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LOS ANGELES MUSIC CENTER OPERA

DON CARLO
VERDI

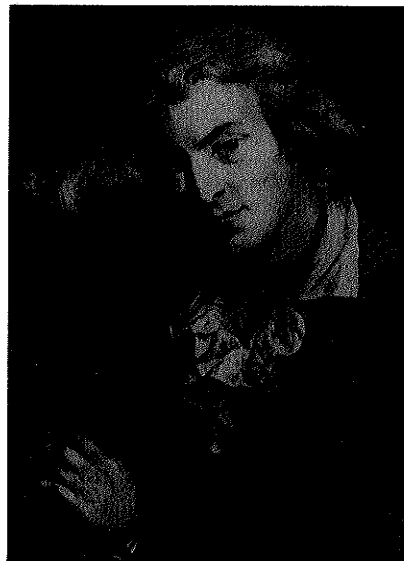
DOROTHY CHANDLER PAVILION

Verdi's *Don Carlo*: Opera as a Constellation of Performance Possibilities

by James A. Hepokoski

Verdi's *Don Carlo* presents us both with such an abundance of riches and with such complications that merely to bring up the subject to an opera devotee — or to mount any performance of it — is to invite controversy. On the one hand, as the composer's most sustained plunge into the sensual world of French opulence, this is his most luxurious score, and it is difficult not to succumb to its powers of intoxication. With the help of librettists Joseph Méry and Camille Du Locle (and the Italian translators Achille de Lauzières and Angelo Zanardini), Verdi transformed Friedrich Schiller's dramatic poem of ideas, *Don Carlos, Infant von Spanien* (1783-87) — an impassioned embrace of freedom conjoined with a sharp critique of monarchical and ecclesiastical absolutism — into a loosely formatted opera that subordinates these still-present ideas to a more purely aesthetic aim: the illustration of music's abilities to illuminate differing characters, to evoke a generalized atmosphere, and to charm through delicious *divertissement*.

On the other hand, *Don Carlo* is by now notorious as the most complex of all Verdian operas with regard to its history of revisions. It lures anyone innocently seeking an overview of information about its compositional history into entering a twenty-year tangle of differing librettos, authorized and unauthorized cuts, revisions, and re-revisions so intricate as to frighten away all but the hardiest of enthusiasts. Even worse, none of it can be ignored, for it all bears directly on the details of every *Don Carlo* performance. One soon learns that there is



an original, French-texted version (whose title is therefore *Don Carlos* — even the seemingly innocent act of referring to the opera's name has come tacitly to assert a position about which language it should be performed in), the more commonly produced Italian-texted version, a four-act version, several differing five-act versions, and so on. Merely grasping the issues at stake is a daunting task; resolving them into anything resembling artistic certainties or a definitive version of the opera seems an impossibility.

Verdi specialists do not even agree on how many versions of *Don Carlo* there are. Ursula Günther, the editor of the essential 1974 Ricordi vocal score that in two thick volumes furnishes all the possibilities, scrupulously counts seven. Julian Budden and Andrew Porter are able to reduce these to five. These are:

- 1) the original five-act, still unstable French version (1866) brought in manuscript by Verdi to the Paris Opéra for the rehearsals preceding the premiere (this was a huge, sprawling score containing almost four hours of music, and it soon proved impractical);
- 2) the still-immense, five-act French version premiered at the Paris Opéra on 11 March 1867 (this version reflected several pre-premiere cuts to shorten the work to reasonably manageable proportions; none of the cut music was performed publicly or published until the 1970s);
- 3) a five-act Italian version retouched by Verdi for a performance in Naples in 1872;
- 4) the four-act, Italian version thoroughly and carefully revised by Verdi in 1882-83 and published in 1884 in an attempt to streamline the somewhat neglected work, primarily through the omission of Act I and the selective recomposition of other portions;
- and 5) a five-act, Italian version first performed in Modena in December 1886 and published by Ricordi the following year. (This was essentially Version 4 above augmented by the addition of the first act — now in Italian — from Version 2. This *ad hoc* amalgam was apparently authorized by Verdi in order to satisfy those who lamented the loss in the four-act version of most of the music of the original Act I; the details of the composer's actual involvement with the final, five-act project are at present unknown.)

