices of each of these singers, the stylistic connotations of their choices, and their ultimate artistic goals. For instance, in analyzing Corelli's artistic approach and means of expression, from Donizetti to Leoncavallo and

¹⁹⁶ BBC Music Magazine, in their list of the Top 20 tenors of all time, placed them at 15th and 8th place, respectively. <https://www.classical-music.com/features/artists/20-greatest-tenors-all-time/>

Puccini, a singer's ear will notice how much his interpretation embraces the *bel canto* aesthetic. In his singing, portamentos abound independently from the musical narrative, which, in turn, is compensated by an explicit demonstration of vocal technique, where one note smoothly transitions into the next. The same goes for his high notes: significantly prolonged, even where there is no fermata or similar agogic indication, show the unquestionable and aurally enjoyable skillfulness of the Italian singer—often, however, to the disservice of the smooth dramatic development of the opera in question and to faithful adherence to the character.

An example of an “excessively” *bel canto* approach might be the passage “Vittoria! Vittoria!” from the second act of the *Tosca* production mention above, in 1967 at the Regio, where Corelli holds a high A-sharp for twelve seconds. On the one hand, Puccini writes in the score *allargando molto*, which does not necessarily contradict this artistic choice. However, consider that at that point of the opera, Cavaradossi, the character interpreted by Corelli, had been tortured and, in this scene, appears on stage heavily beaten, bleeding, and brought in by policemen.¹⁹⁷ It is improbable from a pragmatic, *verismo* point of view that, a few moments later, he suddenly produces a beautiful sound, which, if analyzed through the lens of theatricality, would depict an athlete in his prime rather than a torture victim who has just regained consciousness.

Independent of the repertoire, emphasizing vocal quality and skillfulness over theatricality is one of the main features of Corelli's signature style. As we discussed earlier,

¹⁹⁷ The indications in the Ricordi score are: “Cavaradossi, swooning, is carried in by the agents and deposited on the sofa. Tosca rushes towards him, but is stricken by horror when she sees him bleeding [...]”

this feature is more typical and inherent to the *bel canto* tradition, where considerable space was left for the singer's vocal and technical "show-off."

In contrast, we can take Vickers's "Vesti la giubba" from *Pagliacci*. Here, the interpretation of the Canadian tenor of this *verismo* masterpiece is deprived of its "usual" exuberant passion, despair, and exalted state of consciousness, compensated with an intimate experience of torment. Vickers maintains a clean vocal line without adding any *verismo* features, such as laughter after the phrase "Sei tu forse un uom?" in *recitativo* or sobbing and crying out loud at the end of his arioso, which directly contradicts the composer's indications.¹⁹⁸ I have analyzed a series of available recordings of this aria (CBC Broadcast video, 1955; Recording for RCA, Rome, 1961; Film for Deutsche Grammophon, Milan, 1968; Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires, 1968; Royal Opera House, London, 1982; Opéra Garnier, Paris, 1983.) Curiously, only in the earliest recording, when Vickers is 29, does he comply with the composer's "non-musical" instructions. In contrast, in all the following recordings, he opts for a more introverted, composed interpretation, which produces a strong dramatic effect despite his conscious deviation from *verismo* stylistic conventions.

The artistic choices mentioned above would align Vickers around Verdi's mature aesthetic code, rather than *verismo* or *bel canto*. Also, the fact that Vickers was one of the

¹⁹⁸ The indications in the score are: "Laughing bitterly" in didascaly and "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!" in the lyrics line, after the passage "Sei tu forse un uom?" There are no further instructions or suggestions in the vocal line. Whereas at the end of the arioso, there are detailed performance instructions. After a "sobbing" on the second to last note, once a singer has concluded singing, Leoncavallo indicates: "moves slowly towards the theatre, weeping; reaching the curtain which opens on the stage, he pushes it roughly, as if not wishing to enter; then, seized by a new fit of sobbing, he again buries his face in his hands; takes three or four steps towards the curtain, from which he had recoiled in fury, and [on these chords] enters and disappears."

greatest Otellos in history leads to the same conclusion: the complexity of the role's character poignantly represents the late Verdi, and Vickers meets the composer's requirements, which resonate with his artistic means of expression. Furthermore, it is curious to notice how Vickers was one of few artists going against conventions by applying the late Verdi style to *verismo* and not vice versa (discussed in Chapter V, *Stylistic Influences*.)

