Introduction to the Special Issue on *Ottocento* Opera

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In the early 1960s a PhD candidate at Princeton University informed his professors that he wished to write a dissertation on the operas of Gioachino Rossini. He was pointedly discouraged from doing so and told that, if he wished to be taken seriously in musicology, he should focus on worthwhile repertory such as Renaissance music or works by nineteenth-century German composers. The student persisted in his purpose and, with his groundbreaking dissertation, set the study of *ottocento* opera on a solid trajectory. That student was Philip Gossett. Recently, at a gala event celebrating Philip's 'retirement', many of us who have focused our scholarship on this repertory were reminded about the evolution of the study of nineteenth-century Italian opera during the past 50 years.

Indeed, thanks to the efforts of several generations of scholars, the study of Italian opera of the nineteenth century has not only come into its own but has flourished. Significant and exciting work employing both so-called traditional methods and progressive approaches in source, analytical and cultural studies, within musicology and in other disciplines, is being done. Government-sponsored institutes, associations, and societies devoted to the study and promulgation of the music of individual composers have sprung up and prospered in Italy and the United States – in addition to the longstanding Fondazione Rossini,[1] there are the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani (Parma, organized in 1960) and the American Institute for Verdi Studies (New York, established in 1976 at New York University),[2] the Fondazione Giacomo Puccini (Lucca, founded in 1972), the Centro Studi Giacomo Puccini (Lucca, formed in 1996) and the Fondazione Donizetti (Bergamo, established in 1997). Many of these institutions publish(ed) journals and other volumes devoted exclusively to the music of their subjects – *Bollettino del Centro rossiniano di studi* (Fondazione Rossini); *Studi Verdiani* (Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani); *Verdi Forum*[3] (American Institute for Verdi

[1] Founded by the Pesaro City Council on 4 April 1869 (very shortly after Rossini's death), as a result of the composer's bequest of his wealth to the municipality, the funded organization initially established a 'Liceo Musicale'. In 1940, this became the 'Conservatorio Statale di Musica', and the administrative body became the 'Fondazione Rossini', with the purpose of sustaining Rossini's legacy.

[2] A useful overview of the history of the Verdian institutions can be found in Gregory Harwood's preface to his *Giuseppe Verdi: A Guide to Research* (New York and London: Garland, 1998): xiii–xviii.

[3] *Verdi Forum* was first published as *AIVS Newsletter*, later became *Verdi Newsletter* and is currently the refereed journal *Verdi Forum*, issued sporadically.

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Studies); *Donizetti Society Journal*[4] (London) – many of which enjoy international circulation. Various aspects of *ottocento* opera's creation, production, performance, and reception are routinely discussed in the major academic journals, as well as in more popular publications on both sides of the Atlantic.

The enduring popularity of the repertory of *ottocento* Italy, as well as the acute sense of the need to "restore" the integrity of the works, has resulted in the production of the first critical editions of the works of numerous composers: the *Edizione critica delle opere di Vincenzo Bellini* (ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Alessandro Roccatagliati, and Luca Zoppelli, issued by Casa Ricordi in Milan with the collaboration of the Teatro Massimo Vincenzo Bellini in Catania); *Le edizioni critiche delle opere di Gaetano Donizetti* (ed. Gabriele Dotto and Roger Parker, Casa Ricordi with assistance from the Comune of Bergamo); the *Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini* (1979–2005, ed. Bruno Cagli, Philip Gossett, and Alberto Zedda, Casa Ricordi and the Fondazione Rossini in Pesaro), which has been succeeded by the *Opere di Gioachino Rossini* (2007–present, ed. Philip Gossett, Bärenreiter-Verlag and the Center for Italian Opera Studies at the University of Chicago); *Le opere di Giuseppe Verdi in Edizione critica* (ed. Philip Gossett, a joint venture of the University of Chicago Press and Casa Ricordi), and an edition of Puccini's works (Casa Ricordi). (Despite the intense scrutiny and debate such projects have spawned, discussion of text critical matters is absent from this journal, for the topic warrants an issue unto itself.)