Twentieth-century performances have nearly always adopted either Version 4 or Version 5, although occasionally (if rarely) one may hear Version 5 given in French, thus restoring the original language —

but not the original readings — of Versions 1 and 2. The Italian Versions 4 and 5, then, constitute the main lines of the *Don Carlo* tradition, and it can be argued that they represent Verdi's last words on the matter. As a result of the research of the past two decades, however — essentially the discovery of the 1866, 1867, and 1872 music — several conductors have elected to reinstate one or more extracts from earlier versions. In effect, this mixes into a later score a selection of various things both performed and unperformed in Verdi's own lifetime and produces a new, individualized version. Such things may be done for reasons that are either dramatic (some of the "lost" passages contained important dramatic information) or musical (the restoration of beautiful music), but, strictly considered, the hybrid versions produced would be ones that Verdi himself never heard.

The version presented in this season's production at the Los Angeles Opera is No. 4 with the addition of a brief scene for Eboli and Elisabetta (from Version 2) at the beginning of the second act before the Prelude proper. At the time he was completing this revision Verdi himself found it to be the best solution to the *Don Carlo* problem — the problem of an opera so lengthy and diffuse that it was either ingored or produced only after making a few violent cuts. As he wrote to his friend Opprandino Arrivabene on 15 March 1883: "*Don Carlos* is now reduced to four acts, and it will be easier, and I think also better, artistically speaking — more concise and more muscle." The composer's remarks here are characteristic of his views during the 1880s and 1890s (the *Otello* and *Falstaff* years). The essential principle seems to have been that less is more, and both *Otello* and *Falstaff* would undergo revisions of the same type, although nothing quite so extensive. In the four-act *Don Carlo* we are presented with a mid-1880s recasting of a sumptuous but dramatically uncentered work from 1866-67: this necessitated the whittling away of what was considered inessential and the recomposing of what seemed

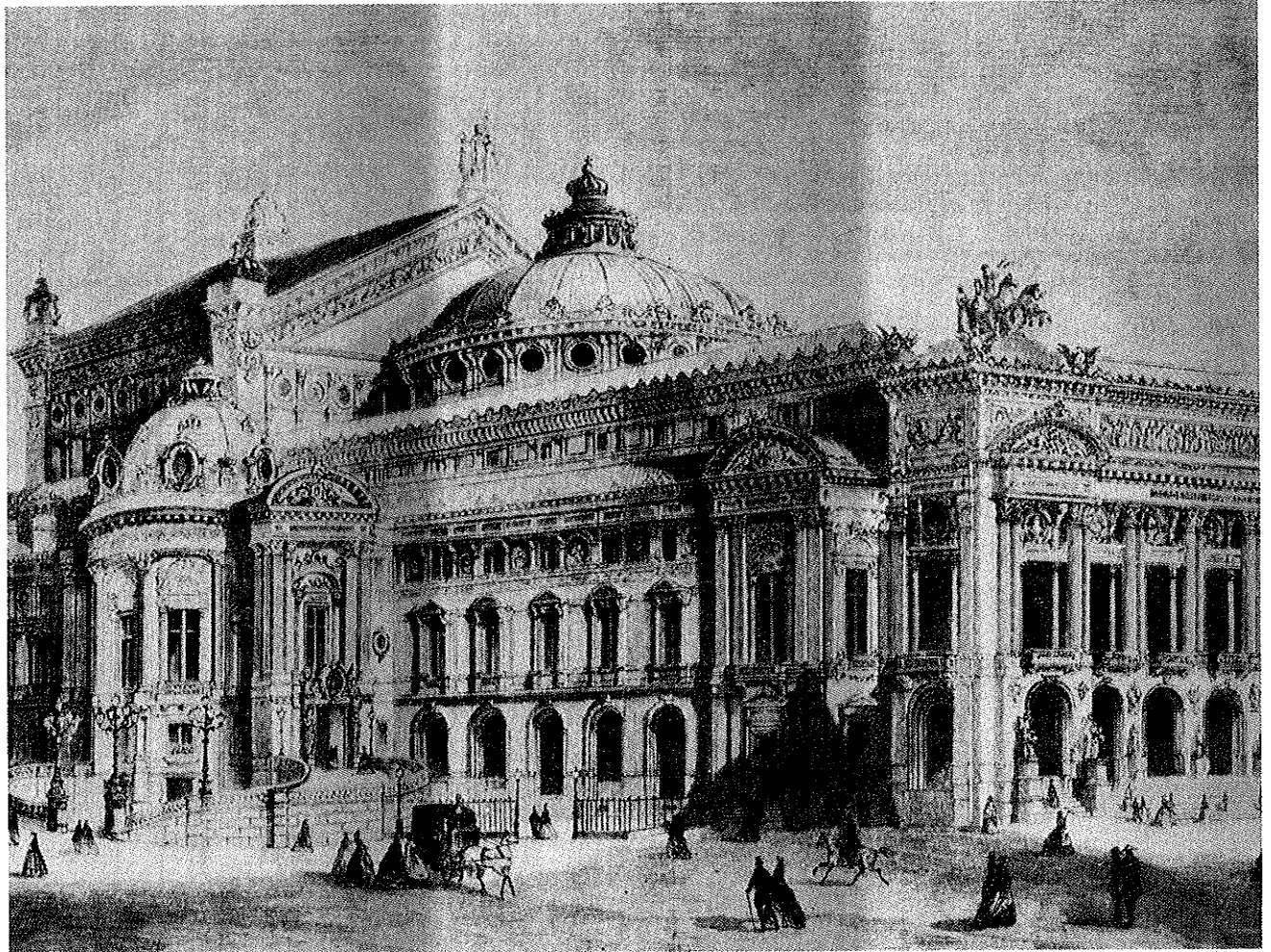
Opposite: Friedrich Schiller, whose play was the original source for Verdi's libretto.
Below: Cast of La Scala premiere of the original version of the opera.