Lastly, to corroborate my argument, here are quotes from the obituaries of both artists, where their artistic skills are emphasized very differently (despite being by the same author), in line with what has been said before.

Here are some excerpts from Corelli's obituary, "Franco Corelli, Italian Tenor of Power and Charisma, and Pillar of the Met, Dies at 82," published in *The New York Times*:¹⁹⁹

Franco Corelli, the Italian tenor whose powerhouse voice, charismatic presence and movie-star good looks [...] died yesterday in Milan. [...]

The enthusiasm for Mr. Corelli among the rank and file of opera fans was not always shared by connoisseurs and critics [...] Mr. Corelli was faulted by some for the sheer athleticism and raw passion in his singing. Those same qualities drove other opera buffs to ecstasy.

Mr. Corelli was famous for shamelessly prolonging full-voiced, climactic top notes. On a pirated recording of his 1957 debut at the Royal Opera House in London, in Puccini's "Tosca," he holds Cavaradossi's defiant, high-note cry of "Vittoria!" in Act II for a full 12 seconds, causing the audience to erupt with bravos even as the music continues.

During the 1960's the anti-Corelli sentiment among critics was epitomized by Alan Rich, who in a 1966 article for the *New York Herald Tribune* acknowledged the vibrancy and white heat of Mr. Corelli's singing, but considered him a throwback to an earlier era when, from Mr. Rich's perspective, musical compromises were common and stylistic refinement lacking. [...]

¹⁹⁹ Anthony Tommasini, "Franco Corelli, Italian Tenor of Power and Charisma, and Pillar of the Met, Dies at 82," *The New York Times*, C14, 30 October 2003.

In juxtaposition are some fragments from the *The New York Times* article “Jon Vickers, Opera Star of Raw Power, Is Dead at 88”.²⁰⁰

The Canadian tenor Jon Vickers, who brought a colossal voice and raw dramatic intensity to everything he sang, including legendary portrayals of Wagner’s Tristan, Verdi’s Otello [...] died on Friday. [...] Making every word he sang matter was another hallmark of his artistry. Mr. Vickers was incapable of fudging a text for the sake of vocal effect...

In the same article, there is a quote from his interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which appeared in a documentary film in 1974:

The understanding, which slowly and surely developed in me, of the necessity of human contact and an understanding of the needs of others and their problems has probably, more than anything else, given me the ability to analyze my roles, to come to grips with a score, to study a drama, to project my feelings into the life of someone I’ve never met except on a piece of paper.

To all intents and purposes, although Corelli might appear more criticized in this comparison, Vickers also received his share of disapproval, which, nevertheless, does not pertain to the subject of my argument.

By comparing these two singers, even if simplistically, I wanted to show evidence for this polarization in practice. At the same time, I do not wish to insinuate that vocal and dramatic expression are mutually exclusive concepts. On the contrary, can we imagine what kind of phenomenon a singer would be with Corelli’s appearance and technique added to Vickers’s depth and scrupulosity?

We have an insight into the artistic driving forces of two outstanding singers. It is important to emphasize that Corelli and Vickers represented their time and, consequently,

²⁰⁰ Anthony Tommasini, “Jon Vickers, Opera Star of Raw Power, Is Dead at 88,” *The New York Times*, A16, 13 July 2015.

acquired knowledge and aesthetic influence relating to the period of their artistic activity. Thus, assuming that they were acquainted with the aesthetic codes of both *bel canto* and *verismo*, I hope I have illustrated the consciousness of their choices and stylistic gravitational center.

In many instances (see Corelli's "Vittoria!"), the narrative-focused mindset is in direct conflict with the *bel canto* approach. Wagner's and Verdi's efforts in rendering opera more about theater rather than singing oppose the tradition that allows expressing an artist's technical skillfulness exhaustively.

Assuming that in later Verdi, there is less space for vocal "showing-off," one might provocatively question, "What is the point of learning how to hold high notes for a long time, to train very long breaths, or to be able to make impressive register leaps when you cannot apply them in practice?" Being "overtrained" or "technically overqualified" leaves an artist much space for different means of expression, which is Verdi's exact intent. As for opportunities for the show-offs, luckily, the *bel canto* repertoire has not lost its appeal and popularity, so there is still space for healthy vocal athleticism.

