Verdi in Performance

edited by

ALISON LATHAM

AND

ROGER PARKER

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This book began life at a conference entitled 'Performing Verdi' that took place at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, to mark the inauguration of the ROH's Verdi Festival in 1995. The initial stimulus towards this Festival came from Paul Findlay and Edward Downes, and was carried forward by Nicholas Payne. A special note of thanks should go to the late Lee A. Freeman, who with his wife Brena D. Freeman financed the inaugural meeting of a Consultative Committee attached to the Festival.

Out of that first meeting came the idea for a 'Performing Verdi' conference, organized by Martin Chusid, Director of the American Institute for Verdi Studies in New York, and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Director of the Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani in Parma. From the start, the conference was planned to stimulate dialogue; hence the division (which we have retained) into a series of 'position papers' on key aspects of Verdian performance, followed by various 'responses'. It was generally agreed that the level of this dialogue was extraordinarily stimulating, and our thanks go to all those passionate *verdiani* who made it happen, and also to Cormac Simms, whose formidable administrative skills were frequently in evidence both before and during the event.

The fact that it has finally became possible to fashion a book from the proceedings of the conference puts a number of other people in our debt. Bruce Phillips and his staff at Oxford University Press showed a continued commitment to the project. Several authors not part of the original event generously supplied further 'responses', in the process enriching and diversifying our dialogue. Roanna Chandler was a scrupulous and meticulous editorial assistant. Our thanks are also owed to Francesca Franchi, archivist of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, for generously helping with the illustrations. When this book was in a late stage of production, we learnt of the untimely death of one of our contributors, John Rosselli; he had dedicated the latter part of his scholarly career to operatic writings of the highest quality, and he will be greatly missed.

Alison Latham
Roger Parker

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ALISON LATHAM

Staging Verdi's Operas: The Single, 'Correct' Performance

JAMES HEPOKOSKI

Thirty years ago, the following would have been an astonishing claim: should we wish to do so, we could reconstruct the original costumes, sets, and staging of Verdi's operas from 1855 (*Les Vêpres siciliennes*) to 1887 (*Otello*). This is especially true of the later works, whose original stage images we could re-create with remarkable accuracy: what everyone wore, where everyone was to stand, what their stage motions were, even (in cases such as *Otello*) their arm and hand gestures and facial expressions. On a moment-to-moment basis, we could at least *see* the same *La forza del destino*, the same *Aida*, or the same *Otello* that Verdi himself saw—or visualized—at their premières. (In fact, it would be easier to re-create these original visual tableaux and acting conventions convincingly than it would be to return to earlier operatic vocal and orchestral styles—features of musical interpretation that raise more troubling questions of historical performance practice.)

This potential for recovering the visual element of Verdi's operas has been made possible by the emergence, about a quarter of a century ago, of eight 'original' operatic-performance manuals, or production books (*disposizioni sceniche*): pamphlets or books with descriptions of scenery, stage position, and movement, individual gesture and the like, made available over a century ago for rental along with the orchestral parts by Verdi's publisher, Ricordi. From them we can learn things of which no hint exists in the score or in other documents. We discover, for example, that at the Roman première of *Un ballo in maschera* in 1859 the stage director, Giuseppe Cencetti, called for a pantomime during the atmospheric orchestral introduction to Act I, Scene ii (the Ulrica scene). Before any singing began, Ulrica the fortune-teller was seen upstage

performing spells with a magic wand in front of anxious onlookers—tracing a line from a boy's head to a cauldron simmering on the fire, circling round the boy, pouring the contents of a vase into the cauldron, immersing her wand in it, and eventually moving downstage to begin her aria, 'Re dell'abisso'. We learn how, shortly afterwards, she was to disappear through an upstage trap-door only to reappear moments later. And so on. We can reconstruct this virtually gesture-for-gesture: it is 'do-able' today at Covent Garden.

Obviously, the temptation for any musicologist writing on 'Staging Verdi's Operas' is to call for an occasional reinstatement of these practices; and that call has been heard many times. Justifiably so: the early stagings do indeed help us grasp the originally planned effects, and sometimes they even provide plot information left unspecified in the libretto. What is also needed, however, is a nuanced understanding of these production books; and nuances, inevitably, lead to ambiguities.

