Cambridge Opera Journal, **21**, 3, 279–289 © Cambridge University Press, 2010
doi:10.1017/S0954586710000182

Verdi's *Attila*: a study in chiaroscuro

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Abstract: This study untangles the complex literary, historical, political and theatrical web of Verdi, Solera, Zacharias Werner, Madame De Staël and Giuseppe Mazzini, and relates it to Verdi's use of light and dark imagery in Werner's play.

At first glance, *Attila* seems like just one of the many operas in Verdi's oeuvre written at a time when he wrote one or two operas annually. More reflection, however, suggests that this *drama lirico* is truly one of the most unusual and puzzling works that the great Italian composer ever penned. Even the circumstances surrounding the work's genesis are exceptional.

Attila is the only libretto among Verdi's almost thirty operas based on a text not then available as an original or translation in either of the two languages that Verdi knew: Italian and French. Only two very short excerpts from Zacharias Werner's *Attila, König der Hunnen* had appeared in a French prose translation: the first and larger half of the second scene of the second act (which Verdi did not use), published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1830,[1] and a small excerpt from the third scene of the fourth act in a history of German literature published in 1836.[2] Verdi may have become aware of the translation of this key scene by way of Giuseppe Mazzini – I will return later to the part played by the chief ideologue of the Risorgimento in the Italian reception of Werner.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear how Verdi was able to translate the very dramatic effects of Werner's 'romantic tragedy' into his opera when they evidently came to him second hand. Of all the German-language sources that Verdi used for his operas, Werner's unusual drama was the only one that he did not become acquainted with through his aristocratic friend and patron Andrea Maffei, the bilingual German–Italian–French *littérateur* and outstanding connoisseur and translator of the literary canon. In a letter dated 25 March 1845 to Maffei, Verdi shows an unmistakable interest in Werner's drama, apparently acquired without having previously spoken to his friend: 'If you have read Werner's *Attila* and if you do not think a good melodrama might be extracted from it, write to me immediately

For publication in this journal, this article was shortened by the author. The full version in its original German appears under the title 'Neues Licht für das Vaterland. "Attila" und die Bedeutung des "chiaroscuro" für Verdis musikalische Dramaturgie', *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft / Annales Suisses de Musicologie / Annuario Svizzero di Musicologia*. Neue Folge / Nouvelle série / Nuova Serie 28/29 (2008/2009), 151–70.

[1] [Anonymous], *La Cour de Valentinien en 494*, in *Revue de Paris*, 21 (1830), 193–214; see also Emil Wismer, *Der Einfluss des deutschen Romantikers Zacharias Werner in Frankreich. Die Beziehungen des Dichters zu Madame de Staël* (1928; rpt. Bern, 1968), 38–9.

[2] A[dolphe] Peschier, *Histoire de la littérature allemande, depuis les temps les plus reculés, jusqu'à nos jours, précédée d'un parallèle entre la France et l'Allemagne, et suivie d'une table analytique des matières* (Paris and Geneva, 1836), II, 361–3.

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because I have almost definitely decided to set this subject' ('Se hai letto l'Attila di Verner e se credi che se ne possa cavare un buon melodrama scrivimene prontamente perché ho quasi deciso di trattare quel sogetto').[3] Maffei seems to have answered Verdi's question about whether *Attila* would be suitable for a 'buon melodrama' positively. A week later Verdi wrote to his librettist Piave: 'Maffei will do the Attila outline for me' ('Maffei mi farà lo sbozzo dell'Attila').[4] In any case, this 'sbozzo', this synopsis, has not survived, and no further documents exist to shed light on Verdi's and Maffei's motivations for adapting this drama.

A comparison of the opera with the spoken tragedy of 1808 shows very few points of contact with the model, another of its highly unusual features. No other opera in Verdi's substantial oeuvre is so different from its literary antecedent. Even a work such as *Giovanna d'Arco*, where the characters diverge substantially from the original, is closer to the action of Schiller's play than this supposedly 'Werner' opera.