Acknowledging the gravitational points in aesthetic codes, like vocality vs. dramatic expression (without trying to delegitimize its value), can broaden horizons and give one a chance to grow professionally. How wonderful would it be if every Corelli could find a part of Vickers in his artistic palette and vice versa!

Integrating and making space for opposing aesthetic ideals is probably the most important aspect of balance in art. A harmonious accordance rather than compromise is possible when each of the parts is aware of the existence and requirements of the other. For a singer, trying to excel vocally and theatrically, and finding a balance in this, represents a

more significant challenge than leaning towards one another; yet, this balance (and a compromise to a certain extent) would imply inclusivity and diversity.

Verdi's Will and Writing vs. Interpretation

Can such adaptiveness exist in personalities like Riccardo Muti, Toscanini, and Verdi himself? We usually do not associate flexibility with names such as Verdi and Toscanini because of some objects of intellectual (and historical) speculation. The most famous example is the overquoted letter, dated May 20th, 1847, from Verdi to Giovanni Ricordi:

In order to prevent alterations made to operas in the theaters, it is forbidden to make any intrusion, mutilation, any alteration that requires any smallest change, under the fine of 1000 francs which I will claim from any theater where an alteration will take place.²⁰¹

The document in question (still) serves as counter-evidence in the hands of spectators and singers when they do not find coherence between the expectation and the result. This quote appears whenever there is a discussion about minimal alterations, such as an interpolated note or, more frequently among spectators, when an opera is set in modern times. It is worth remembering that Verdi was facing much more severe problems back then.

In Chapter 5, I mentioned that in a *Rigoletto* during the 1852/53 season at Regio, they added Paolo Samengo's ballet scene "Il Conte Pini," which, due to its "ugliness" was substituted by "Il Saltimbanco," written by Giovanni Casati. Muti pointed to the documented performance at La Scala, where the third act of *Il Trovatore* was not performed at all. Instead, Marco Beghelli talks about another night of the same production and mentions that they opened the performance by performing the third and fourth acts, followed by the first

²⁰¹ Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio, *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, 39.

and the second. Furthermore, let us not forget the so-called “suitcase arias,” a trivial custom of opera stars.²⁰² For example, contralto Dionilla Santolini, performing Federica in *Luisa Miller*, usually interpolated a grand aria from Pacini’s *Saffo*.²⁰³ Moreover, Hilary Poriss, in “Making Their Way through the World: Italian One-Hit Wonders,” states that the suitcase aria phenomenon was used to set the standards, where a less-known singer would try to emulate a more famous one by choosing the same suitcase aria to interpolate.²⁰⁴ Consequently, a limited set of suitcase arias eventually became widely performed, as happened with “standardized” cadenzas, high notes, and cuts.

Thus, back in 1847, Giuseppe Verdi had to deal with what we would consider today an atrocious mutilation of his operas. By writing this letter, he fought for *his* music in his operas, and for a basic dramatic coherence. Given the already complicated plot of *Il Trovatore*, I wonder *what* a spectator would understand if they performed the acts in the following order: 3rd, 4th, 1st, and 2nd? Or, if the third act was cut entirely and there were also ballets by other composers in the first two acts?

²⁰² Nowadays, although rarely, this phenomenon continues to surprise audiences in a musicologically and historically justifiable context. In Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*, for example, Marilyn Horne used to exchange the lesson aria “Contro un cor” with Rossini’s Tancredi’s or Arsace’s (*Semiramide*) aria, or rondò from *La donna del lago*.” In Arena di Verona in 2015, Australian soprano Jessica Pratt, the same aria in *The Barber of Seville*, substituted with Heinrich Proch’s “Deh, torna mio bene.” In the case of Rossini, it was a common practice during his lifetime, and there is a historical motivation for such experiments. Mozart’s “Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio” K. 418, written as a suitcase aria, also testifies to how widespread and common a similar practice was.