outmoded or simply improvable.

What most opera audiences will want to know is: which is the correct version to perform? is one seeing the real *Don Carlo* or (*Don Carlos*), the one that Verdi would have wanted us to see? This question is unanswerable. Notwithstanding the arguments mounted vehemently on one side or another in past years, the most reasonable conclusion is that a definitive version of this opera neither exists nor can

exist. *Don Carlo* is no fixed object — no single score or set of parts. Rather, it is a constellation of performance possibilities. The same might be said of many other operas, both Verdian and non-Verdian: in circumstances where multiple versions of a work exist, each of which may lay claim to some degree of authenticity, the very concept of a definitive version currently seems outmoded. Any choice that excludes alternatives — however supported



by strong argumentation — can seem arbitrary, the product more of a desire to reduce ambiguities to a single solution than to embrace the actual realities of a given situation. The notion of *Don Carlo* as a set of flexible options for performance, no one of which may be considered the pre-eminently “valid” realization, need not be a problematic concept in the late twentieth century, which has seen so many contemporary explorations of music that is in one way or another indeterminate with regard to performance.

The four-act *Don Carlo* presents us with a mixture of two contrasting Verdian styles. Most of its music is written in the expansive French manner of 1866; but here and there one hears an overlay of the more concise style of 1882-83 — what

might be referred to as a pre-*Otello* or pre-*Falstaff* style. Although Verdi altered several sections of the work in his revision (an extensive discussion of the details may be found in the third volume of Julian Budden's *The Operas of Verdi*), the most immediately audible examples of the late style are: 1) the tenor *romanza*, “Io la vidi” near the beginning of Act I; 2) most of the Philip-Rodrigo (Posa) duet; this crucial, highly subtle piece gave the *maestro* more compositional trouble than any other in the opera); 3) the *Andante* orchestral Prelude to Act II, based on the “Io la vidi” theme; 4) parts of the Act III Quartet, especially the *concertato* portion beginning, “Ah! sii maledetto, sospetto fatale” (“Ah! May the fatal suspicion be accursed”), shortly after the scene

with the Grand Inquisitor; 5) Eboli's brief confession in Act III, “Pietà! Pietà!” preceding the 1866 “O don fatale”; 6) the rebellious conclusion of Act III, following the death of Rodrigo; and 7) the conclusion of Act IV, beginning especially after Carlo's and Elisabetta's farewells and before the appearance of the Monk (Charles V).

The special treat offered by any production of the four-act version is the opportunity to hear the 1882-83 revision of *Don Carlo*'s brief but incandescent “Io la vidi” (“I saw her”). While the other late-period revisions appear also in the later five-act version, this one — to be counted among Verdi's most masterly solo pieces for tenor — may be heard only here. Since this was the only portion of the original Act I

Opposite: *Paris Opera*, where the first version of *Don Carlo* premiered in 1867.
 Below: *La Scala*, Milan, where the 1884 revision had its first performance.