Ricordi, in Milan, seem to have taken an interest in printing *disposizioni sceniche* on Verdi's advice in the mid-1850s. Stage manuals of this sort had been common in France from the late 1820s: H. Robert Cohen has recently published a catalogue of French manuals (*livrets scéniques*) for about 600 operas produced in France, and he has also edited a 1991 volume reproducing twelve of the most important—for *La Juive*, *Le Prophète*, *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, and so on. (When Ricordi, in 1855, published the stage manual for *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, slightly revised and translated into Italian, now under the title *Giovanna de Guzman*, it became the first of the Verdi production books.)

Ricordi's Italian manuals were modelled after the French ones, but there may have been important differences in their respective staging traditions. As Cohen has pointed out, 'staging in Paris and the French provinces throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th was an art of preservation rather than creation . . . staging, in a word, was not intended to be altered'. Thus a French *La Juive* at the Paris Opéra in 1890, or even later, would have looked much like the one from the 1830s or 1840s. There was a constancy here, one that understood concrete visual tableaux as part of the unalterable essence of the work.

But so far as we know at present—and more research may be needed here—this degree of tight tableau control was not a consistent element of Italian practice. This is not to say that nineteenth-century Italian stagings were highly variable. On the contrary, they were doubtless riddled with traditions, norms, and consistencies. At issue, however, is the extent to which any

single staging in Italy was widely regarded as normatively established—a stable, lasting part of 'the opera itself'. The strong form of this conviction seems more French than Italian, though it is certainly true that the mature Verdi was demanding about stage effects in the initial productions of his operas. Within the Ricordi manuals this urge to limit options became especially clear in the 1870s with the rise of Tito Ricordi's son Giulio, who not only wrote several operatic production books but also modernized the firm and brought it to its peak with the late Verdi and beyond.

Giulio Ricordi's stage manuals (his first Verdi one was *Aida* in 1872) are more meticulous than are their Italian predecessors, and their level of richness may be correlated with his own ascendancy within the business. Ricordi's manuals strove to march all future productions in step with those first seen at La Scala, the opera house most within the Ricordi orbit. At the beginning of each book, from at least 1877 (including those for Boito's *Mefistofele*, Massenet's *Le Roi de Lahore*, and the later Verdi operas), Ricordi placed the warning: 'It is absolutely necessary that artists take full notice of the staging [herein] and conform to it.' By the time of the 1887 *Otello* book, the most detailed of all, he would insist on even more: 'In like manner, the Direction and Ownership must not permit any sort of alteration to the costumes: these have been carefully studied and copied from period paintings and there is no reason for any of them to be changed according to the whim of this or that artist.' Ricordi himself owned the commercial rights to these things: his urgings were anything but disinterested.

In short, the language of the later production books was the language of power—commercial and artistic. Their premiss was that, with the composer's blessing, the guidelines for the ideal staging had been revealed. They bolstered the claim that these works could now survive as fixed objects, preservable in their purity; that for each there was a single, 'correct' performance against which deviations could be measured and brought back into line. Such convictions may strike us today as overbearing. To be sure, Ricordi's production books provide much information about the staging of the later Verdi operas, but this should not blind us to what they also were: a sign of a corporationally administered modernity and an attempt to forestall the multiplication of unauthorized meanings within the later operas—to keep those 'authorially intended' meanings centred, contained, in every production.

In an increasing tide of technological change and modernization, Ricordi's

manuals tried to stop time, to arrest the slipping away of the present, by demanding fidelity to these instructions. In this they were unsuccessful. Before long, differing productions did happen, particularly in the twentieth century. What the manuals provided, however, were snapshots of important productions and premières, glimpses into initially established, authorially sanctioned traditions, and insights into the psychology and aesthetics of stage productions in the late nineteenth century. For us, this remains their enduring value.

