

The Operas of Verdi (revised edition)

Julian Budden

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992

3 volumes (524 pages, 523 pages, 546 pages),

\$19.95 each (paper)

Let us be clear about the most important point: Julian Budden's study of Verdi's operas remains a monument of operatic scholarship. It emerged at precisely the right time, in three hefty chunks (1973, through *Rigoletto*; 1978, continuing through *La forza del destino*; 1981, completing the project through *Falstaff*), thus happily greeting the rising tide of the new Verdi scholarship in America and Europe. Those were heady days: for the first time, nineteenth-century Italian opera was beginning to be accepted as a serious study, both inside and outside the academy. A tangible symbol of this scandalously delayed legitimation, Budden's book could not have been more welcome.

And rightly so. In the years before its appearance English-speaking Verdians hobbled along with the shakiest of guides: Francis Toye, Spike Hughes, Charles Osborne, Dyneley Hussey, et al. Shot through with the new "scholarly" flavor of the late 1960s and 1970s, Budden's *magnum opus* set a new tone of literate maturity for operatic discussion and instantly rendered its predecessors obsolete. His treatment of the operas was nothing short of a phenomenon, attractive to the general public and indispensable to a new crop of young Verdi scholars.

As is now widely known, Budden treats the operas luxuriously and with great affection, granting an individual chapter to each. These become lengthier and more detailed with the mature operas: Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, is dealt with in 23 pages; the last two, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, require 119 and 115 pages, respectively. Each operatic chapter is subdivided into two parts, the first overviewing the basic history of the work and its composition, and the second offering a step-by-step discussion of its music. Throughout, Budden displays an admirable acquaintance both with the larger world of opera and with the changing historical contexts in which Verdi's *oeuvre* appeared. And the book's five interpolated — and very dense — overview-chapters, "Verdi and the World of the Primo Ottocento" and "Characteristics of the Early Operas" (volume 1), "The Collapse of a Tradition" and "Formation of the Mature Style" (volume 2), and "A Problem of Identity" (volume 3), are as close to classic essays as Verdi scholarship possesses. In short, if there is still an opera lover or Verdi enthusiast who does not own a copy of these volumes — or, worse, is still limping along with their amateurish, massively outdated predecessors — read no further: go out and buy this book.

Now, in the 1990s, we have what Oxford calls the "revised edition." For those of us who have relied on the old edition of these volumes for more than a decade, the main questions are: what was revised? and just how "new" is this edition? On the 1992 back cover we find ourselves beguiled by a strong claim: "For this new edition the author has made a host of corrections throughout, and

updated the text in the light of recent scholarship.” As it turns out, this is vastly overstated: very little in the book has been altered. Contrary to the cover’s implication, strong indications of an eager intersection with most of the Verdi scholarship of the 1980s are for the most part nowhere to be found. This is important, since the 1980s saw an unprecedentedly strong push in operatic research of all kinds. This work unquestionably challenged and changed the most basic aspects of our view of Verdi’s music.

It is telling that for all practical purposes the appended bibliography in the third volume of the revised edition is identical to that of the old edition, with the latest entries still from 1980. The most substantial new element in the 1992 version is the “Preface to the Revised Edition” at the beginning of the first volume. Here Budden provides a three-page survey of some, but by no means all, of the most important events in Verdi research since 1980, “of which even the present reprint has not always been able to take account” (p. x). Here the key word is “reprint”—not “revision”—and it should be stressed that in the preface Budden himself is absolutely forthright about this. Strikingly absent from both the preface and the book itself, though, is any mention of the analytical revolution in Verdi studies of the later 1970s and 1980s. This was a period of giant, and still controversial, steps toward cracking the code underlying the logic and generic “meaning” of Verdian textual and musical structures. Much of this activity has centered around the extremely important work of Harold Powers at Princeton University, whose influence is reflected in the current writing of just about every active Verdi scholar today. The reader will find none of it, though, in this revision. What Oxford has given us here, then, is a slightly emended (though still very welcome) reprint of the old edition. Notwithstanding a handful of nods to a carefully limited selection of more recent work, the book remains a monument of the 1970s, not of the 1980s or early 1990s.

Perhaps for economic reasons, both Budden and the publishers seem to have agreed that the page layout of the new reprint was to remain identical with that of the old: each has the same number of pages, and with only a few exceptions the reader will find exactly the same material, line for line, in the 1992 edition. Clearly, a decision was made early on to incorporate only the least cumbersome of revisions, those that could be accomplished by altering a few words, at most a line or two. In all cases, of course, these were changes that needed to be made. Still, even these are quite rare, and one needs patience to locate them.

On the most obvious level, simple misprints or many of the small, casual errors in the old edition are corrected here. Thus the single misprint “1863” as the year of the Parisian *Macbeth* now appears correctly as “1865” in the first sentence of the essay on that opera (I, 269); the term “Schenkerian ‘Grundgestalt’” now appears, more logically, as “Schoenbergian ‘Grundgestalt’” (I, 457); an earlier reference to “Regnava il silenzio” from *Lucia di Lammermoor* is now amended to “Regnava nel silenzio” (II, 70); *Le pré-aux-clerics* is now accurately ascribed to Hérold, not to Adam (III, 279); dozens of names and foreign words have been respelled or differently accented (for example, the second librettist

of *Il trovatore*, Leone Bardare, no longer has a double *m* in his middle name, Emanuele; *ottocento* is no longer spelled *ottocènto*). Hundreds of such corrections occur throughout.