Werner and Verdi

We should address the question frequently taken as a starting point in the literature: what fascinated Verdi so much about this crude drama from 1808 anyway? Certainly there is much evidence to suggest that he became aware of the play by reading Madame de Staël's effusive praise of it in *De l'Allemagne*, which had been available since 1814 in an Italian translation. For in a letter to Piave on 12 April 1845 he strongly recommended: 'Here is the sketch of Werner's tragedy for you. There are magnificent things in it and it is full of effect. Read Stael's *Allemagna*' ('Eccoti lo schizzo della tragedia del Verner. Vi sono delle cose magnifiche e piene d'effetto. Leggi l'*Allemagna* della Staël').[5] But this testimony provides little real insight. 'Effetto', or 'theatrical effect', was surely what Verdi strove for in all his operas, and the adjective 'magnifico' is similarly vague.

To come to terms with the question of Verdi's specific interest in *Attila*, we might consider an indirect approach yet to be tried in the literature, that is, the juxtaposition of Verdi's commissioned libretto with Werner's original drama. The few concordances and countless differences provide insight into Verdi's specific perspective on the more-or-less historical subject matter. A nuanced comparison of the libretto – on which first Francesco Maria Piave, then Temistocle Solera, and then Piave worked – with Werner's drama was conducted a few years ago by Rita Unfer Lukoschik from the viewpoint of 'ideological and poetic valency'.[6] Nevertheless, it seems appropriate once again to emphasise how little Verdi adopted from

[3] The letter, first published in 1955, can be consulted in the Biblioteca comunale in Trent. Quoted in Marta Marri Tonelli, *Andrea Maffei e il giovane Verdi* (Riva del Garda, 1999), 102.

[4] Undated letter, previously dated to 1844, that was clearly written between 3 and 5 April 1845. Quoted in Marcello Conati, *La bottega della musica. Verdi e la Fenice* (Milan, 1983), 145. For dating, see p. 152.

[5] Conati, 143.

[6] Rita Unfer Lukoschik, 'L'Attila di Zacharias Werner ed il libretto per Verdi', in *Verdi und die deutsche Literatur / Verdi e la letteratura tedesca. Tagung im Centro tedesco di studi veneziani Venedig 20.–21. November 1997. Bericht*, ed. Daniella Goldin Folena and Wolfgang Osthoff (Laaber, 2002), 71–89, here 80–1.

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the 'accumulation of philosophical, mystical, Masonic, and religious cues in Werner's world',[7] and how fundamentally his opera differs from its literary source. These differences are even more noteworthy when one considers that Francesco Malipiero's opera *Attila*, premiered in Venice in 1845, is far less removed from Werner's drama than Verdi's is.[8]

A comparison of the Werner with Verdi's opera shows, that, apart from the basic framework of plot – at the beginning the conquest of Aquileia, at the end the murder of Attila by the female protagonist, now named Odabella – only one dramatic sequence follows the progression in Werner's work: the meeting of Leo and Attila in front of the gates of Rome that culminates in Leo's exhortative words and Attila's frightful vision. But even the dramatic function of this moment is significantly altered: no more a peripeteia as in Werner's fourth act, it is now part of the exposition in Verdi's first act. Beyond this, the dialogue between Attila and Aetius from Werner's third act reappears in the duet of Ezio and Attila in the first scene of the prologue. And finally, the sunrise over Attila's bivouac at the beginning of the fourth act in Werner's drama provided a model for the natural phenomenon that occurs in the second scene of Verdi's prologue,[9] where not only the context and the dramatic function are changed, but, above all, the connotation of the radiating light is fundamentally altered. We will return to these three scenes in more detail below.

Light and dark

If we do not limit ourselves merely to the plot or to a more or less ideological and theological subtext when considering Werner's drama, then a striking feature of the work that has seemingly never been noticed in the scant literature on Werner emerges.[10] In a remarkable number of places, Werner introduces metaphors of light. In fact, right at the beginning we read in the *Dedication to his dear friends:* 'The glaring hot rays of the world's tumult / He who has won the holy prism for himself beholds / As the five blended colours in beautiful play; / In each does he see the whole image of the suns / Even in the dark ones a resounding light / Absent for those far from the source' ('Des Weltgewühles blendend heisse Strahlen / Schaut, der das heilige Prisma sich gewonnen, / Als schönes Spiel der fünf vereinten Farben; / In jeder sieht er ganz das Bild der Sonnen, / Die dunkeln sind ihm auch des Lichtes

[7] Lukoschik, 80.

[8] See Markus Engelhardt, *Verdi und andere. 'Un giorno di regno', 'Ernani, 'Attila', 'Il corsaro' in Mehrfachvertonungen* (Parma, 1992), 174–258.

