

**Reading Character, Culture, and Politics in *Les vêpres siciliennes*:  
Verdi Confronts the Ternary Principle<sup>1</sup>**

The operatic stage is the nineteenth-century space where one encounters the most spectacular intersections of European musical tradition with the real, material history of emerging modernization. Here, through the thin allegories of plot and the generic implications of musical practice, we encounter important strata of European society wrestling with different sets of opposed cultural tensions. Among these were the turbulent social movements of transformational politics and economic, characteristically blended with the liberal-humanist anxieties of articulating a presumably “natural” conception of class, ethnic, and gender status. It is not without reason that Eric Hobsbawm has described the mid-century civic opera house as “that characteristic cathedral of [nineteenth-century] bourgeois culture.”<sup>2</sup>

For several years I have been developing the idea that one of the master keys to understanding Verdi is to be found in the implications embedded in his treatment of operatic genres (differing song- and aria-types, for example)—a treatment that includes the possibility of generic deformations and generic mixtures. My claim has been that the genres that are his stock-in-trade convey differing sociocultural and ideological registers that the composer harnessed both for the more precise depiction of character and for the advancing of the drama proper. Operatic genres are not merely neutral conveyors of song: they come pre-packed with social and cultural connotations accrued during the history of their usages in prior and current generations. These connotational

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a paper that I delivered at a Sarasota, FL, Verdi Conference on 25 March 1994. During the 1990s I thought that I might revisit and expand it into a publishable paper. But these were also the years when I was abandoning the much-changed field of Verdi Studies and beginning to pursue Sonata Theory along with more general theories of analytic-hermeneutic practice and early modernism. Consequently, the paper was left untouched. This is a reformatted but essentially unaltered version from the 1990s, one, however, that has inserted the pencil corrections and emendations that I had written into the Sarasota original.

<sup>2</sup> The original copy has appended onto it a 29 December 1994 note to self with regard to the talk’s original first paragraph: “You’ve already used these opening lines in the revision of the Belfast paper [‘Ottocento Opera as Cultural Drama’]. Find another opening.”

[Additionally--notes to self entered into the opening of this paper from around 2006-07 (entered during the process of finalizing my Puccini “Un bel di” paper, which wound up summarizing the Sarasota paper’s essential conclusions in the Puccinian n. 9)—in case I ever did wind up revising this] → “After a rewritten paragraph of intro that rephrases something like the above. . . . Mention that this is the third member of a trilogy of papers from the early 1990s [“Addio del passato” and “Ottocento Opera” are the first two members] . . . whose goal has been to understand Verdian structures not as abstract features but as choices and processes that are intended to convey a crucial aspect of drama. Formulaic structures as carriers of drama. This is the place to make the case about the continued utility of genre and structural analysis in Verdi, largely abandoned in current Verdi Studies—an argument on behalf of the importance of dialogic form and generic analysis and hermeneutics. . . .”

aspects of the formal genres favored by Verdi (high style, low style, mixed style) convey additional messages in the dialogue between the composer and the most informed, text-adequate listeners among his audiences—about whom we need to know much more than we do at present.<sup>3</sup> Social and dramatic content in these operas resides not only in the surface plots and local texts but also more deeply, more tellingly, within the musical structures themselves.

While a consideration of genre by no means unlocks all the doors of an operatic work, it does afford access to many of them. Choices within an opera to construct any section in this or that form, this or that genre, were neither neutral, nor arbitrary, nor purely formalistic or abstract. Rather, such choices were made for social and dramatic reasons. From the beginning of his career, it was one of Verdi's gifts to grasp the expressive power of genres and to amplify and intermix their connotations. What is most noticeable as one moves through the operas of the late 1840s and early 1850s—for example, *Luisa Miller* (1849), then *Stiffelio* (1850), *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (1853), *La traviata* (1853), and (for Paris) *Les vêpres siciliennes* (1855)—is that in the last mentioned of these (*Vêpres*) at least one relatively new generic element—grand ternary form—is added to the mix. Even though there were one or two scattered Verdian precedents (the most important of which occurs in *La battaglia di Legnano* from 1849), it is only in *Les vêpres siciliennes* where Verdi had frequent and emphatic recourse to these ternary structures—a design associated at this time with French grand opera. (Historically, of course, the ABA' format was anything but new.)

