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Primal scenes: Verdi in analysis

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Anniversary years always prompt revaluation as well as celebration, and the centenary of Verdi's death in 2001 was no exception. The conference for which the articles in this issue were written came at the end of a year packed with Verdi celebrations in both opera houses and academic settings. In terms of performance, a handful of ostentatious critical failures in 2001 sparked new debate about two old issues – the pros and cons of revisionist staging in general, and the degree to which contemporary productions should be faithful to what we can glean of the composer's intentions. These edgy, sometimes irreverent productions prompted the critic for the *New Yorker* magazine, Alex Ross, to declare that Verdi should be exempt from the rigours and indignities of *Regietheater*. While the abstraction of Wagnerian drama might reward updated settings spiked with flashes of contemporary social critique, he suggested, Verdi's operas work because the composer 'meant every word' and because their dramatic force is propelled by unadulterated emotion and sharp juxtapositions, qualities too direct and 'site-specific' to tolerate stagings that draw out hidden contexts or ironize dramatic conventions. In what quickly began to sound like a back-handed defence, Ross pronounced: 'To the analytical mind such music can look crude, even vulgar on the page. Only in live performances, when the momentum begins to build and the voices become urgent, does it catch fire. But how do you go about analyzing momentum and urgency?'[1]

The academic events of the 'Verdi year' quite naturally began from the confident assumption that such 'momentum and urgency' not only *could* be analyzed, but even *demanded* elucidation. Yet, with all his insistence on immediacy and transparent meanings, Ross may have grasped something that has also become important to opera scholars recently – and not only in connection with Verdi. For one thing, the major musicological celebration of the composer, a marathon two-week conference with sessions in Parma, New York and New Haven, began from the unspoken assumption that musicology was not the most interesting thing to 'do' with Verdi in 2001. The conference's main panels were orientated around position papers by experts from other disciplines: a historian assessed Verdi's relationship to Italian history, a literary critic placed *Falstaff* within the frame of 'late style', and a linguist analyzed the composer's use of language in his correspondence.[2]

The symposium published here takes a nearly antithetical approach. Armed with the slightly tongue-in-cheek title 'Primal Scenes: Staging and Interpreting Verdi's Operas', it closed out the Verdi year at the University of California, Berkeley. Long

[1] Alex Ross, 'Verdi's Grip', *The New Yorker* (24 September 2001), 82–7, here 84.

[2] These position papers were delivered by, respectively, Giuliano Procacci ('Verdi e la storia d'Italia'), Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, M.D. ('Rethinking Late Style in Verdi [and Wagner]'), and Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo ('Sullo stile dell'epistolario'). The proceedings of the conference will be published in *Verdi 2001: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi. Parma, New York, New Haven, 24 gennaio-1o febbraio 2001*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Marco Marica (Florence, forthcoming).

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the scholarly home of Joseph Kerman, Berkeley had been the seedbed for some of the earliest and most influential work on Verdi in the United States.[3] It was a particular pleasure of the conference that several former students returned to give papers and a luxury to have Professor Kerman's generous input at all stages of planning.[4] Many aspects of the four-day gathering were shaped by his inspired and ambitious ideas of what a Verdi conference should be. In a way, the intellectual debt of Verdi scholarship to Kerman's writings goes so deep that it is difficult to describe. His essays on the vexed issue of 'tonality and drama' in *Un ballo in maschera*, for example, or on 'lyric form' in *Simon Boccanegra* are still required – and rewarding – reading for Verdians, but the papers delivered at the 'Primal Scenes' conference showed Kerman's impact in more sweeping and more submerged ways.[5] The inheritance is there, of course, in the ritual dance of homage and resistance that many writers on nineteenth-century Italian opera still perform in response to his theory of 'opera as drama'; but Kerman's intellectual influence was felt most of all, perhaps, in a style of interpretation many of us have learned from him, enquiry that begins from a sensitive, profoundly *musical* observation of details in a work but never stops there, always going on to ask why these pleasing textual details matter and to connect them to ideas outside the text.[6]

As its title suggests, the Berkeley conference proceeded from as far inside the composer's musical mind as it seemed possible to burrow: from the 'primal' level of the individual scene.[7] This approach was prompted in part by a sense that studies

[3] For example, David Lawton, 'Tonality and Drama in Verdi's Early Operas', Ph.D. diss. (1973); and David B. Rosen, 'The Genesis of Verdi's Requiem', Ph.D. diss. (1976); also the product of graduate work at Berkeley was Gary Tomlinson, 'Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera: An Essay in their Affinities', *19th-Century Music*, 10 (1986–7), 43–60.