[9] Jean-François Candoni, 'De la tragédie romantique allemande à l'opéra italien: "Attila" de Verdi, entre discours patriotique et internationalisation de l'opéra', in *A travers l'Opéra. Parcours anthropologiques et transferts dramaturgiques sur la scène théâtrale européenne du XVIII^e^ au XX^e^ siècle. Études en l'honneur de Gilles de Van*, ed. Siro Ferrone and Andrea Fabiano (Paris, 2007), 241–61, here 259–60.

[10] See, among others, Franz Stuckert, *Das Drama Zacharias Werners. Entwicklung und literargeschichtliche Stellung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1926); Gerard Koziełek, *Das dramatische Werk Zacharias Werners* (Wrocław, 1967); Ulrich Beuth, 'Romantisches Schauspiel. Untersuchungen zum dramatischen Werk Zacharias Werners', Diss. phil. (Munich, 1979).

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Schaalen, / Für die, die fern von dessen Quell noch darben').[11] The play explicitly aims to transcend dramatic situations and human feelings with metaphors of light and dark. Thus, it is no surprise that – to cite just a few examples – 'the sword of Wodan', who 'is enthroned above in darkness', is carried by the Hun warriors 'like a bolt of lightning'.[12] The first words of Irnak, the son of Attila, upon seeing the burning city Aquileia are: 'Father, dear Father / Over there the fire burns so bright, so beautiful!' ('Vater, lieber Vater, / Das Feuer dort, es brennt so hell, so schön!').[13] Among Attila's sayings is: 'In truth burns the eternal light!' ('Denn in der Wahrheit flammt das ew'ge Licht!').[14] He even explains love with metaphors of light and flames as uncontrollable forces of nature: 'A bard once called / Love a bolt of lightning that, split into two / Comes upon two halves of a heart, once whole / And unites them again, cleansed in a flame!' ('Ein Barde nannt' einmal / Die Lieb': 'nen Blitzstrahl, der, in zwei gespaltet, / Zwei halbe Herzen trift, die vormals Eines, / Sie neu vereint, in einer Flamme reinigt!').[15] In the very last moments of the drama, as Hildegunde commits suicide she curses the 'light' moments before she is blessed by Pope Leo, and he cries out triumphantly: 'Praise be to the light!' ('Lob sey dem Licht!').[16]

The extent to which Verdi made this compositional principle his own here is truly noteworthy. In contrast to Werner, though, he inserts references to light and dark only occasionally into the text of his characters, and instead makes the metaphor ubiquitously visible through stage instructions. The directions for Werner's tragedy contain indications of lighting, mostly very brief, for only five of the eleven scenes.[17] But Verdi's libretto overflows with detailed instructions. For example, the first scene of the prologue reads: 'Night draws to a close and is illuminated by a large number of torches . . . Here and there the outlines of a few rebel flames . . .' ('La notte vicina al termine è rischiarata da una grande quantità di torce . . . Qua e là vedesi ancora tratto sollevarsi qualche fiamma . . .'). The stage directions for the second tableau read: 'Darkness blends with stormy clouds, and then little by little a roseate light, until (at the end of the scene) the sudden rays of the sun flood everything, embellishing the firmament with the most serene and limpid blue' ('Le tenebre vanno diradandosi fra le nubi tempestose: quindi a poco a poco una rosea luce, sino a che (sul finir della scena) il subito raggio del sole inondando per tutto, riabbella il firmamento del più sereno e limpido azzurro'). Similarly, the third tableau, again

[11] Friedrich Ludwig Zacharias Werner, *Attila, König der Hunnen. Eine romantische Tragödie in fünf Akten* (Berlin, 1808), [3].
[12] Werner, 10 and 12.
[13] Werner, 36 (I).
[14] Werner, 47 (I).
[15] Werner, 129–130 (III, 2).
[16] Werner, 253 (V, 3).
[17] Werner, [9] (I): 'Die . . . Stadt Aquileja in Flammen'; 159 (IV, 1): 'Morgendämmerung . . . Mehrere Wachtfeuer . . . Ganz im Hintergrunde das Druidenchor . . . angezündete Fakkeln emporhaltend'; 208 (V, 1): 'Waldgegend in mondheller Nacht. In der Ferne das Hunnenlager festlich erleuchtet'; 219 (V, 2): 'Klösterliche Zelle zu Rom. Seitwärts ein Tisch, worauf . . . eine brennende Lampe'; 227 (V, 3): 'Das Innere von Attila's prächtig mit Kerzen geschmücktem Zelte. In der Mitte des Hintergrundes . . . ein kleine[r] Altare, auf welchem eine Opferflamme brennt . . . Chor der Druiden und Jungfrauen, welche Fackeln tragen.'