One of the ironies implicit in Ricordi's post-1870 demand for invariant staging lies in his own self-image as a reformer or 'updater' of earlier staging traditions, especially those regarding the stage mannerisms of the chorus. From the *Aida* manual onwards, Ricordi placed a note at the opening: 'Try to persuade the chorus, especially the men, that they must not represent an insignificant mass of persons. Rather, each represents a character, and as such he must act and move on his own accord, according to his own emotions, only maintaining a certain unity of action with the others.' In the *Otello* stage manual (1887) he extended this to call for the abolition of 'that funereal non-expressiveness of facial expression usually found in choruses . . . Away with the old phrase, "[But] my father did it this way!" '

In a general context of reform and potential destabilization, Ricordi was eager to establish fixed certainties—like trying to claim territory by planting a banner in the steady current of a river. As the waters flowed onwards into the twentieth century, these production-manual images became dated and were swept away. The Italian stage manuals were forgotten, only to be recovered and reclaimed decades later by scholars.

This brings us to the main point. The Verdian *disposizioni sceniche* are historical documents, not timeless ones. These production books were located in concrete historical circumstances and they were written to be read by a specific, limited community of nineteenth-century opera producers. As is the case with so many texts written over a century ago, the meaning they intended to convey is often no longer clear: it is easy to misread them.

An example occurs in the 111-page *Otello* stage manual, written largely by Giulio Ricordi in mid-1887, shortly after the La Scala première and initial tour of the opera, though with input and approval both from Boito and from Verdi himself. One of the key words throughout is *naturalezza* ('naturalness'), a call to perform an action 'as if it were happening in reality' (p. 79). Ricordi and

Boito positively ordered opera directors to embrace a stage aesthetic of credible and flexible naturalism. Negatively, they badgered them to abandon excessively stylized gestures, to avoid stiff conventions and exaggerations, to beware of unnatural pauses that strained 'real-life' credibility. Such admonitions reveal the way in which Ricordi, Boito, and Verdi feared that *Otello* would be misinterpreted: with stilted poses, faded traditionalism, and stylized stiffness (we have already noted such remarks with regard to operatic choruses).

On the face of it, the *Otello* manual seems the most 'progressive' of the Verdi stage manuals in this respect. But if we study it apart from an awareness of the concerns of its early readership, we might conclude that it struck a blow for the type of 'natural' stage movement that we often prize in more modern theatre. To conclude this would be a mistake. Its call for 'naturalness' spoke not to our potential excesses but rather to those of the Italian operatic stage of its time. The tension of the words in the *Otello* production book lies in their locked engagement with mid-century operatic practices that were being eclipsed. But it is not easy for us today to read those words with that in mind. More likely—perhaps inevitably—we push those words into a dialogue with a future they had not envisaged: with what we know has happened to operatic staging and technical direction in our own time.

How are we to understand Ricordi's and Verdi's ringing principle of *naturalezza*? In my work on the *Otello* staging materials I tried to show that by late nineteenth-century dramatic standards the production manual was filled with conventional (possibly dated) gestures: grandiose declamatory effects, raised arms towards heaven, sudden leaps and starts of surprise, hands-on-heart poses, the urge to maximize footlight facial illumination for rhetorical effect, and the like.

Perhaps the clearest perspective on this is afforded by the following story. In December 1886, only two months before the *Otello* première, Shakespeare's play *Othello* was put on in Milan (in Italian), with Giovanni Emanuel in the title role. Emanuel represented a new generation of actors: instead of following the high-rhetorical styles of Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi (the most famous Italian Othellos of the preceding generation), Emanuel allied himself with the rising northern schools of realism and naturalism. Grand declamation was toned down, theatrical gestures and statuesque poses abolished: the effect was of free stage movement, emerging

modernism and anti-Romanticism. *Naturalezza* indeed! But Verdi and Boito did not respond favourably (although Ricordi did, and even took some of the *Otello* cast members to the performance). Out of protest, Boito refused to attend, citing his allegiance to the older school of Salvini and Rossi. Verdi agreed, maintaining that Emanuel's extreme realism turned Othello into a merely weak, pitiful character. Similarly, only a year after the *Otello* première, Victor Maurel, Verdi's first Iago, wrote his own stage manual for the opera—explicit competition for the Ricordi production book. Maurel's stated goal was to bring the production up to date, to make it more flexible, more realistic. Verdi did not like it: some of its ideas, he cautioned Maurel, he found '*trop* moderne'.