Since scholars have used the term “ternary” in different ways, our first problem is terminological. By a ternary structure I mean a big-block, three-part form, representable in capital letters ABA', in which the final block, A', brings back all or a substantial part of not only the music *but also the text* of the A-section. In pure ternaries this return to the opening lines of text is the defining feature. This rebeginning at A' after a contrasting, central B-section is not a common feature of Verdian practice prior to *Les vêpres siciliennes*. (In the lyric forms of his earlier works, once the opening lines of an aria had been delivered, they were not to be returned to.) In *Vêpres* the two most obvious ternaries, though not the only ones, are the arias opening Act II and Act III, Procida's “Et toi, Palerme” and Montfort's “Au sein de la puissance.” This move toward the ternary is the result not so much of Verdian compositional will but of external factors: the commercial demands of the Parisian commission; the traditions and tableau-monumentalism of French grand opera; and the strongly French—and, for Verdi, poetically challenging—libretto by Scribe and Duveyrier.

Let's back up for a moment to review the generic situation in Verdi's works before *Les vêpres siciliennes*. At the heart of nineteenth-century opera is the principle of generic intermixture—

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<sup>3</sup> Iser on text-adequate readers. Address this larger point?

blends and juxtapositions of connotatively “higher” and “lower” styles that (as Carl Dahlhaus has pointed out)<sup>4</sup> announce the inexorable arrival of a new kind of audience, one increasingly concerned with celebrating the world-views of certain strata of the liberal-humanist bourgeoisie. Without recapitulating a broader theory of the Verdian treatment of form in the 1840s and early 1850s, we could at least say this: in a rapidly changing and modernizing world in which the tradition of Italian opera was sliding into a crisis of inevitable decline, Verdi had been developing a rigid, even formulaic system of genre.<sup>5</sup> In his first decade of composition, then, Verdi adapted certain pre-existing Italian practices (the so-called “Code Rossini”)<sup>6</sup> into a rougher, more explosively dramatic *power-style* of schematized formal constriction. At first, then, Verdi was seeking to precipitate earlier Italian, pre-centered tendencies into compact, clenched-fist methods of schematized compositional control.

This compact, early-Verdian system is something that audiences have normally been invited to understand as preponderantly Italian, and it has been the subject of much scholarly study in the past twenty-five years. This study has spawned its own vocabulary. Thus we read of various castings of Italianate “lyric form” for individual melodies (these are efficient aa’ba’ or aa’bc melodic patterns—or deformations thereof—often setting 8-line texts); and we read of square-cut cantabile-cabaletta designs, normalized Verdian duet structures, ensembles, and so on. Much less methodically explored has been Verdi’s effort in the later 1840s and early 1850s to filter a wave of less elevated, more connotatively natural French practices through this Italianate power-style. Up until the point of *Les vêpres siciliennes* these added French practices were borrowed almost exclusively not from the more elevated ternary models but from the more casual strophic styles—lighter, more naive, or more colloquial songs in multiple verses, such as the *romance* and the *ballade*, which featured expressively different melodic ways of moving through a given text.<sup>7</sup>

Having customized his own disciplined set of Italian generic defaults in the later 1840s and early 1850s, Verdi then began to sprinkle in foreign elements with other connotations. As Abramo Basevi noted in the 1850s, these were the lighter, more casual strophic song-patterns or, at least, quasi-strophic methods of organizing individual, single-stanza texts. These French-strophic intermixtures would seem to tilt the operas of the early 1850s—*Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*—further in the direction of identification with key sectors of the rising liberal-humanist

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<sup>4</sup> Dahlhaus

<sup>5</sup> Orig. continuation here: this development is an example of what I call more generally the principle of *generic centering*.

<sup>6</sup> Balthazar?