²⁰³ Roberta Pedrotti, “Musicisti, bufale, leggende e alterazioni,” Italian Online Music Magazine, accessed 29 March 2024, <https://www.apemusicale.it/joomla/it/terza-pagina/7249-editoriale-musicisti-bufale-leggende-e-alterazioni>.

²⁰⁴ Hilary Poriss, “Making Their Way through the World: Italian One-Hit Wonders,” 221.

A skeptic might argue that the fact that Verdi was fighting alterations on a bigger scale does not necessarily imply that it did not concern minor interventions and modifications to his scores. A few details reveal Verdi's flexibility and awareness of performance and interpretation practices. Here is what Philip Gossett points out when it comes to the tricky matter of the variations in the cabalettas:

A suggestive contemporary indication is found in orchestral materials related to the first performances, under the composer's direction, of *I Masnadieri* at Covent Garden in 1847. Orchestral lines that double the vocal part are crossed out in both the first presentation and the repetition of the cabaletta theme in Amalia's cabaletta "Carlo vive?" This suggests that Jenny Lind, who created the role, may well have introduced different ornamental figures into her part, so that the orchestra could no longer play what Verdi had originally written.²⁰⁵

Curiously, this happened two months after the letter in question (*I Masnadieri* premiered on July 22nd, 1847), and as the composer, Verdi had the power to impose his choices. But there is more: in the same production of *I Masnadieri*, Verdi "specifically left the task of providing a cadenza to the art of Jenny Lind."²⁰⁶

A second piece of evidence is easily verifiable, and I stumbled into it during rehearsals for *Rigoletto*: the third act of the opera presents several *recitativi*, and the one that follows the quartet "Bella figlia dell'amore," between Rigoletto and Sparafucile, includes a curious score notation: "This recitativo must be sung without the usual appoggiaturas."

Here we are in 1852, and Verdi indirectly suggests that there are the "usual appoggiaturas." It suggests that a certain liberty for a singer was taken for granted. It is no surprise that this detail has been noticed and discussed by many scholars, such as Will

²⁰⁵ Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, 323.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Crutchfield and Philip Gossett. It is also interesting to observe how those “hinted” appoggiaturas, not present in older editions, have appeared more recently in the critical edition of the opera (edited by Philip Gossett), thus offering more precise information about how it was executed at its premiere.

Finally, an interesting episode regarding Toscanini and Verdi is described by Italian journalist Giuseppe DePanis. It was in Genoa in 1898, and Toscanini was preparing to conduct Verdi’s *Pezzi Sacri* in Turin:²⁰⁷

He [Toscanini] asked Verdi himself for advice on how to interpret his own music. Verdi sat him down at the piano. Toscanini, having reached a certain passage, yielded to the temptation – not without misgiving, he told me, but instinctively as he had always done in studying the work – of playing a short *allargando*, not marked in his score.

“Good, good,” Verdi interrupted him, “that’s how it should be played.”

Toscanini, half puzzled and half delighted, gazed at him without speaking.

“Exactly like that. And do you know why I didn’t write in the *allargando* that you, quite correctly, just played? Who knows how and how often certain interpreters would have then exaggerated the marking?”²⁰⁸

This episode reveals the 84-year-old Maestro showing openness to an interpretation of his music, suggesting that with good taste and deep understanding, a variation can prevail over the written word or note. I hope this observation will not become the subject of speculation, as happened with Verdi’s letter to Ricordi. However, it is unlikely that this would happen because Verdi did not write it, nor does it bear his signature. It is also true that Verdi would

²⁰⁷ Today known as *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* (*Four Sacred Pieces*), here figure as *Pezzi Sacri* because, at the premieres in Paris and Turin, the first piece, *Ave Maria*, was omitted.

²⁰⁸ Marcello Conati, *Encounters with Verdi*, 302-303.

never put such a statement in writing, knowing that he would be leaving a document that very would likely be misinterpreted later.