Whatever the *disposizione scenica* for *Otello* might have advised about *naturalezza*, from a broader perspective it is clear that its creators preferred a school of acting that preserved many features of the towering, intense styles of decades past. In this respect the production book's call for *naturalezza* is not ours, as it was not Maurel's. Instead, it isolated a moment in the fluidity of Italian theatrical practice. The system of staging and acting advocated by the *Otello* stage manual takes a position in between the old and the new in 1887 in Italy. The force of its dramatic principles relies largely on our ability to reanimate conceptually that particular historical tension.

The moral of this is simple: as we read the production books today, we should not assume that the words always mean what they appear to mean at first glance. But there is a problem larger than language here. Let us concede that we can come to understand the words sufficiently and that, with the help of specialists, we could reproduce these early stagings of many of Verdi's operas. In seeing the 'original' stage images, how much closer would we be to these operas? Does reconstructing the operas' 'visual sign' (to use Roger Parker's term) finally show us the 'real' *Un ballo in maschera*, the 'real' *La forza del destino*, the 'real' *Don Carlos*? The historical performance movement of the past several decades built its early reputation by making or implying similar claims, and continues to promote itself in this way; but recently those claims have come under some suspicion. It may be that once performers, audiences, and times change, a recovery of eclipsed aesthetic surfaces—original sonorities, original stage pictures—reveals somewhat less than it appears to promise.

This might seem paradoxical. If today we choose to 'see what Verdi saw', how could this be construed as anything but an expressive gain? Here we need

to keep in mind Verdi's larger conception of drama. Verdi's aim, ideally, was to create a magnetically gripping experience (he called it *Dramma*, the capital 'D' important) in which the audience was to become totally absorbed in the tale unfolding on stage. This was an aesthetic of continuous, compelling engagement, one that was no longer distracted by the individual technical devices that produced it.

For Verdi, the ideal *Dramma* comprised four elements that were to interact with exquisite balance: text, music, vocal display, and stage picture. While one or other of these elements might dominate at any given moment, no extended scene—much less a whole production—was to stress any of them at the expense of the others. Time and again, Verdi objected to complex music concerned only with itself, not with the *Dramma*, to elaborate libretto poetry that served literary not dramatic values, to mannered singing or staging that called attention to itself in an egotistic or self-absorbed way.

We may learn much from Verdi's negative reaction in November 1886 to some of Alfredo Edel's costume designs for *Otello*, especially the ostentatious, quasi-barbaric costume suggested for Otello in the Act IV murder scene. Verdi wrote that the costume: 'attracts too much attention and distracts. *Once the public starts saying "Oh, what a beautiful costume", we are lost*. Artists must have the courage to efface themselves.' Similarly, during the planning for *Falstaff*, Verdi complained about self-indulgent set designers and instead requested 'painters who are not so vain as to prize their own ability above all—[we want ones who] will serve the *Dramma*'. Similar quotations abound, and from them we might draw a conclusion relevant to any modern production: Verdi, it seems, was suspicious of staging practices that called attention to themselves as different, unusual, exorbitant. Rather, especially in the later years, he sought a production whose details ceased to be noticed as details—whose specifics, so to speak, disappeared into the action, into this larger notion of *Dramma*.

Here lies the central aesthetic problem in reviving nineteenth-century staging. We can certainly revive it; but to the extent that we do so, we are likely to focus (as Verdi's audiences would not have) on its divergence from the current norm. In fact, in all likelihood such a staging would ask us explicitly to enjoy and assess in terms of this difference. At that point such a production, in calling attention to its own difference (for example, in advertising itself on the basis of that difference), runs the risk of being received more as an engaging

presentation of 'accurate data' than as an aesthetic *Dramma* in the original Verdian sense. To state the concern most bluntly, one might imagine an ever-contrary Verdi astounding the modern scholar with the following objection: *'Once the public starts saying "Oh, what an 'authentic' staging", we are lost.'*