<sup>7</sup> JH, “Ottocento Opera as Cultural Drama”

middle class, which saw itself as the bearer of the natural, the non-pretentious, the emotionally spontaneous. Even before *Les vêpres siciliennes* Verdi was infiltrating his Italian base with French accents—with techniques drawn from a second set of conventions: the lighter, more artless French strophic styles—verse-refrain structures, and so on.

But by 1854 and 1855 Scribe’s libretto for *Les vêpres siciliennes*, drawing on French grand-opera convention, challenged Verdi to go further and add a *third* element to the mix: allusions to grand, formalized ternary structures. We now encounter mixtures of not two but three sets of generic defaults: the all-important Italian base, the French strophic styles, and the French ternary. And although one might argue that the generic mix in *Vêpres* seemed quite French by prior Verdian standards, we should keep in mind that Verdi did not enter the French conventions neutrally or on their ground; rather, he entered them as a vector, with momentum and direction, from his own prior Italian practice.

Now, earlier, I referred to such intermixtures as a throwing-together of socioculturally higher and lower styles. From a nineteenth-century politically progressive point of view, this inclusion of the lower style would be a positive, not a negative, attribute. “Lower” could carry the connotation of “more natural, more modern, more spontaneous, more casual—less stiff, aristocratic, and old-fashioned.” It was in the more casual styles—including but not limited to stanzaic songs and melody-patterns—that the nineteenth-century musical audience sought to construct one of its most desired reflections. One of the grand stories of nineteenth-century opera as a whole is the way that the presumably lower, or spontaneous, genres first invade, then undermine, and then dissolve away the more formalized, higher genres: These things may be interpreted as musical images of the new, liberal-humanist world overtaking and appropriating the old. Within individual works these intermixed tensions of high and low styles may be tied to plot and character. This is what Verdi invites us to do in his operas.

Obviously, this is all more complex than I can deal with here, but for now let’s move out of the abstract and get a sense of how such ideas might be applied concretely toward a reading of *Les vêpres siciliennes*. Setting aside important nuances, I propose that we might order the three generic style-sets that Verdi intermixes here into an overlapping hierarchy from socioculturally high (or old-world) to low (modern or new-world). On the top, the most formalized and old world is the monumental French ternary practice, the big-block ABA’ structures, for Verdi the added generic element in *Les vêpres siciliennes*. In the middle is Verdi’s standard Italian practice from the 1840s—cantabiles, cabalettas, melodic lyric form, and so on—perhaps now representing within this French opera of 1855 (at least for Verdi) sheer Italian-operatic normality with its potent, residual claim to “Italian-ness.” (This is hardly a negligible factor in an opera written for Paris, let alone one with this

plot, dealing with Italians rising up against the French). And the lowest and most modern are the more casual, less pretentious strophic styles and melodic patterns—the natural styles presumably meant to strike a more immediate bond with significant strata of their initial European audiences.

One could read any portion of this work by asking about its implied dialogues with these hierarchized genre-types. What follows here will be centered around this question: To what extent does Verdi define each of the four principal characters of *Les vêpres siciliennes* by his or her interaction with or relationship to the large ternary genre, ABA'? Restated: How does each character approach the most formal, most elevated structure at hand? The issues may be most clearly presented, I think, not by proceeding act by act, but rather by considering the principal characters in this order: Montfort, Procida, Hélène, Henri.

First, to Montfort: the most transparent case. Not surprisingly, it is the French Guy de Montfort who is given the most expansive and formal of ternary structures—the big-block ABA'—in his *air* (as Scribe and Verdi call it) that opens Act III, “Au sein de la puissance.” Montfort, of course, is the figure of paternal and state authority. As the libretto tells us, he is the “governor of Sicily, serving Charles of Anjou, king of Naples,” and for “modern” nineteenth-century audiences—and for us as well—Montfort is probably intended to be taken as a metaphorical embodiment of old-world privilege or unjust power, the figure *against* whom the ultimately just (though excessively brutal) Sicilian mass uprising is aimed.