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set at night, features a description of lighting effects: 'It is night; near a bubbling brook, moonbeams' ('È notte; nel vicino ruscello bulicano i raggi della luna'). In the fifth tableau (I, 6) white clothing is requested for the 'row of virgins and girls' ('schiera di vergini e fanciulli'). The seventh tableau (II, 5) uses effects similar to those of the first scene: 'The night is brightly illuminated by a hundred flames that rise from huge oak tree trunks prepared for the occasion' ('La notte è vivamente rischiarata da cento fiamme che irrompono da grossi tronchi di quercia preparati all'uopo').

Only two of the eight tableaux do not mention light or colour in the stage directions. Moreover, it is striking that half of the tableaux – four of the eight – are actually set at night. And the second tableau of the prologue takes place during the passage from night to dawn, the last tableau during the early morning. Only the two army encampment scenes (I, 6 and II, 1) seem to play out during the day – though this is never explicitly stated. Thus we see a preference for the darkness of night – a preference truly unusual for opera in general – that Verdi only later in 1853 would reproduce on a similar scale in *Il trovatore*.

Verdi not only preoccupied himself with the question of lighting, but also with everything directly visible on stage. His enthusiasm for the subject seems to have been aroused to a large extent by Madame de Staël's comment that a key scene from Werner's drama – the meeting of Attila and Pope Leo I and the following vision in the third scene of the fourth act[18] – was depicted in a famous fresco by Raphael in the Vatican. Verdi insisted on this link so much that he asked his friend Vincenzo Luccardi, a sculptor in Rome, to send him a sketch of this fresco on 11 February 1846, particularly with a view to providing information about 'the colour of the clothing' ('i colori del vestiario').[19]

Such an unusual interest in depictions of one of Werner's imagined scenes should give us pause. In fact, two authors have recently noted 'Verdi's new interest for visual details and spectacular scenes'.[20] Yet the consequences for an interpretation of Verdi's *Attila* have yet to be drawn from these observations and, truth be told, it is methodologically not easy to glean dramatic and musical expressions of this focus on visual elements of the opera.

The sound of light

So how does one set light and dark, even white colours or a vision in one person's imagination, to music? We do not need once more to consider the spectacular

[18] Werner, 195–6 (IV, 3).

[19] Letter from Verdi to Vincenzo Luccardi from 11 February 1846, in *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio (Milan, 1913), 441; see Wolfgang Osthoff, 'Caratteri, poesia, passione – zur Musik von Verdis "Attila"', in *Verdi und die deutsche Literatur*, ed. Folena and Osthoff, 91–116, here 98–100.

[20] Kurt Malisch, 'Attila', in *Verdi Handbuch*, ed. Anselm Gerhard and Uwe Schweikert (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2001), 342–7, here 346; see also Peter Ross, 'Verdi: Attila (1846)', in *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus and Sieghart Döhring (Munich and Zurich, 1997), VI, 408–11.

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sunrise in the first act.[21] Inspired by Félicien David's ode-symphony *Le Désert* from 1844 and also by Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*, Verdi portrays the ascent of the sun culminating in a *fortissimo* entrance of the entire orchestra, an effect obtained by almost three minutes of sustained pedal on a preparatory dominant. Verdi's characteristic cultivation of sharp contrasts reveals itself most notably at the entry of *Coro di eremiti* on the fifth of the dominant G with the words 'Qual notte!'

The entrance of the 'vergini e fanciulli' dressed in white in the finale of the first act draws on 'pure' a cappella chords in the 'virgin', non-chromatically altered key of C major. The Italian paraphrase of the Pentecostal hymn *Veni creator spiritus* (which Werner incidentally – with the Latin wording not allowed by the Venetian censorship for Verdi's libretto[22] – gives over to male priests) contrasts with the entrance of the chorus after the sunrise by stressing not the octave, but rather the third above the octave. At the same time, this a cappella singing is bound up with the development that leads to Attila's frightful vision. Notably, the stage directions 'commovendosi a poco a poco' appear over the last bars of the Pentacostal hymn. After Attila suddenly forces the musical progression from C major to F minor Leone enters unexpectedly with his solo 'Di flagellar l'incaro' in the chromatic neighbour-key of D flat major, which at the same time refers back to the nightmare that Attila has already related using the same music in his *scena ed aria*.