On another level — although a somewhat more inconsistent one — individual sentences are clearly retouched here and there on the basis of later scholarship. Since there does not seem to be a large number of these, one is left with the distinct impression that they have been included only when the author found it especially easy to do so. The opening pages of the *Macbeth* chapter, for example, contain three or four such alterations, probably the result of the activities surrounding the 1984 publication of *Verdi's "Macbeth": A Sourcebook*, edited by David Rosen and Andrew Porter. (This book is mentioned neither in the preface nor in the bibliography, although Budden does devote a generous paragraph to it in the footnote at the end of the *Macbeth* chapter [I, 312] where there happened to be a half-page of blank space.) All things considered, the decision to include an alteration into the text can strike one as haphazard. One still reads, for example, that “exactly what other changes [Maffei] made [to Piave’s original *Macbeth* libretto] we shall never know” (I, 272). In fact, as the note on page 312 later acknowledges, we do know more about these changes than we might suspect as we read this line, but to have incorporated the new knowledge into the text itself would have required a more extensive revision. Similar examples of things apparently too complicated to update conveniently could be multiplied throughout the operas, especially the later ones.

Another, though still very infrequent, way of sidestepping the need to substantially revise the main text was to change or expand a remark in the footnotes to include a reference to a publication from the 1980s. Examples: on pages 28–29 of the first volume, while mentioning the once-puzzling cimballo (still using the original words, “a brass bass known as the cimballo, which seems to have been a variety of bombardon”), we now find a rewritten footnote referring us to an important Italian article on that instrument by Renato Meucci in the fifth volume (1989) of *Studi verdiani*. Similarly, while leaving the main text unaltered, the author refers in a footnote to Evan Baker’s new reading (1986–87) in *Studi verdiani IV* of a single word in one of Verdi’s letters to Piave about *Macbeth* — a reading which, as Budden writes, now “puts a very different complexion on the tone of the letter!” (I, 272). Again, in his earlier discussion of *Il trovatore* Budden had expressed a suspicion about the presumed year of one of Verdi’s letters to Cammarano; in an expanded footnote (II, 60), we now read that “the authenticity of this letter has since been established. The postmark however, indicates the date as 1851.” In *Aida* we now find a footnoted reference (III, 187) to Marcello Conati’s 1985 article in *Studi verdiani III* on the original version of the conclusion of the Aida-Amneris duet. Such altered footnotes may be found scattered throughout, but they are far fewer than one might expect.

One of the most evident of the footnote changes concerns the citation of Verdi’s correspondence regarding the Venetian operas: *Ernani*, *I due Foscari*, *Attila*, *Rigoletto*, and *La traviata*. Here Budden wisely has decided largely to

delete his earlier references to Morazzoni's *Lettere inedite* (Milan, 1929) in favor of the new, improved source, Marcello Conati's collection of documents, with commentary, *La bottega della musica* (1983). Conati's collection, though not listed in the bibliography, is now first mentioned on page 31 of volume 1 and references to it account for most of the subsequent alterations in the Venetian-opera footnotes.

Whether these sorts of things, however welcome, satisfy our expectation of what a "revised edition" might be ("updated . . . in the light of recent scholarship") is open to question. Even so, to quibble about such terms is beside the point. Budden's book was (and remains) a monument of operatic scholarship. It is still an eloquent and impressive example of what a single, highly gifted writer was able to create in the 1970s. It is still indispensable.

James Hepokoski

Benjamin Britten: A Biography

Humphrey Carpenter

New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993

677 pages, \$30.00

Benjamin Britten: "Billy Budd"

Cambridge Opera Handbooks

Edited by Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993

180 pages, \$44.95 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper)

In a brief preface to this monumental biography of Benjamin Britten, Humphrey Carpenter stresses his intention of providing "a candid and fully truthful biography" of the composer (p. x). To the extent that it is possible, Carpenter has realized this elusive goal brilliantly, tenaciously pursuing Britten's difficult and often dark relations with others.¹ The densely detailed portrait that emerges is not essentially new but fills out the remarkable sketch made by W. H. Auden in a letter to Britten in early 1942. According to Auden, all great artists struggle to balance bohemianism and bourgeois convention, Britten's own inclination being toward the latter forces. More specifically, Auden stated:

Your attraction to thin-as-a-board juveniles, i.e. to the sexless and innocent, is a symptom of this. And I am certain too that it is your denial and evasion of the demands of disorder that is responsible for your attacks of ill health, i.e. sickness is your substitute for the Bohemian.

Wherever you go you are and probably always will be surrounded by people who adore you, nurse you, and praise everything you do. . . . You see, Bengy dear, you are always tempted . . . to build yourself a warm nest of love . . . by playing the lovable talented little boy.