On the lips of Montfort the grandeur of the ternary form—a stylized form whose operatic memory goes back at least to the aristocratic operas and librettos of the eighteenth century—can be taken to represent one of the expected perquisites of power. Through architectural connotation and historical memory the structure conveys his sense of position, status. Montfort's unquestioned right to it, even in such private moments as those in “Au sein de la puissance,” suggests that, as a man of broad authority, the decorous formality of the ternary delivery is his proper mode of utterance. That this piece is preceded not only by a lengthy recitative but also by an extended orchestral introduction—both signs of monumentality and importance within operatic convention—only heightens the effect of this expansive tableau.

This *de facto* splendor is also the point of the opening two lines of the *air*, which conjure up the pomp of office, “Au sein de la puissance, / “Au sein de la grandeur” (“In the center of power, in the center of grandeur”). Along with the stage decor and the personage of Montfort himself, the opening lines set the terms of the high-style musical form that is to follow. But the point of this *air* is hardly one of swaggering confidence. Quite the opposite: Montfort is brooding about a letter he has received some time ago from a woman with whom he had a sexual liaison some eighteen years past—in fact, a brutal liaison, smacking of kidnaping and rape (“Je l'enlevai jadis”)—from which he has

learned that the young Sicilian revolutionary Henri is his illegitimate son. And Montfort he has just vowed to soften his previously harsh attitude toward him. But this sudden softening (*attendrissement*) and the manner in which it is conveyed play on the typically new-world ideology of the overriding legitimacy of “natural” or spontaneous emotion. Montfort’s (one might say) bourgeois humanizing towards his son, irrationally overriding the interests of aristocratic state politics, is at odds with the pre-established grandeur of ternary form. In this fissure of ternary solidity lies the crux of the aria.

Verdi’s musical solution here is simple but effective. Given the high-style implication of a large ternary form, ABA’, in the libretto—8 lines, 4 lines, the original 8 lines again—he crafted the large A section into a self-contained structure that unfolds, unexpectedly, in the manner of a typical low-style *stanzaic* block: a verse/refrain-space structure, even though there are not multiple stanzas and literal refrains here. The general French strophic process is unmistakable, and Julian Budden has noted, though without remarking on its expressive significance, that the effect of the A-section was that of an F-sharp minor-major romance. In other words, Verdi was intermixing elements primarily from two French style sets, ternary and strophic: The residual Italian components are minimal here, virtually negligible, as Abramo Basevi observed (and complained about).<sup>8</sup>

In Montfort’s air, then, Verdi was invading the A-section of the high-style ABA’ ternary with intermixtures or suggestions of a low-style French stanzaic process. This is the point of the text: “Au sein de la puissance,” “in the midst of [ternary] power,” the old-world Montfort opens up to the newer, less formal world of casual or natural structures. In observing his doing so, we can sense that that he is revealing his own “natural” link to and inadvertent sympathy with the presumed contours of the emotional world of important elements within the nineteenth-century audience.

And so Montfort confesses in the text that the old world—without this human sense of having a son—was empty, “a frightful, immense void” (“Un vide affreux, immense”), lines that are repeated for emphasis. And as he subsequently begins the major-mode refrain space, he anticipates the new world that he believes he is now entering—one whose gates are clearly to be opened by spontaneous emotion. The text that Verdi set at the F-sharp-major refrain space, *meno mosso* and *dolcissimo*, is perfectly clear on this point: “Le ciel vient apparaître . . . Et je me sens renaître” (“Heaven appears before me . . . and I feel reborn”). The text that Scribe eventually published has a different line here, but the same point, “Mais s’offre un nouvel être,” a “new being” emerges; and the familiar Italian translation speaks even more directly of “un avenir beato” (“a blessed future”). The major-mode refrain space takes on a politically utopian suggestion, one that is far from irrelevant in this opera of political revolution and side-switching. Throughout all of this, the musical texture moves in

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<sup>8</sup> Basevi

subsection- contrasts and disjunctions—abrupt style mixtures, not at all a feature of Italianate lyric-form melodies but very much an acceptable procedure within French stanzaic processes. Let's listen to a bit of it.