The moonbeams that flood Odabella's *romanza* at the beginning of the first act with a distinctive light are evoked in the music by the instrument traditionally associated with moonlight in opera of the nineteenth century: on the third beat of the 3/8-bar, the flute plays demi-semiquaver ornaments over the finely chiselled texture of a penetrating phrase on the English horn, cello and harp. The morning light in the orchestral prelude to Foresto's *scena e romanza* at the beginning of the third act gives rise to a chromatically altered, yet reposeful, cadence in G major – the same key that Verdi already used for the Pilgrims' chorus at the beginning of the third act of *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*.

Following this argument, one might establish a complementary link between the sunrise, the most visually striking scene, and the surprising blackout in the finale of the second act. Osthoff once described the latter in particular detail, and also in the context of a discussion of the sunrise in the first act. But he stopped short of drawing any further conclusions from this juxtaposition.[23] Yet many details of the composition show that Verdi deliberately wanted to create a reciprocal relationship. The *Coro delle sacerdotesse*, which precedes the *colpo di scena* in the finale of the second act, is again in C major. Its text foregrounds the significance of light: 'Who gives light to the heart?'('Chi dona luce al cor?'). But the chorus breaks off before the expected reprise of the beginning. Musical development comes to a standstill on a dominant pedal – with string tremolos strongly reminiscent of the accompaniment to the *Coro di eremiti* in the earlier scene before the sunrise. A grand pause marks the transition to the *pezzo concertato*, a device that, as so often, communicates the

[21] See the article by Helen Greenwald in the present issue of this journal.
[22] See the letter of the president of the Teatro La Fenice to Alessandro Lanari dated 18 August 1845 in Conati, *La bottega della musica*, 156.
[23] See Osthoff, 'Caratteri, poesia, passione', 96.

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speechless fear of all present. Articulation of the surprise comes with a change in lighting, a shift from light to dark: 'An unexpected and quick gust of wind extinguishes most of the flames. All rise in a natural expression of terror. Silence and general sadness' ('Un improvviso e rapido soffio procelloso spegne gran parte delle fiamme. Tutti si alzano per natural modo di terrore. Silenzio e tristezza generale'). An E minor/major chorus notes how 'the terrible storm / darkened the lamp' ('l'orrenda procella / qual lampo sparì'). And then it is precisely at the beginning of the ensuing *tempo di mezzo* ('Si riaccendan le quercie d'intorno'), when Attila orders the torches to be relit, that Verdi's music returns for a moment to the key of C major – associated with clear, beaming light – before the *stretta* ('Oh miei prodi! un solo giorno') sounds in the heroic E flat major.

Once the listener becomes aware of the association of keys and major–minor modality with light and dark in Verdi's score, the frequent contrast of mode in Attila's role takes on special meaning. Attila enters in the second scene of the prologue with the words 'Heroes, arise!' ('Eroi, levatevi!'), a short phrase accompanied by an unusually emphatic cadence in F major. A mere six bars later, however, on the words 'Qui! . . . circondatemi', he is in F minor, already heard once before for the bloodthirsty opening chorus. The very same major–minor ambivalence occurs again in the duet at the end of the same scene: Ezio begins his *adagio* in F major ('Tardo per gli anni, e tremulo') and Attila, just moments later, forces the music to F minor ('Dove l'eroe più valido'). Attila's first actual solo, the *scena ed aria* in the first act, consists of an *adagio* ('Mentre gonfiarsi l'anima') in F minor, which brightens up to F major, the key that is then used as the basis for the *cabaletta* ('Oltre quel limite'). A little later, Attila reacts to Leone's entrance with a solo in F minor ('No! . . . non è sogno – ch' or l'alma invade!').

This musical translation of chiaroscuro suggests not only a metaphor for Attila's ruptured soul, but also a new feature of Verdi's compositional style whereby he portrays the emotional state of his characters through distinct musical contrasts. It is surely no coincidence that the contrast of F minor and F major plays a large part in the title role in *Macbeth*, and it seems inviting to draw a line from the musical representation of Attila to Violetta's famous aria in the first act of *La traviata:* her overpowering change from F minor of the beginning ('Ah! fors'è lui che l'anima') to F major in the statement 'A quell'amor ch'è palpito'.