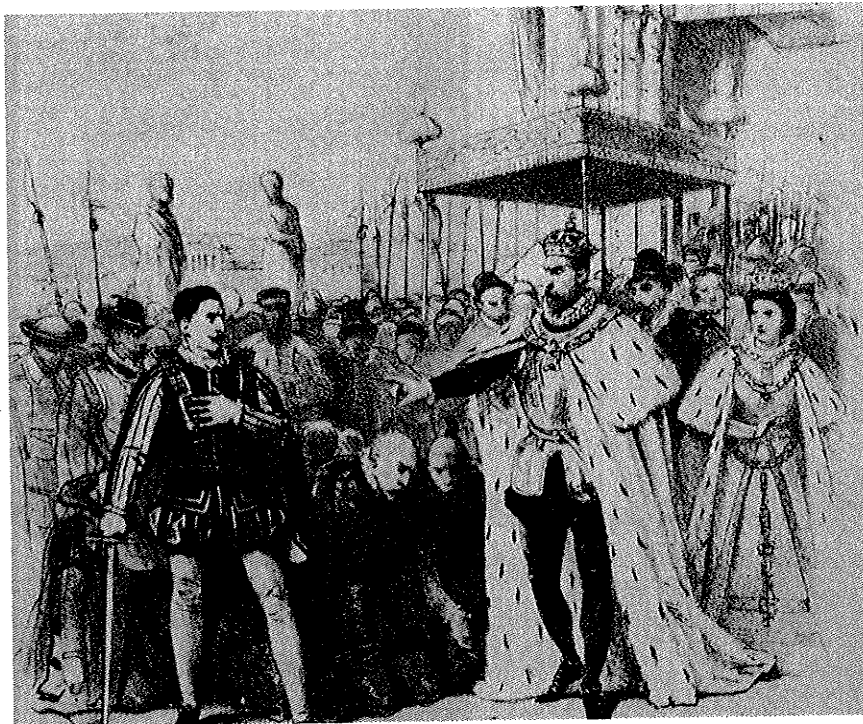
that survived the 1882-83 cuts, it had to be retailored to be inserted into the new first act; all five-act versions simply use the earlier "Io la vidi" in its original position. (One might argue that this alone provides a sufficient justification for choosing to perform the four-act version from time to time.) Although both versions of the solo piece begin with the same melody, the later "Io la vidi" is altogether a more relaxed composition, one tinged with a touch of late-style melancholy: it is lowered from its original, more highly-strung C major into a darker and richer B-flat; its harmonies and accompaniment become more and more subtle as it proceeds; and it shuns the earlier, square-cut rounding of the earlier version in favor of lus-

icious growth and change, a spinning-out of ever-new, lyrical lines. This is a late representative of one of the central *topoi* of nineteenth-century opera: the introductory *romance* in which a leading character sings of a beloved only briefly glimpsed. The reflective quality that pervades this new, deeper "Io la vidi" gives it a valedictory tone — a summing-up of the whole generic tradition — and its effect is not unlike its even more relaxed (and generally less *topos*-oriented) successor, Fenton's *Sonnet* in the third act of *Falstaff*.

Not content merely to revise Don Carlo's "Io la vidi" in 1882-83, Verdi also decided to use its opening theme as the basis for a new, extraordinarily impressive orchestral Prelude to Act II. (This replaced a long string of 1866-67 *divertisse-*

ments, including a leisurely ballet; the Prelude, of course, is not unique to the four-act version, since it also appears in the later, five-act *Don Carlo*.) Verdi decided here, that is, to launch the action of both Acts I and II with the same melody, and the dramatic effect could not be clearer. Act I had furnished us with the straightforward statement of desire that will prove to be the main driving-force of the opera: Don Carlo's *romance*, the sign of his love of Elisabetta. By Act II we are beginning to feel its consequences spreading through the drama: reflecting this, the Act II Prelude — again, preceded in this production by a brief scene from the 1867 version — presents a musical image of the multiplication of desire, as can be clearly heard in

Below: Frontispiece of a special edition of *Don Carlo* presented by the firm of Ricordi to Verdi.



the contrapuntal, ardently ascending imitations of the "Io la vidi" theme in its first half. (The whole Prelude traces out a broad arch: ascent followed by descent.) Verdi had used the image of the contrapuntal multiplication of an operatic motive before, in the Prelude to *Aida*, and it would turn up again in the Prelude to Act III of *Otello*, which quotes a passage of Act II to represent the spreading both of Iago's poison and Otello's jealousy.