The familiar counter-argument, of course, would insist on the opposite: that Verdian music and nineteenth-century staging match each other hand and glove, that here in the 'original staging' the Verdian concept of *Dramma* will always be most tellingly projected. There is much to be said for this view, but the perceptual problem persists: a staging that was once understood as largely 'normal' within the nineteenth century becomes for today's audience something non-traditional or unusual, because we have lost the context within which it was originally perceived. To revive an unfamiliar, early staging is to risk deflecting the *Dramma*, as it were, into something else, something in which one of the largest components is the furnishing of 'referential historical information'. This will certainly appeal to opera lovers with an appetite for history, but from a larger perspective it is doubtful that this experience should carry a unique privilege with regard to the work itself. For what is this 'work itself'? One might argue that what *Aida* has become for us over the decades is as much 'the work itself' as was its original production. There is even an argument that what *Aida* has become in its history of performances and changing interpretations has made it far more for us than what it originally was—that to restrict *Aida* to its original circumstances would be to diminish it.

Underlying the historical reconstruction movement is a grand yet melancholy hope: we might call it the Myth of Recoverable Immediacy. In its purest claims, it would have us believe that if we can only recover the historically authentic external sign (the cimbasso, the vocal ornament, the stage gesture, the backdrop, the costume, the gas lamp), the original work will once again speak spontaneously, authentically. But no sign ever speaks so directly. And once original performance circumstances and contexts are transformed—say the 1859 practices in Rome or the 1887 expectations in Milan—the original connotations of the sign decay or are lost altogether.

There may be many wonderful reasons for wanting to recover the nineteenth-century stagings of Verdi's operas. After all, operatic stagings in our own time have often been exercises in defamiliarization: commentaries or glosses on the more or less fixed repertory texts that classic operas have become. Today we tend to be more interested in new productions, especially

in surprisingly creative, controversial, or spectacular rethinkings, than we are in maintaining stable, unchanging texts. There may be sound reasons for this. However, in such a context of competing, ever-changing productions, the original staging, with its unique concerns and special authority, might throw its hat into the ring from time to time. Historical information has its place—and it can be an important one. We would be short-sighted not to pay attention to it.

But nuances are everything, and we are probably fooling ourselves if we argue that in reviving an 'authentic' staging we have recaptured the long-forgotten aesthetic heart of the work. It would be wiser and more accurate to acknowledge that we can never experience these operas as they were originally experienced. Their former social and theatrical contexts are lost, at least in any spontaneous way, and those spontaneous contexts were the very things that had centred their original terms of apprehension.

One last articulation of the paradox: in restoring an original staging we do not so much 'see' the original work as experience a modern, historicized commentary on what has continued to extend into our own time. With regard to operatic staging, our relationship to the 'original' visual sign has been for ever altered not only by our acquaintance with modern productions but also by those images generally given to us by film, television, and video.

On this side of high technology there is no easy return to a lower-tech past. To revive the original staging of *Otello* is not finally to see *Otello* as it was meant to be; it is first and foremost to participate in a commentary on twentieth-century staging, for we cannot escape taking the measure of the 1887 staging against a vast backdrop of later practice of which the first Italian audiences had no inkling. In order to see *Otello*—or indeed any opera—externally as it was, we are obliged to gaze at it through what it has become.

FURTHER READING

For a facsimile of and extensive essays on the production book for *Otello*, see James Hepokoski and Mercedes Viale Ferrero (eds.), *'Otello' di Giuseppe Verdi* (Musica e Spettacolo, Collana di Disposizioni sceniche diretta da Francesco Degrada e Mercedes Viale Ferrero; Milan, 1990). The fundamental bibliographical survey of the French *livret* sources is H. Robert Cohen and Marie-Odile Gigou, *Cent ans de mise en scène lyrique en France (env. 1830–1930)*

(Stuyvestant, NY, 1986); no comparable volume on the Italian sources exists. The *livrets* of *Les Vêpres siciliennes* and *Le Trouvère* are published in facsimile in *The Original Staging Manuals for Twelve Parisian Operatic Premières*, selected and introduced by H. Robert Cohen (Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century France, 3; Stuyvesant, NY, 1990). The *disposizione scenica* of *Aida* is reproduced, in translation, in Hans Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida': The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents* (Minneapolis, 1982). Ricordi's 'Collana di Disposizioni sceniche' has also published a volume on *Simon Boccanegra*, ed. Marcello Conati and Natalia Grilli (Milan, 1993).

PART I RESPONSES