All things considered, in concluding this chapter, it appears that artistic sensibility is an essential quality which supports the knowledge (i.e., familiarity with the compositional process of the opera, its peculiarities, the composer's ideas expressed in letters, etc.) and is not a substitute for it. Put simply, if driven by artistic sensibility, consciously diverging from "what is written" can establish a dialogue between a score and an interpretation rather than a conflict between the original and the "altered." However, it is essential to remember that it takes awareness to diverge from the original writing or "tradition", which comes with a fair amount of responsibility.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Hopefully, at this point, I have provided a detailed insight into the environment of Teatro Regio di Parma, what challenges it presents, and what kind of tensions arise between the public, artists, conductors, and composers. My intention has been to establish a dialogue that serves as a stimulus for subsequent development in all four categories: public, artists, conductors, and composers. Although the target reader of this work is an opera singer interested in performing Verdi, I hope that it also provides critical knowledge to non-performers.

At this point, in discussing tensions that arise and might arise between the public, artists, and scholars, I consider it necessary to acknowledge the tensions between the first two categories from the perspective of Verdian artistic dualism, a term used by Massimo Mila, which might in turn generate a different, more inclusive and encompassing point of view on a bigger scale. In making conclusions, I focus less on Teatro Regio, assuming that the problems and tensions discussed there can occur in many other theaters, only manifesting in an “amplified” way in Parma.

Thus, after a detailed analysis, can there be a relatively simple answer to **“What should artists be aware of when singing at Regio, and what should (ideally) be their goals?”**

Develop a team-focused mentality

As a performer, in the last 10-15 years, I have noticed that conductors take a clear stand at the beginning of an operatic production. They explicitly and consciously lean towards either a “traditional” or philological reading. Nonetheless, I also observed flexibility to a certain extent. (Remember Muti’s *La Traviata*, where he made an exception for “Sempre libera” at the end of the first act). Acquiring a mentality of seeing an opera on a bigger scale,

also in terms of production, would contribute to developing a team-focused approach (which would also include the cast, supported by a conductor, a stage director, and all the personnel backstage) that contrasts with the older divos and divas models. Success as a team most likely entails the individual success of every team member. In contrast, the reverse dynamic is more challenging to track (e.g., recall that the presence of Cesare Siepi and Aldo Protti in the cast of *Don Carlo* in 1961, or that of Renato Bruson in *La Traviata* in 1979 did not save the productions from fiasco). Therefore, a team-focused mentality would be beneficial not only for its positive impact on the entirety of a production but also because it reduces individual psychological pressure.

Make your decision and defend your standpoint

Considering the artistic values in question, today's singers, in addition to their skills, also have a broader view of the entire opera or composer's art, and are aware of their individual impact on the whole of an artwork. In a few words, rather than categorizing into "right" and "wrong," one could lean towards "appropriate" or "not appropriate" for a given context. The term "appropriateness" raises a complex and possibly subjective discussion where many aspects should be considered: the cast, the geographical context, the venue, the period we live in, the social values of a given audience, the setting, the interpretation of the stage direction, and more. However, "inappropriateness" also has potential artistic value, and the tension created by it can be a significant driving force or express an aesthetic idea.

Think of *Il Trovatore* with all of its "traditional" alterations except for the high C: perhaps it would appear bizarre from the musical point of view, but it would send a clear message against "fossilization" of specific "traditional" passages. Contrarily, imagine the opposite: the same opera is deprived utterly of the alterations but keeps the high C of "Di

quella pira.” We would probably achieve an artistic effect that emphasized the figure of the eponymous protagonist, who would be the only one allowed to go beyond what is written. However, this effect could be possible assuming that the spectator is aware of the possibility of such alterations so that this conscious renouncement would be perceived as an artistic and not a philological operation. Luckily, the audience is subject to change, and its tastes are not set in stone, so we, artists, have the power to contribute to the change in taste and overall perception of opera.

You might be the first “different” one

Considering that often there are tensions between the factions in public, it would be naïve to think that there is a universal approach or method that would satisfy every taste. Let us remember that the audience’s taste is influenced by their aural experience, including recordings. In Parma (and elsewhere), a young tenor will necessarily be compared with the best-of-the-best tenors, heard live or on a recording. Setting Corelli or Bergonzi as a point of reference will result in emulation (even if unconsciously) of the same aesthetic values, falling into the vicious cycle of fossilizing the “traditions” and precluding the development of interpretation. A singer’s “divergent” interpretation today might become a point of reference in the future since every “traditional” passage had its first instance somewhere. If a singer finds themselves singing at Regio, it implies they already have artistic authority, and, consequently, can afford creative audacity to a certain extent.