New light for the Fatherland

Recent studies have warned that the political dimension of Verdi's operas should not be overstated.[24] It is indisputable, though, that in the *adagio* of the duet between Ezio and Attila in the prologue, Verdi composed the emblematic lines 'Avrai tu l'universo / Resti l'Italia a me' so that that the word 'Italia' – completely anachronistic for the time of the opera's plot – is uttered no fewer than fourteen times. It is unclear, however, whether we should give credit to reports from the

[24] Osthoff, 116.

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1880s[25] which asserted that audiences forty years before connected the opera to the then seemingly realistic possibility of uniting Italy under the government of Pope Pius IX.[26] Even if this reading enjoys a certain popularity,[27] one should exercise caution with it. What Verdi really meant when he wrote to Solera that he truly understood what the librettist wanted to say with this infamous distich remains especially puzzling today.[28] Unfortunately, Solera's lengthy reply offers no help, since the librettist did not discuss Verdi's conspiratorial rhetoric in the slightest, but instead only provided paraphrases of the two lines in full seriousness.[29]

An examination of reception documents from the years around 1848 confirms that, in fact, this change of wording was hardly associated with current politics; rather, the place to look for this is Foresto's *cabaletta* ('Cara patria, gìa madre reina').[30] Kurt Malisch, building on Peter Ross, has correctly suggested that several very problematic decisions made by Verdi can be explained as a consequence of the 'accentuation of "power-drama" [*Machtdrama*] to the detriment of "love-drama" [*Liebesdrama*]'. Because of the dominant role of Attila and Odabella, the tenor loses 'weight', such that 'both of Foresto's arias' have 'next to no dramatic function'.[31]

But if one folds Verdi's lighting instructions into an interpretation of the first appearances of Attila's adversaries Odabella and Foresto, then 'dramatic function' as well as the political connotation of regicide might be understood in a new way. It is striking that Odabella's pyrotechnically brilliant entrance in the prologue is in the exact key that Verdi uses shortly later for the gleaming light of the sun. Attila's and Uldino's dialogue changes between G major and E minor when Odabella, with her striking words 'Santo di patria / indefinito amor!', sets off in the new key of C major. But not just that: with her breakneck roulades she energetically covers ('con energia') her entire vocal range from *b* up to *c‴* in C major, the key that then serves as the basis for her following *adagio* ('Allor che i forti corrono'). And not only

[25] See Roger Parker, *'Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati': The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma, 1997), 96.

[26] See John Rosselli, 'Risposta a Giuliano Procacci', in *Verdi 2001. Atti del convegno internazionale / Proceedings of the International Conference Parma – New York – New Haven, 24 gennaio–1° febbraio 2001 / 24 January–1 February 2001*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Marco Marica (Florence, 2003), 223–6, here 225.

[27] See the two contributions, both wordy as well as ignorant of relevant research, by James W. Porter, 'Verdi's "Attila", an Ethnomusicological Analysis', in *Attila: The Man and His Image*, ed. Franz H. Bäuml and Marianna D[aisy] Birnbaum (Budapest, 1993), 45–54, here 47; and Rainer Schönhaar, 'Universalgedanke und nationale Identität / Zwei Stadien politischer Romantik auf der (Musik)Bühne am Beispiel "Attila" von Zacharias Werners Drama bis zu Verdis Oper', in *Politische Mythen und nationale Identitäten im (Musik-)Theater. Vorträge und Gespräche des Salzburger Symposions 2001*, ed. Peter Csobádi, Gernot Gruber, Jürgen Kühnel, Ulrich Müller, Oswald Panagl and Franz Viktor Spechler (Anif and Salzburg, 2003), 511–44, here 537; also Candoni, 'De la Tragédie romantique allemande à l'opéra italien', 255 and 257.

[28] See Verdi's letter to Temistocle Solera dated 25 December 1845, in *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Cesari and Luzio, 440.

[29] See Solera's letter to Verdi dated 12 January 1846, in *Carteggi verdiani*, ed. Alessandro Luzio (Rome, 1947), 245.

[30] See the article by Douglas Ipson in this volume.

[31] Malisch, 'Attila', 344.

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Odabella's first entrance is in C major; the last part of Foresto's first solo, the clearly patriotic *cabaletta* ('Cara patria, già madre reina'), discussed above, is as well.