[4] Many, many thanks are due to those who contributed to the lively intellectual atmosphere and the smooth progress of the conference. The conference was generously funded by a number of sources at Berkeley: the Departments of Music and Italian Studies, the Dean of Art and Humanities in the College of Letters and Sciences, the Consortium for the Arts, the Graduate Division, and the Townsend Center for the Humanities. Heather Wiebe, Wendy Allanbrook, Katherine Bergeron and Heather Hadlock helped with a flow of creative ideas and logistical support throughout the planning stages and during the conference. I am also grateful to Richard Taruskin, Martin Deasy and (again) Heather Wiebe for their insights during and after the conference, which have prompted some of my thoughts here. Finally, all of us at the conference gained much from the contributions of the four session respondents, Paul Alpers, William Fitzgerald, Gerald Mendelsohn and Paul Robinson, and from David Levin, Philip Gossett and Joseph Kerman, participants whose papers could not be included here.

[5] Kerman, 'Viewpoint [response to Siegmund Levarie, ''Key Relations in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*'']', *19th-Century Music*, 2 (1978), 186–91; and his 'Lyric Form and Flexibility in *Simon Boccanegra*', *Studi verdiani*, 1 (1982), 47–62.

[6] The ideas of operatic drama, of course, derive from Kerman's still important book *Opera as Drama* (orig. pub. 1956; rev. edn. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988). Even more influential on recent writing on opera are the desiderata for a new, and newly contextual, musicology outlined in *Contemplating Music* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). Any inventory (however incomplete) of Kerman's impact should also mention his elegant and witty prose style, which has long been an unequalled standard for writing on music.

[7] The scenes we eventually focused on were chosen collectively by the participants. They were: *Il corsaro*, Gulnara/Corrado duet (Act III); *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth/Macbeth duet (Act I) and sleepwalking scene; *Un ballo in maschera* (Act II complete); *Simon Boccanegra*, Amelia/Simon duet (Act I); *Don Carlos*, Posa/Philippe duet (Act II); and *Aida* (Act III complete).

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of nineteenth-century opera may be approaching one of those turning points that seem to arise every ten or fifteen years in musicology. Opera studies have received an enormous infusion of vitality by borrowing from other disciplines (especially literary theory, gender studies and film theory), with tangible and unequivocal gains (evident over the years in this journal and elsewhere). If there has been a corresponding loss, it might lie in a new insecurity about 'the music itself' – in worries about whether close reading is merely solipsistic, too remote from the ways opera has historically communicated to audiences, and about exactly *how* to write about musical detail.[8]

These questions have a slightly melancholic, millennial feel, especially arising as they do after the explosion in operatic analysis of the 1970s and 1980s. That boom had two faces, one predominantly formalist but grounded in history, the other Schenkerian and unapologetically presentist. In what remains a fundamental aspect of the Verdian vocabulary, a number of pioneering articles and dissertations parsed the forms of Ottocento opera in detail, providing a rich language for comparing works and styles and also showing that these formal categories were familiar to at least a segment of the nineteenth-century audience.[9] This discovery of a Verdi-specific (perhaps even 'authentic') formalism coincided with a brief vogue for Schenkerian analysis and other relatively 'hard' analytical approaches.[10] And although those Schenker graphs of arias and ensembles now read as quaint artefacts of a long-gone era, the flush of analytical enthusiasm was important in establishing a framework for talking and writing about music that seemed above all to lack a *Geheimnis*, music whose meanings seemed to reside uncomfortably close to the surface.

In light of this short history, Alex Ross's (rhetorical) question 'how do you go about analyzing momentum and urgency?' takes on new significance. To judge by the articles collected here, the verdict *c.* 2001/2002 is that Verdi's style, in its characteristic immediacy, *can* be fruitfully analyzed, although not always by

[8] These concerns are hardly confined to opera studies. The most cogent attack on the solipsism of musical analysis is Gary Tomlinson, 'Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer', *Current Musicology*, 53 (1993), 18–24.