MUSIC: A section, beginning of B: IN ITALIAN (Sherril Milnes, James Levine; ca. 2:00)

[formal thematic block/ continuation/ set-up / refrain space]

a a' b x

Operatically, that is a clear stanzaic block. And yet the overriding disposition of the whole piece—we've only heard about 40 percent of it—is that of the formalized, old-world ternary: the old and new worlds are in tension here. Still, we should notice that the old world (the ternary principle) ultimately predominates. With Montfort, the ternary style is “looking down from above,” so to speak, and it is yielding to elements of the new (a dangerous thing to do, as the rest of the opera will show).

Montfort's air is an example, then, of what I call a “*full ternary*” aria, an ABA' structure whose outer blocks—the capital A's—consist of a complete, self-standing, 8-line aria-melody: a complete French stanza, for example, as here, or, as possibly in other cases, a complete lyric binary (small letter aa'ba'' or aa'bc). But sometimes—as in Procida's apostrophe to the city of Palermo at the opening of Act II, “Et toi, Palerme,” to which we now turn—the A sections are shorter. In these cases the half-length A-sections comprise only the portion that in lyric form may be identified as the *thematic block* (small letter aa', usually setting not eight, but only four lines, 2 + 2). I call such briefer ABA' structures “*compressed ternary forms*.” In all instances, when they move into the contrasting B-section, it initially seems as though we are merely entering the medial zone (small-b zone) of a standard Italian lyric form. We learn otherwise only when the return to the initial melody *with its original text* obliges us to redefine the piece as a more formalized ternary structure.

Compressed ternaries seem to be hybrids—generic mixtures—between standard Italian lyric form (small-letter aaba) and the grander, full ternaries. In compressed ternaries the capital-letter ABA' overall structure is further reducible to small-letter aabaa, where the last two a's are a reprise of the first two. Most important, this is a ternary form entered or achieved “from below,” that is, from the middle rung of the hierarchy, from the initial premise of Italian lyric form. For any midcentury Italian composer there was a famous predecessor for such compressed ternaries, and it was perhaps the most celebrated of all tenor *romances*, “Ange si pur” (or “Spirto gentil”) from Donizetti's *La favorite*. (One might also notice the slightly differing precedent from the fourth act of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, Arnold's “Asile héréditaire,” or, more directly, from Verdi's own *La battaglia di*

*Legnano*, Rolando’s “Ah, m’abbraccia d’esultanza”—a rare example of Verdian compressed ternary form before *Les vêpres siciliennes*.)

The generically expressive point of the compressed ternary would seem to be its potential for suggesting a quasi-monumentality constructed or gained from below. This is the point of Verdi defining Procida (the mature, seasoned revolutionary) with this structure at the beginning of Act II, “Et toi, Palerme.” (This decision may have been entirely Verdi’s: Scribe’s printed version of this text does not suggest any sort of ternary form. We might recall, though, that “Et toi, Palerme” replaced a different ternary aria originally planned for Procida, “O Sicile, o ma patrie.”) Procida’s “Et toi, Palerme,” of course, is also in dialogue with a standard type of French *romance* (I refer to it as the “Patrie” type, the apostrophe to the fatherland, though these *romances* are normally strophic), and its most obvious predecessor, as virtually everyone remarks, is from Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*, Marguerite’s “O beau pays de la Touraine”—which, one might add, is a full ternary (a grand ternary uttered “from above”), not a compressed one (delivered “from below”).

To return to the main point: Procida’s ternary “Et toi, Palerme,” a thorough generic intermixture, strikes us as quite the opposite of Montfort’s “Au sein de la puissance.” Here, still powerless, Procida is asserting his right to the formal trappings of power and authority (“Levez-vous! levez-vous!”). Procida would seem to be no aristocrat: He is described only as a mature *médecin sicilien*, although Budden gives us the important information that “in the epoch preceding the Risorgimento . . . Procida was regarded as a forerunner of men like Giuseppe Mazzini” (176). Procida’s natural language in this context would be the purely Italian: Italian lyric form as an identifier of unquestioned *italianità*, especially when inflected, as here, with the melodic contours of the Italian-popular or folk idiom. Once this is established, the more specific point is simply made: Procida—the Italian revolutionary—begins from a centered “Italian-ness”—lyric form—which he wishes to elevate, and to this end Verdi has him construct an “elevated” ternary structure on his own terms. He appropriates the more formal power-language of the “old world” (ABA’), recasting it, appropriately, as a variant of Italian lyric form. Bluntly put, Italian lyric form invades and subdues the ternary: this is also the heart of the plot of *Les vêpres siciliennes*, as least as Procida understands it. Let’s listen:

MUSIC: “Et toi, Palerme” aa / b ... a [etc.]—Joseph Rouleau...2:25

Thus: a ternary from achieved from below. One might only add that “Et toi, Palerme” is not an entirely self-standing piece: it also serves as the first element of a larger, double-aria structure—the cantabile preceding a subsequent cabaletta (more *italianità*, unlike the isolated air of Montfort).



Moreover, the cabaletta-complex that follows, “Saint amour qui m’entraîne,” is clearly modelled after one in *Il trovatore*, the Count di Luna’s “Per me ora fatale.” Although the precise melodic structure or lyric-form expanded variant of Procida’s cabaletta, “Saint amour,” is one of the most important for the understanding of Verdian melodies in the later works in the 1850s, we shall limit ourselves here to noting Procida’s pointed subordination of the compressed ternary *cantabile*, “Et toi, Palerme,” to the demands of a more purely Italian, larger design.

Thus Montfort and Procida. But what about the two younger characters, the lovers—and hot-blooded revolution-sympathizers—Hélène and Henri? Their approaches to ternary structures are more subtle. Hélène’s single approach would seem to be in her grand aria—actually a double-aria, with cabaletta—in Act I, “Viens à nous, Dieu tutélaire.” But her approach in this *cantabile* is one that subverts the ternary, one that performs in musical terms the destruction of high-style monumentality.

One should recall the circumstances of her aria. The opera’s opening had been French-defined (old-world defined) through an opening ternary chorus (“O beau pays de France,” with added Sicilian grumblings) and through some decidedly explicit and unpleasant power-conversations among the French minor characters, Robert, Thibault, Béthune, and Vaudemont. In short, after claiming the French (old-world) right to the women of Sicily—and we might note once again that threats of kidnaping and rape bubble persistently to the surface as unust, old-world images in Acts, 1, 2, and 3—Robert has outrageously ordered the detained Duchess Hélène—dressed in mourning because of the French execution of her brother—to amuse them by singing a song. “Froidement” (“coldly”) she agrees, “Je chanterai!” But the French get more than they expected.

In terms of its text Hélène’s D-flat *cantabile* is an inset song, a story of a storm at sea, of the threatened sailors asking God for help, and of God’s replying that the sailors’ lives are dependent only on themselves—obviously, all of this is a patent metaphor for the tyrannized Sicilians. But the musical structure here is equally telling. The *cantabile* proper begins with the sailors’s prayer, “Viens à nous, Dieu tutélaire,” and proceeds with a four-line melodic block. This section, marked *Largo*, is not shaped as a standard Italian lyric-form, to be sure (its phrase-pairing design may suggest things more French), but it is clearly intended as a complete four-line thematic block—possibly the onset, or A-section, of some sort of compressed ternary variant. (A full ternary would have a longer A-block.)

[MUSIC: “Viens à nous, Dieu tutélaire,” A-BLOCK: then stop tape  
In Italian—Martina Arroyo.... 53”]

A contrasting middle section follows for the recounting of God’s response after the prayer: the music is faster, marked *Allegro moderato*, it is modulatory away from Db, and so on. Now, in