Most of the music of the four-act *Don Carlo*, however, was written in 1866: this is midway between *La forza del destino* (original version, 1862) and *Aida* (1871-72). This was a period of emerging crisis for Italian opera. In this decade, the first decade of Italian independence, the textual, melodic, and structural conventions of *ottocento* opera were coming under increasing fire from national progressives as too inflexible. And Verdi himself, formerly the musical embodiment of the *Risorgimento*, was leavening his once-terse style by eagerly assimilating practices associated with French grand opera (Meyerbeer and Halévy), *opéra comique* (Auber)

and the more contemporary *drame lyrique* (Thomas and Gounod). These included such things as generally longer, more leisurely operas with broader melodic lines, especially common-time, march-based melodies with intermixed triplets; more varied, colorful, and sophisticated accompaniments; a greater concern for local-color stasis and spectacular tableaux calculated to stun the audience: and the more emphatic adaptation of certain French aria-types, such as the grand, ternary-structured aria ("ABA") and the more modest stanzaic types (*couplets*). While it certainly may not be said that Italian practices have disappeared from *Don Carlo*, the opera's 1866 music unmistakably represents Verdi at his most French.

The three formal, grand arias — all of them expressions of bitter, profound disillusionment — occur in the last two acts. In King Philip's D-minor meditation "Ella giammai m'amò!" ("She never loved me!") at the beginning of Act III one encounters a lengthy *scena* dominated by two unforgettable, "psychological" string motives: the deep-voiced, solo-cello descents

into the low register, and a dazed, circular pattern repeated in the muted violins — a symbol of pointlessness and obsession with the idea of isolation. The aria proper, "Dormirò sol nel manto mio regal" ("I shall sleep alone in my royal mantle"), wearily adopts some of the same motives and is cast into a variant of French ternary form. The parallel aria that begins the final act, Elisabetta's "Tu che le vanità conoscesti del mondo" ("You who knew the vanities of the world"), similarly French, is also shaped into a ternary form. Its sparsely unaccompanied opening lines and its free, recitative- and *arioso*-like central section "Carlo qui verrà" ("Carlo will come here") give the impression of an aria that approaches a pure *scena* or dramatic soliloquy. This is also the impression offered by Eboli's grand aria, "O don fatale" ("Oh fatal gift"), near the end of Act III. Although its basic structure expands more on Italianate patterns than on French ones, the fluidity with which Eboli passes through contrasting musical zones provides the high drama of a reflective, dramatic monologue — all of which is remarkably distant from Verdi's more compact, Italianate arias of the 1840s and 1850s. Contrasting with these three grand arias, however, is Rodrigo's more standard "double-aria" in his Act III death-scene. Both the *adagio*, "Per me giunto é il di supremo" ("The last day has arrived for me") and the brief and not quite totally unfurled *cabaletta*, "Io morirò, ma lieto in core" ("I shall die, but with a happy heart") — Verdi's last solo *cabaletta* — graft broad, suave French melodies onto fundamentally Italian structures.

Even more characteristically French, however, are the three stanzaic solo-songs with refrains in the earlier acts. Such *couplets* are selected in nineteenth-century opera for lighter music, for inset songs, or for a colloquial, natural, or naive discourse of (or to) characters of lesser rank or common blood. Stanzaic songs are less formal utterances than the grand-aria types mentioned above: they are class-identifiers, or at least attitude-

identifiers. Thus when Rodrigo in Act I asks the Queen Elisabetta to receive Don Carlo, "Carlo ch'è sol il nostro amore" ("Carlo, who alone is our love"), he both adopts a relatively informal candidness and puts himself into the position of a supplicant by casting his request in the form of a stanzaic song with refrain. (Curiously, the immediate model for its melodic contours may be found in Verdi's preceding opera, Carlo's stanzaic "Son Pereda, son ricco d'onore," from *La forza del destino*.) Eboli's earlier Veil Song, "Nei giardin del bello saracin ostello" ("In the gardens of a beautiful Saracen mansion"), is an example of a more extroverted set of local-color couplets provided as sheer divertissement. Although herself a princess, Eboli here sings an inset song — clearly some sort of popular song — to her ladies-in-waiting and is accompanied on the mandolin by a page: hence the appropriateness of the strophic structure. (The model for Verdi here was Hélène's *Sicilienne*, "Merci, jeunes amies" in the last act of *Les vêpres siciliennes*.)