[9] Philip Gossett, 'Verdi, Ghislanzoni, and *Aida*: The Uses of Convention', *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1974), 291–334; Robert Moreen, 'Integration of Text Forms and Musical Forms in Verdi's Early Operas', Ph.D. diss., Princeton University (1975); Scott Balthazar, 'Evolving Conventions in Italian Serious Opera: Scene Structure in Works of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi, 1810 to 1850', Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania (1985); and Harold S. Powers, ' "La solita forma" and the "Uses of Convention" ', *Acta musicologica*, 59 (1987), 65–90.

[10] This aspect of opera studies is best represented by the volume *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), gathering together papers delivered at a conference at Cornell University in 1984. See also Elliot Antokoletz, 'Verdi's Dramatic Use of Harmony and Tonality in *Macbeth*', *In Theory Only*, 4 (1978–9), 17–28; Siegmund Levarie, 'A Pitch Cell in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*', *19th-Century Music*, 3 (1981), 399–409; William Drabkin, 'Characters, Key Relations and Tonal Structures in *Il trovatore*', *Musical Analysis*, 1 (1982), 143–53; Roger Parker and Matthew Brown, 'Motivic and Tonal Interactions in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 36 (1983), 243–65; and their ' "Ancora un bacio": Three Scenes from Verdi's *Otello*', *19th-Century Music*, 9 (1985–6), 51–62.

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traditional means. On the one hand, surfaces are getting more attention, and musicologists have become adept at drawing out their nuances, from Melina Esse's thoughts on conventional orchestral figures for sobs and sighs as signs of 'interiority' to Gabriela Cruz's reading of the flute sonorities in *Aida* as traces of Verdi's fascination with Egyptology, with mummies and the preservation of remains. At the same time, though, these and other essays engage in relatively little of what has traditionally qualified as 'analysis' or close reading; for someone trained in the heyday of music theory, it may feel like cheating to use the word 'analyze' at all in such contexts. The 'Primal Scenes' framework notwithstanding, few of the articles collected here plot the workings of a scene step by step or even offer sustained discussions of how musical details might influence staging. Typically, authors begin from a scene but quickly step back to connect it to currents that surrounded it in nineteenth-century Europe, or to concerns more immediate in our own world.

Perhaps the biggest change in the orientation of the close readings themselves is the centrality granted the notion of 'power' in its various forms. Musical details are regularly adduced as hints about which character is calling the shots in a duet or to make larger points about submerged political meanings, about where the composer's (or librettist's) sympathies might lie. For the latter set of questions, *Aida* has long been Exhibit A. Edward Said made an issue of the opera's colonialist politics in an article first published in 1987 and none of the handful of ripostes from within musicology has fully dealt with the issues Said raised, as seems clear from the unanimity with which the four articles on *Aida* here address the issue. Said himself construed power within the opera as lodged in everything from learned compositional techniques (its 'wall-like' counterpoint) to the monumentality of the visual spectacle to what he calls an 'imperial notion of the artist', embodied in Verdi's megalomaniacal attempts to keep all elements of the production under his control.[11] Without rejecting any of these elements, this group of *Aida* articles examines the opera's power politics within a more complex generic frame. Steven Huebner sees the opera as participating in the well-honed interaction between the desires of the private individual and the demands of the public sphere so fundamental to French *grand opéra*, and Gabriela Cruz pursues a similar notion of *Aida* as an honorary French opera to show how Verdi's treatment of recurring themes is indebted to Meyerbeer's.[12] Delving more deeply into the history of French colonial spectacle, Katherine Bergeron shows that *Aida* places the colonial warrior on display in a manner that can only be unstable and gawky. She ties French-colonialist and Italian-generic contexts into a neat bow, to read the embarrassing fervour of the Act III Aida–Radames cabaletta not only as an old-fashioned musical convention, but as

[11] Said, 'The Imperial Spectacle', *Grand Street*, 6 (1987); repr. as 'The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*', in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 111–32, here 125 and 116.

[12] The most important analysis of the intersections of political, institutional and sociological concerns in French opera is Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago, 1998). See also Jane Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge, 1987).