terms of generic expectation, we might suppose at its opening, “Et Dieu disait,” that we have entered the B-section of some sort of ternary form (probably a compressed ternary). What we are led to expect musically is an extended middle-zone, B, and a return to the opening section, “Viens à nous, Dieu tutélaire”—though textually, of course, it would be awkward to return to the prayer. What Verdi has Héléne do here is to enter the B-zone “normally”—or according to genre—but then to dissolve it with the implied exhortation to revolutionary action. In short, having conjured up, “on orders,” the French, old-world, or high-style ABA’ form, Héléne proceeds to destroy it midway through the B-section. In more technical terms, what she does is gradually to merge the ternary’s quasi-declamatory B-section—here a call to self-reliance—with the principle of the *tempo di mezzo* (the normal “action” passage connecting a cantabile to the cabaletta) and then elides directly into a crowd-rousing cabaletta, “Courage! du courage!” with the onset of which the implied narrative voice of the inset song disappears and her own hortatory voice emerges.<sup>9</sup> Put another way, she takes initially French structural premises and wrests them toward a new, Italian center.

[MUSIC: B-Section, “Et Dieu disait” Narrate the events,  
through the opening of the cabaletta, “Courage!” 1:25]

Here Verdi constructs Héléne’s unrealized ternary *cantabile* to perform an act of musical subversion—which is exactly what the text is about. Here the high-style ABA’ is not only linked to the principle of old-world authority and stiff monumentality, it also seems linked to the notion of public space, or formal public-square exhibition on the terms of the reigning powers. And it is precisely those powers that Héléne wishes to overturn. It is important that she utters the pseudo-ternary structure in an anonymous narrator’s voice; the text is delivered (and printed) in quotation marks, and she thus pointedly avoids associating her identity with their form. By gradually appropriating the ternary’s B-zone as an Italian *tempo di mezzo*, though, she is able to regain her own voice, in the Italianate “Courage! du courage!” (no more quotation marks), and, most interesting of all, in the subsequent cabaletta she proceeds to construct a very different sort of grand ternary structure, one now totally on her own terms and very much in dialogue with Italian lyric-form principles.

Though we won’t linger on it here, the C-major “Courage! du courage!” is an example of what I call a “ternary cabaletta,” one whose central ritornello section is so expanded or sharply defined as to permit its consideration as a full-blown section in its own right. Such ternary cabalettas

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lady Macbeth, “Or tutti, sorgete!”—something of a model for this cabaletta?

are common features of *Les vêpres siciliennes*: Here Verdi, led by Scribe, expands the usual cabaletta-short ritornello-cabaletta repetition format in such a way as to seem simultaneously in dialogue with the monumentality of full ternary form: this is another social appropriation of a higher structural authority, as it were, from below. To be sure, such an interpretational possibility was always there in prior cabalettas—in Violetta’s “Sempre libera” from *La traviata*, for example. The differences here are not so much in kind as in size or degree, though contextual placements (for example, the obsessively ternary contexts in *Les vêpres siciliennes*) are also important as framing factors. Without going into the matter further, I might mention only that the subsequent ternary or ternary-like cabalettas in *Les vêpres siciliennes* are either duet-cabalettas, such as “Téméraire, téméraire,” from the Henri-Montfort duet in Act I, or ensemble strettas, such as “Je cède avec ivresse,” from the Act IV Quartet—a classic instance. These things present additional complications, though, that we’re not considering here.

My argument thus far regarding the solo ternary structures in *Les vêpres* is that Verdi, usually following certain suggestions of Scribe, has these three characters—Montfort, Procida, and Hélène—treat this most formal of designs as something of a battleground—as turf over which to fight. But what of the fourth (and perhaps the most important) main character, the tenor and *jeune sicilien* Henri? Although it may initially seem strange to say so, here the crucial point is that Henri is given no ternary aria—rather like the Sherlock Holmes situation in which the central clue is that the all-important dog did not bark in the night. At no point does this young revolutionary generate on his own the musical structure corresponding to the sphere of old-world power. (Verdi seems even to have rejected an early, ternary text, “D’impatience et d’espérance,” once proposed for Henri’s Act 4 aria.) In this sense Scribe and Verdi delineate Henri’s character as far more modern than that, say, of Procida.