Compete, keeping your uniqueness

By mentioning recordings, I wanted to emphasize their massive influence on setting standards in opera in every detail concerning sound: the tone of the voice, expression, cadenzas, and interpolations. In Will Crutchfield’s “Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The

Phonographic Evidence,” we discover that at the rise of the era of recordings, there were various interpretations and deviations from Verdi’s text and score instructions. Singers took more liberty, expressing *their* set of skills and peculiarities. With the advent of the mass distribution of recordings, which started in the 1930s, it appears that in Verdi, many details were standardized, and traits characteristic of *verismo* were acquired. Without inquiring about the dynamics of such development, which veers away from the present topic and has already been a subject of research, I would like to point out again the polarization between variety and individualism in singing at the beginning of the twentieth century and a more standardized (“traditionalized”) approach, starting from the late 1920s. This standardization, on the one hand, brought to the theater a spirit of competition, thus galvanizing the audiences by constantly comparing singers’ skills in absolute terms, such as vocal extension and volume. I do not intend to belittle the immense importance of the recording industry, to which we owe a lot in terms of artistic heritage and scholarly research. This thesis has benefited significantly from these sources.

On the other hand, it significantly reduced interpretative liberty and left off-market many singers who, 30-40 years earlier, would not have problems singing Verdi. Establishing a dialogue between these opposites can only enrich, sensitize, and revitalize the modern opera world. We need more philological readings of operas, historically informed settings, and more synergy between artistic directors and scholars so that artists on one side and the public on the other can gain access to tangible and motivated alternatives – opera productions that offer a different perspective, thus enriching the operatic panorama.

Focusing on the present, an artist is a future for the past

Today, the popularity and diffusion of audio and video recordings are not controlled nor are influenced by international recording companies (like they were in the past) and have entirely different logics and driving forces. A video on YouTube can go viral in a couple of hours; anyone can record a video and make it available to anyone. By choosing, performing, or sharing their “untraditional” interpretation, a singer can send a message emphasizing that “untraditional” does not mean “wrong,” and at the same time, “philological” does not necessarily imply “right.”

Finally, today’s generation has a massive advantage over the previous generations: instant access to documents and testimonies relative to any field of interest, thus allowing us to form our individual, informed, and motivated points of view. This is the opportunity, and perhaps a moral and artistic obligation, to fight for diversity and freedom with awareness and consciousness of cause, even in a field often associated with fogeneity and outdatedness. At this point in this work, a reader cannot “ungain” artistic awareness, which is my ultimate goal. Such artistic awareness in singers would enrich the opera world, where there would still be space for “vocal athleticism” alongside profound dramatic characterization.

Arguably, singing today at Regio is even more challenging than in the past, given its increasing role on the international scale. Considering this fact and summarizing the statements, bits of advice, and observations, one can state that it takes a lot for a singer to succeed at Regio: the “traditions,” the history of the theater, and the audience’s expectations are undoubtedly something a singer would not want to go against. Unless, accompanied by a solid vocal technique and impeccable diction, a singer has a precise plan of action, where any disregarded expectation is compensated by a convinced (and hopefully convincing) reading,

where the tension between philological awareness and “tradition” fosters a new perspective. Hopefully, such a perspective will represent both the artist and their time, transcending the custom of the continuous tribute to the singers of the past. Being audacious and present-focused cannot be regarded as a lack of respect towards the past. On the contrary, by not challenging heritage of the singers of the past, we leave them “undefeated” and prevent different aesthetics, values, and artistic mentalities from developing.

Ambitions, substantial experience, a solid vocal technique, clear diction, the theatrical sense, philological awareness, a stable nervous system, and a voice that can convey the qualities mentioned above – these are the essential set of skills that would most likely help an artist to succeed. By saying “most likely,” I want to emphasize that there are no (and cannot be) guarantees for anyone. Otherwise, we would call opera a sport, not art.

Art comes before all: all the aforementioned qualities are null if no soul exists in them. As the German painter Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) said: “Art is the highest form of hope,” and hope is something every single one of us needs—and this need, luckily, can never be utterly satisfied.

We, artists, “produce” hope. We ought not forget about this privilege and responsibility.

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