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a trace of colonial unease, a musical sign that Radames is mired in an outdated and untenable model of colonial manhood and political power.

The delicate balancing act between public and private in *grand opéra* also has implications for Verdi's representation of gender, as both Huebner and David Rosen show. Huebner mines the musical resonances between two arias, Radames's 'Celeste Aida' and Aida's 'O patria mia', to reveal Aida as a grim realist, someone who counters Radames's dreamy vision of a land where love can triumph with a gloomier view of a 'patria' lost forever. Huebner's perceptive response to the blind spots of Radames, who tries and fails to live up to the ceremonial capital that the Egyptian state has invested in him, suggests that opera studies and masculinity studies might finally have meshed productively. Rosen tackles related issues in his defence of Don Carlos as a character who truly undergoes *Bildung*, whose commitment to the oppressed colony of Flanders becomes credible by the opera's last act. Rosen adduces an array of musical signs to show that Carlos leaves behind the fragmented, asymmetrical phrasings and derailed cadences that surround him early in the opera to grow into a more controlled and coherent musical idiom.

These readings participate in the shift made in literary studies some years ago, away from 'feminist theory' and towards the more inclusive and less pointedly political 'gender studies'. Characteristic of this altered focus, female characters are of less interest to many of these scholars than are issues of gender dynamics, such as the mechanics of seduction or the traces of the 'closet' in Verdi's portrait of the historically homosexual monarch Gustaf III in *Un ballo in maschera*. The first is explored by Emanuele Senici, who suggests that successful seduction is always in some sense about masquerade, about assuming the subject position of the love object. Senici shows that Riccardo does just this in the *Ballo* seduction duet, subtly citing and transforming melodic and harmonic gestures from the music Amelia has sung and rendering himself irresistible by reflecting her back at herself. Ralph Hexter takes the trope of masquerade in *Ballo* in a different direction, to suggest that the opera's various masks and veils themselves serve to paper over an open secret essential to Verdi's fictionalized portrait of Gustaf. Drawing on a dizzying array of sources, both within and beyond the opera, Hexter paints a picture of a Paris (setting for the first operatic treatment of the story, by Auber and Scribe) in which queer texts were regularly heterosexualized, their subtexts then signalled by authors and grasped by audiences in all sorts of subtle ways.

Even those articles that *are* centrally about female characters steer away from familiar questions of how women are brutalized by plot and how (or whether) the vocal force of their music transcends this plot-violence. Heather Hadlock compares two operatic settings of Byron's *The Corsair* to show how Giovanni Pacini and Verdi handle the poem's female characters. In Pacini, the role of the murderous Gulnara is pared down, her fierceness displaced on to the second heroine, Medora, who costumes herself as a (male) warrior to rescue her beloved Corrado. Staying closer to Byron, Verdi's opera takes pleasure in staging Gulnara's exoticism and transgressions, but contains her influence by casting her as a foil for the stereotypically virtuous Medora. Much more than just a study of operatic Byron-reception, Hadlock's comparison becomes a case-study of the emergence of gender

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stereotypes in Italian opera, tracking the evolution from a dramatic world in which a variety of characters could be sung by all-purpose or free-floating voice types to one in which plot was articulated by enforced oppositions between vocal registers: soprano vs. tenor, soprano vs. mezzo, tenor vs. baritone.

Almost all the articles in this issue could be subsumed under a single broad rubric: interpretations based on the interactions of opera's visual and aural dimensions. But the superficially 'multivalent' scrutiny of opera's component systems that once stood in for real analysis of staging and design has been transmuted into more probing studies of opera's visual language. Inspired in this respect, too, by the new prestige and the lively interpretative currents around Parisian *grand opéra*, that quintessentially visual manifestation of the operatic medium, Verdi scholars have begun to examine set and costume designs for original productions, as well as the staging manuals (or *disposizioni sceniche*) that prescribe blocking (and much else) for the first performances of operas from *Un ballo in maschera* on.[13] Crucially, though, discussions of staging here tend to find the greatest meaning in the moments that do not work, that seem odd or impossible to realize convincingly. In other words, the excavation of these visual and gestural sources is gradually shifted: from a focus on authenticity and fidelity to an enquiry that treats staging manuals and other documents not as prescriptions but as interpretative texts like any other.[14]