Political statement appears to be only a secondary function of the lighting directions characteristic of the entire opera. The patriotic sentiments of Odabella and Foresto become associated with the light of the rising sun – and incidentally also with the 'pure' key of virgins (Odabella is only engaged, not married). As such, the belligerent heroine can be seen in the tradition of Joan of Arc, the protagonist in Verdi's 1845 opera.[32] With the character of Attila, however, it is primarily the dark sides of that figure that are accentuated.

Mazzini and Verdi

In this context, it may be of interest that Giuseppe Mazzini, the pioneer of *Giovine Italia*, was a staunch advocate for the dramatic works of Zacharias Werner. In 1838, Mazzini arranged to have Werner's most successful work at the time, the *Schicksalstragödie, Der 24. Februar*, published, and he prefaced it with a long bibliographical and critical essay about the playwright. (*Attila, König der Hunnen* was, curiously, nearly completely ignored in this essay. Whereas all of the other important dramas were praised in detail, Mazzini mentions this work only in passing as a drama 'that merits praise' ('che merita lodi') and 'might contribute . . . to the progress of art' ('può giovare . . . ai progressi dell'arte').[33]) It is quite possible that Verdi's interest in Werner was sparked by this Italian translation of a fantastic tragedy of fate. Indeed, Mazzini issued a reprint in 1839 with the Milanese publisher Bonfanti as the fourth part of a *Museo drammatico*.[34] But above all, another essay, which Mazzini intended as an additional companion to the translation, articulated many ideas that seem to find an echo in Verdi's later development. In writing about the continuing relevance of 'fate',[35] and drawing on the ideas of Victor Hugo, Mazzini praises this prose work as 'an attempt (against almost insurmountable odds) to recall in modern drama the spent dogma of fate' ('tentative (presso chè insuperabile) di rievocare nel Dramma modern il dogma spento della fatalità').[36] Further on,

[32] For the motive of the belligerent virgin in Verdi, see also Mary Ann Smart, 'Proud, Indomitable, Irascible: Allegories of nation in "Attila" and "Les Vêpres siciliennes"', in *Verdi's Middle Period (1849–1859): Source Studies, Analyses, and Performance Practice*, ed. Martin Chusid (Chicago, 1997), 227–56, here 232–9.

[33] [Giuseppe Mazzini], *Cenni su Werner*, in [Friedrich Ludwig Zacharias] Werner, *Il ventiquattro febbraio, tragedia*. Traduzione di A[gostino] R[uffini] (Saggio sulla letteratura europea degli ultimi cinquant'anni. Letteratura alemanna) (Brussels, 1838) (reproduction accessible on http://books.google.com), 123–65, here 144; also in Giuseppe Mazzini, *Scritti editi ed inediti* (Imola, 1910), VII, 203–36, here 224.

[34] An updated, republished version in the collection *L'Alemagna letteraria* (Milan: Per gli editori dello spettatore industriale, 1844), 215–33, brings, however, only Werner's drama alone without Mazzini's discussion; see Alda Manghi, *Mazzini e Werner*, in *Convivium. Rivista di lettere, filosofia e storia*, *Raccolta nuova* 6 (1952), 873–95, here 881.

[35] See Anselm Gerhard, *Die Verstädterung der Oper. Paris und das Musiktheater des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1992), 210–16; trans. as *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1998), 238–46.

[36] Un Italiano [Giuseppe Mazzini], 'Della fatalità considerata com'elemento drammatico', in [Friedrich Ludwig Zacharias] Werner, *Il ventiquattro febbraio, tragedia*, trans. A[gostino] R[uffini]

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these points are exemplified in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and in two dramas by Schiller that we know would have had meaning for Verdi: *Die Räuber* and *Kabale und Liebe*. Finally, Mazzini's plea for 'il Dramma della provvidenza'[37] culminates in a quote from Schiller's *Piccolomini:* 'Within his breast, just as he says, shine the stars of his destiny' ('*Nel suo petto*, come egli dice, *stanno le stelle de' suoi destini*').[38]