Similarly, Elisabetta's moving Act I farewell to the curtly dismissed Countess d'AreMBERG, "Non pianger, mia compagna" ("Do not weep, my companion"), unfolds in two stanzas with refrain: the structural point is one of descending from the stiffness of one's normally elevated position to speak a less formal, more direct language of tender consolation to one of lesser status. The English-horn accompaniment here participates in a century-long *topos* in which a despairing, "isolated" soprano is accompanied by an oboe or English-horn obbligato. Such pieces normally begin in the minor and resolve themselves at the end into the major. (One of the most influential models was "Il faut partir" from Donizetti's *La fille du régiment*. In Verdi some other examples include such famous pieces as Violetta's "Addio, del passato" from *La traviata* — in which the major-mode conclusion recollapses back into the minor — Amelia's "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa" from *Un ballo in maschera*, and Desdemona's Willow Song from *Otello*.)

One might also note that, consid-

ered as a whole, the solo pieces of *Don Carlo* move from these more informal or public couplets of Act I to the remarkably more elevated, formally intricate, and personal monologues of the final two acts. In other words, the solo pieces become increasingly more interiorized as the opera proceeds. This progressive deepening of the solos both parallels and helps to articulate the trajectory of the drama itself, in which the relatively public and socially interactive events of the first two acts turn notably sombre and personalized in the last two. The denouement of *Don Carlo* unfolds largely as a set of dark confessions, revelations, or unmaskings of the principal characters, now revealed to possess a depth that the earlier acts had not suggested.

The 1866-67 duets of *Don Carlo* also display considerable inventiveness and power. One might notice, for instance, the parallelisms between the Carlo-Elisabetta Love Duet in Act I and the Carlo-Eboli duet in Act II: the latter is in some respects a parodistic commentary on the former. Most remarkable of all, perhaps, is the chilly, dark-timbred Act III confrontation of the King and the Grand Inquisitor, like the King an uncompromising, malevolent *basso*. Accompanied by an unpleasant, sinuous figure in the lowest instruments, this freely-shaped descent into "backroom politics" avoids all references to the standard duet structures of nineteenth-century opera: the free structure itself makes the point that the King and the Inquisitor view themselves as momentarily freed from all merely social constraints in order to pursue their ominous bargaining. A similar "dialogue duet" (to use the term now adopted by the current Verdi scholarship) may be found in the famous Rigoletto-Sparafucile encounter some fifteen years earlier; without question, that duet served as Verdi's model for this one.

At the end of Act II, the center of the opera, one finds perhaps the most French (or Meyerbeerian) of all of its gestures: the brilliant auto-da-fé scene. The traditions of "grand opera" required such things as ballets and immense crowd-scenes

featuring march-like processions, orchestral splendor, massive choruses, and spectacular stage-effects rising to a central dramatic crisis, and Verdi rose to the challenge to produce one of the most sonorous and varied tableaux in his entire output. The instrumental march in its center allies itself with the traditions of similar marches in Meyerbeer's *Le prophète* and Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, and Verdi would soon compose another such scene, with another such march, in *Aida*.

Verdi's operas of the 1860s and early 1870s — *La forza del destino*, *Don Carlo*, and *Aida* — all seem to share the aims of striving to create a whole world on stage, to maximize the variety of musical styles and structures currently available, and to depict the conflicting interests and forces of differing strata of society. These are operas of inclusion: they seek to admit as much diversity as possible. In the case of *Don Carlo* this thirst for variety and for the absorption and mastery of non-Italian styles led Verdi into creating the most loosely conceived drama of his career. It was this that precipitated the revision-crises that the opera underwent in the next twenty years, with the result that it now exists not as a single work but as a complex, often confusing set of options. But at the same time, Verdi's many confrontations with *Don Carlo* produced some of his most powerful music, and as Julian Budden has noted, "For many devoted Verdians it remains their favourite opera. No other work of his explores such a variety of human relationships."

Don Carlo will always present a conductor or stage director with numerous problems to solve before it is performed. But however any individual production resolves those problems — however it chooses to navigate through the constellation of possibilities — the audience will be treated to a rich musical experience of the highest rank.

Currently Professor of Musicology at the University of Minnesota, James A. Hepokoski is preparing the critical edition of Falstaff for The Works of Giuseppe Verdi being published by the University of Chicago Press and G. Ricordi & Co.