Not only is Henri in part defined by his distance from solo ternary architecture, he often seems to be wary even of standard Italian lyric-form structures. (The chief exception here is to be found in his ecstatic lyric-form duet cabaletta with Hélène, “Pour moi rayonne / Douce couronne,” in Act IV. But the structural point of this love-duet cabaletta is its very attainment of “normality” within Italian operatic convention. From Verdi’s perspective this duet cabaletta would have been far and away the most orthodox piece in the opera.) More generally, though, instead of ternaries and lyric forms, Henri is drawn more characteristically to strophic structures or verse-refrain-space patterns—and also, here and there, to the broad, modern, French double-periodic structures. He is drawn, in other words, to the presumably lower or more modern, more spontaneous modes of expression. Henri’s personal and political character centers not around grand ternary structures but around stanzaic ones, such as those found in his two solo pieces, “O jour de peine” in Act IV and “La brise

souffle au loin” in Act V, both of which unfold in two stanzas.<sup>10</sup> From a broader point of view, what Henri would seem to embody—both in the plot and in the music—is the new, youthful world and its stanzaic or double-periodic structures (that world prizing the natural rights of spontaneous feeling) devoted ultimately to the eclipsing, and hence the destruction, of the stiffer, architectonic old world and its ternaries.

This general argument might be pushed further. Considered as a whole, *Les vêpres siciliennes* may be read as a grand, fully differentiated intermixture of contrasting genres, in which, despite the complicating persistence of the intermixture, a general tendency may be discerned across the five acts. The opera begins with a marked, old-world ternary bias—frequent, strong ternary allusions with varying connotations, especially in the first three acts. These ternaries are submitted to various appropriations, bruising, or deformations, and the opera eventually tilts toward strophic patterns, especially in Acts IV and V. (Once again: These tendencies are not absolutes or pure things: They are matters of nuance and weighting within intermixtures.) Most important, the general structural shift away from the ternary and toward the stanzaic or the more modern at the end reflects, even enacts, important features of the plot and its obsession with political revolution and personal redefinition.

For this reason, I would argue that the two obviously lighter, back-to-back *couplets* in Act V, Hélène’s *bolero*, “Merci, jeunes amis” and Henri’s *mélodie*, “La brise souffle au loin,” are not mere sweetmeats or functionless *divertissements*. On the contrary, particularly because they are foreshadowed by parallel, more intense stanzaic structures in Act 4, they have enormous roles to play in the larger musical-structural motion of the whole. With these lighter Act 5 pieces Hélène and Henri are staged as believing that they are liberating a new world of feeling, though one which proves to be unrealizable in the opera’s present. Nominally, both characters wish to be on Procida’s side—certainly not on the side of the old world—but their theoretical loyalties are undone by natural emotion. In Act V both Hélène and Henri seek refuge from political intrigue and grand authoritarian structure; both seek to claim a moral cleansing from guilt and responsibility through the strength of their presumably purer, natural, or new-world emotion. And, doubtless, they want the audience on their side. The lighter, strophic songs in Act V mark a point of structural attainment in all of this. They are anything but irrelevant.

By way of conclusion, I add only that I do not find it a coincidence that the last formal musical number of the opera—the *stretta* of the trio near the end of Act V, “Trahison! imposture!”—is interpretable as a musical illustration of deep generic crisis. One of its most prominent structural implications, though, is that of a “modern” three-stanza structure, each of whose stanzas is marked by

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<sup>10</sup> Note in margin: 1863 [?]: “O toi que j’ai chérie.”

the normative, spotlighted refrain space, “Adieu, beauté fatale!” “La cloche fatale,” and so on. The brutal, *fortissimo* tritone gash that Verdi inflicts on the conclusion of this trio—one of the nastiest sounds in all of opera—may be understood to imply the decisive rending of old-world monumental operatic genres, at least within the delimited world of this opera. This *fortissimo* tritone-wound issues in a tense jumble of non-generic events that lead to the ringing of the vesper bells and the concluding stage-image of mass carnage at the final curtain, one that claims Montfort, Hélène, and Henri alike. Aptly, in the autograph score Verdi labeled this non-generic conclusion only with the words, “après le trio.” To be sure, this drama of dissolution and destruction is one played out in the surface plot on-stage. But, equally important, it is a plot played out—with perhaps even more ringing implications—in the musical structures themselves.