One intriguing product of this new attention to the visual is interpretations that zero in on *tensions* between sight and sound, and on the ways expressive power can shift at important moments between the seen and the heard. Here the work of Carolyn Abbate has been critical: although Abbate has in fact given 'only a passing glance to the Italian operatic repertoire' (to borrow Elizabeth Hudson's formulation), the conception of sound and meaning she proposes has inspired many students of Italian opera to hear our texts with new ears.[15] A handful of articles circle around the intuition that Abbate's preference for invisible, oracular voices that obscure the source of their sound is a uniquely Wagnerian construct not easily transported across the Alps. Both focusing on early operas, Hudson and Esse listen for less metaphysical messages speaking through Verdi's orchestral voices. Hudson, tussling also with Gary Tomlinson's recent interpretation of *Macbeth* as manifestation of post-Kantian subjectivity, tunes in to the changing sources of the orchestral

[13] For example, the two volumes of staging manuals for Parisian operatic premières edited by H. Robert Cohen (Stuyvesant, NY, 1991 and 1998); the exhibition catalogue '*Sorgete! Ombre serene!*': *L'aspetto visivo dello spettacolo verdiano*, ed. Pierluigi Petrobelli, Marisa Di Gregorio Casati and Olga Jesurum (Parma, 1994); and Petrobelli and Fabrizio Della Seta, eds., *La realizzazione scenica dello spettacolo verdiano* (Parma, 1996).

[14] For a heated debate about the status and proper use of the staging manuals, see David Levin, 'Between Sublimation and Audacity: The Dramaturgy of Expression in *Don Carlos*' and James Hepokoski's response, in *Verdi 2001* (see n. 2).

[15] See Hudson's article in this issue, 13, n.15. Abbate's *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991) has been most influential; but both her article 'Opera; or the Envoicing of Women' (in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993], 225–58) and her recent *In Search Of Opera* (Princeton, 2001) have also left powerful traces on the work of many younger scholars.

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motives in the duet for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.[16] What begins as a clear distinction between 'real' sounds (such as the owl's cry) and noises echoing in Macbeth's disturbed imagination soon collapses, taking listeners inside the protagonist's clouded perceptions. Esse similarly plays on the continuum between subjective interiority and externalized sound, reflecting on the paradox that our main access to an operatic character's inner turmoil is often through highly conventional orchestral patterns for sighs and sobs. The emotive interior is externalized through 'legible' bodily sounds; what is most private is rendered overt and melodramatic.

Without invoking Abbate, Jane Bernstein is also concerned with where music comes from in *Macbeth*, specifically in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. Bernstein hears an ascending scale that recurs in the strings throughout the scene as gestural in origin, translating into music Lady's compulsive hand-washing gesture (a gesture that was elevated to a defining feature of the character by actresses Sarah Siddons and Adelaide Ristori). Through this process, sight *becomes* sound: a theatrical gesture is rendered as a recurring musical motive. Perhaps because she addresses a much later work, *Aida*, Cruz hears a power in Verdi's orchestra that could equal the musical depths Abbate finds at certain moments in Wagner. Pursuing resonances between Verdi's and Meyerbeer's treatment of the orchestra, Cruz focuses on a moment early in Act III when Aida's identifying motive, previously tied to her movements and physical presence, is played to an empty stage, just preceding her entrance. The effect of this orchestra that 'sings' in the absence of a visible body, she suggests, is *not* that of 'a controlling omnipresence doling out clues to the drama's unfolding', but closer to an attempt to make 'mummies sing', to give voice to something already dead.

What these essays have in common is a conviction that Abbate's insights have something important to tell us about Verdi, but that the physical and the manifest retain more of a hold, even in Verdi's most supernatural moments, than an account of Romantic opera that begins from Wagner would allow. Gary Tomlinson deals with this same tension between the seen and the felt, the rational and supersensible, in the curse music from *Simon Boccanegra*. He notes a disjunction between the dramatic force of the curse and the rather pedestrian blocking and gestures specified for the chorus in the *disposizione scenica*. This gap between melodramatic gesture and the performative power of the curse suggests that 'Verdi and Boito have constructed a dramatic situation that outstrips the possibilities of the representational codes they work within', an instant of Dionysiac force within a predominantly Apollonian structure of representation. The gap, perhaps, is filled by the 'awesome power of Verdi's orchestra to enunciate the inarticulable, to speak the unspeakable', a power Tomlinson perceives as sometimes taking on the function of a new kind of *parola scenica*. Alessandra Campana also perceives unseen hands at work in *Simon Boccanegra*, but her ghosts enter from another angle entirely. Her interpretation of the recognition duet in *Boccanegra* hinges, like Tomlinson's, on a mystifying detail in the *disposizione scenica*, the fact that the final moments of the scene

[16] Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999).