Even if documentary evidence does not confirm that Verdi read Mazzini before 1848, the unusual decision of the composer (or, if the idea went back to Solera, then the appropriation of that decision) to prefigure Attila's fear in the face of Leo's appearance in the preceding act by means of Attila's aria 'Nel suo petto' seems a precise echo of Schiller's dictum. Even the anticipation of Leo's admonishing words here does not have the slightest precedent in Werner. Because of this idiosyncratic decision, one might consider Verdi's opera as an early example of a development that concurrently occurred in the dream narratives of Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843), Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* (1849) or Wagner's *Lohengrin* (1850). Later events are anticipated with musically audible premonitions[39] wherein 'the figures [appear] subjected to a power' that 'confronts them from their own inner depths' – from their 'chest' – 'and, all the same, is alien'.[40]

A final experiment with 'monumental opera'

Much supports a view that Verdi's *Attila* marks the end of a phase that includes *Nabucodonosor* (1842), *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843) and *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845) – a phase that may be summarised by the term 'monumental opera' (*Monumental-oper*).[41] Verdi's own view that this score suits itself especially 'pel Grand Opéra di Parigi',[42] indirectly confirms this classification – even if these words bespeak an underlying misjudgement of the compositional standards of contemporary French 'grand opera'.

Should we choose to see *Attila* not as an end, but rather as the beginning of a development in Verdi's composition, then the vital significance of the lighting directions stands out, indeed not only in the narrow sense of a history of stage technology, but also with respect to the insistence with which the composer tried to illuminate the dark sides of broken souls. This is fully in line with what Pierluigi

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(Brussels, 1838) (reproduction accessible on http://books.google.com), 1–42, here 5; also in Mazzini, *Scritti*, VIII, 167–200, here 172.

37 Mazzini, 36–7, or 196.

38 Mazzini, 38–9, or 198. The quote reads in its original German: 'In deiner Brust sind Deines Schicksals Sterne' (II, 6, verse 962); in Andrea Maffei's translation first published in 1845 (!) as: 'Il vero / Astro del tuo destino è nel tuo petto'.

39 See Anselm Gerhard, 'Das im "Gedenken" uns "dünkende" Bild eines Ungegenwärtigen. Erinnern und Entäußern in der Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts', in *Resonanzen. Vom Erinnern in der Musik*, ed. Andreas Dorschel (Vienna, 2007), 134–48, here 140–4.

40 Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* (Velber, 1971), 21 or (Zurich and Schwäbisch Hall, 1985), 22.

41 Ross, 'Verdi: Attila (1846)', 409.

42 Verdi's letter to Léon Escudier dated 2 (?) September 1845, in *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Cesari and Luzio, 439; for dating, see Conati, *La bottega della musica*, 176–7, n. 30.

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Petrobelli recently attempted to analyse as Verdi's typical 'contraste entre la lumière et l'obscurité'.[43]

The conceptual as well as compositional limitations of the dramaturgy of this opera are obvious. The ensemble finales of the first and second acts, with their large-scale *pezzi concertati*, are particularly convincing parts of Verdi's score. Should one look for a concept that captures the atmosphere at those moments, the fallback would have to be a word frequently used by Verdi, especially after 1846: 'cupo', with its broad field of meaning somewhere between gloomy, dark, livid, deep and even reticent. Following Attila's dream narrative, we even encounter the word in the sung text. In the *adagio* ('Mentre gonfiarsi l'anima') of his aria in the first act, he characterises his reaction to the night-time frightful vision: 'In me tai detti suonano / Cupi, fatali ancor'.

If one keeps in mind how blatant and striking the musical characterisation of light is in *Attila*, then one gains insight into the composer's own strengths and weaknesses. For, in the following years he tried with particular tenacity to portray the dark sides of theatrical scenes and seascapes, adopting musical and dramatic ideas of both of the *Attila* ensemble finales, especially in his subsequent opera *Macbeth*, and also in *Il trovatore*. The use of a brightly lit scene as a refined foil occurs in the almost erotic realisation of the red sky of dawn at the beginning of the first act of *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), and then again in a nuanced instrumentation in the new version of that opera in 1881. In *Simon Boccanegra*, as in *Attila*, this bright light produces an abrupt contrast to the nightly darkness in which Maria dies at the end of the prologue, and to the gradual blackout of all light that accompanies the death of the main hero at the end of the final act. In a certain way, the lighting programme of this mature opera is still a consequence of Verdi's idiosyncratic and very selective reading of Werner.

[43] See Pierluigi Petrobelli, 'D'autres regards sur le théâtre musical', in A *travers l'opéra*, ed. Ferrone and Fabiano, 263–76, here 266.

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