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are directed to be played not at the footlights, as might seem natural, but at the back of the stage, with Simon 'ecstatically' watching his new-found daughter exit. Together with the striking parallels between Amelia's narrative of her early life and Simon's overlapping narrative in the previous act, this detail of staging plants an ambiguity, making it seem as if Simon might simply have *wished* his daughter into being, summoned her as a ghost through vivid story-telling and the force of his desire.

Almost every essay raises implications (often quite explicit) for staging, but a few authors make the problems and possibilities of performing these works a central concern. Clemens Risi analyzes three German productions that use various techniques of alienation to shake spectators out of their passive relationship to the spectacle. These strategies, he points out, are nowhere near as novel as their *enfant-terrible* directors might think, but extend back at least to Brecht. Where Alex Ross wants to rescue Verdi from the challenges posed by revisionist stagings, Risi not only embraces such new conceptions but asserts a continuity between these provocations and Verdi's own desires to engage an audience through 'theatricality'.

Although Verdi's voice is invoked with regularity within these covers, appeals to composerly authority (including Risi's) tend to strike a casual tone: these authors are happy to solicit and consider the opinions of the *maestro*, but no interpretation is thought to stand or fall on his words. This feels like a natural – and healthy – phase, prompted by many factors: a certain over-familiarity with Verdi's epistolary views on drama, resistance to the composer's self-mythologizing late in life, and a general turn in the humanities away from authors and towards studies of spectatorship. Roger Parker goes to an extreme of disregard for the composer's authority in his discussion of the much-revised duet for Philippe and Posa from *Don Carlos*. Parker shows that Verdi cared little about stylistic consistency as he revised, allowing passages composed in 1867 to stand beside those clearly conceived in a 'later' style, which tend to anticipate the language of *Otello*. In the same vein, as Verdi revised the duet he brought back motives from the earlier version in radically changed affective contexts, as if to suggest that the musical material had no fixed meaning, but could be recombined according to a new compositional logic. If Verdi himself cared so little about consistency, Parker argues, why should 'we' (as scholars, performers, listeners) be bound by the dictates of a single compositional moment? Perhaps we should simply perform what works best, each performance based on expressive imperatives, not on some stamp placed by the composer on one version or another, nor on a desire to freeze in time one particular phase of the composer's thought.

Parker flaunts this release from the 'composer's voice' as perhaps only one who has prepared a critical edition *and* devoted an entire book to a single composer can.[17] But his airy perspective might mark a general loosening of our attachment to Verdi the man *and* Verdi the architect of dramatic edifices. What has replaced this focus on a single controlling mind is not (thank goodness) a new New-Critical focus on

[17] *Nabucodonosor* in *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi* (Chicago and Milan, 1987); and *Leonora's Last Act: Essay in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997).

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texts in isolation, but rather a growing understanding of the operas (and their composer) as positioned in the broad canvas of nineteenth- and twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. Where 'we' perhaps once felt the need to shoulder Verdi's 'anxiety of influence' for him, to demonstrate the uniqueness, seriousness and individuality of music that grew out of an unusually fixed and repetitive set of generic norms, the operas now seem to gain substance when we probe their debts to Parisian theatre (even the lurid melodramas), or to Wagner, or to *grand opéra*. The effect of such contextual *sorties* is (somewhat paradoxically) to position Verdi as increasingly central, as shaping and shaped by multiple strands of nineteenth-century thought and social engagement. The 'primal' immediacy and urgency that Ross points to in the music are no less intense or enjoyable, but this collection makes a strong case that Verdi's very ability to galvanize masses and stoke emotion cries out for critical scrutiny, all the more so because such intensity and mass appeal carry us so close to the core of Verdi's culture and our own.

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