This special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* cannot even begin to address the myriad of current issues related to the composers of the era (who, of course, number dozens more than the luminaries mentioned above) or to the genre in general. What the journal seeks to present are case studies highlighting a few of the many topics and methods that yield meaningful scholarship and that may prove to be fruitful paths in the study of *ottocento* opera in both the near and the distant future. Given Verdi's prominence in the genre, as it turns out, three of the four articles presented here concern his operas, but all four of the studies bring up questions and issues relevant to other composers and repertory as well; each, however, deals with matters that seem to be specific geographically and temporally.

In '"Repatriating" *Falstaff*: Boito, Verdi, and Shakespeare (in Translation)', Denise Gallo deals with Verdi's and Boito's efforts to make *Falstaff*, the composer's final masterpiece, 'Italian'. Gallo, who is academically trained in musicology and in English literature, combines her insights from both disciplines in examining the earliest published editions of the plays from which the opera is drawn and of the contemporary nineteenth-century translations consulted by both composer and librettist to revise the standard narrative of the libretto's conception and design. In the process, she sheds new light on the creation and reception of the opera in its day.

Moving back several decades in Verdi's career, Susan Rutherford, a theatre historian and classically trained singer, takes a different approach to discussing the interrelationship of literary model and libretto, in the context of staging, acting, and musical composition. In 'From Byron's *The Corsair* to Verdi's *Il corsaro*: Poetry Made Music', she examines the integration of two art forms (poetry and music) into one (opera). She investigates Verdi's (and Piave's) capacity to determine which elements of the narrative lent themselves best to the theatre

[4] The *Donizetti Society Journal* began in 1974 and has been published periodically, the most recent issue (no. 7) released in 2002.

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and how developing an epic poem (to be read) into an opera (to be seen and heard) required composer and librettist to distil the literary model's dramatic and sonic essences. In doing so, she illuminates ways in which Verdi's theatrical acuity affected how he may have approached writing drama into his music.

The third article, Andreas Giger's 'Behind the Police Chief's Closed Doors: The Unofficial Censors of Verdi in Rome', also deals with text, plot and drama, in ways that touch upon audience perception and reception of opera. The author, who has written a great deal on operatic censorship (a matter with which Verdi grappled throughout nearly his entire career), explains two prominent cases by way of a detailed account of the interventions imposed in Rome on *Un ballo in maschera* and *La forza del destino*. The discussion reveals the rigour and care exercised by unofficial censors in formulating alternatives to objectionable passages and shows that censoring did not always weaken a libretto but sometimes presented acceptable solutions comparable in quality to the original. Here again, the dramatic essence of an opera stands front and centre.

Since the first three articles deal in varying ways with the effect of words on creation, performance, and reception of the operas of the primary exponent of *italianità*, it is perhaps fitting that the final article deals more precisely with reactions to Italian *ottocento* opera. In 'Music, Letters and National Identity: Reading the 1890s' Italian Music Press', Alexandra Wilson, a specialist on music journalism in late nineteenth-century Italy, examines the attitudes underpinning *fin-de-siècle* writings about Italian versus German, operatic versus instrumental, popular versus learned music. Through an overview of the Italian specialist press and more specifically of one particularly nationalistic journal, *Rivista musicale italiana*, she argues that nationalist debates, especially about operatic and non-operatic music, in the musical press of this period served as a means for competing factions in the music establishment to present their aspirations for the 'authentic' musical culture of Italy and its meaning for contemporary audiences.

Taken as a group, these studies suggest directions for scholarship about opera, with regard to text and music, compositional process, cultural context, and reception, for those not only in musicology but in literary studies and social history as well. Such scholarship promises to continue enlightening us about the artistic, political, and social contexts in which *ottocento* opera was created and performed – and about the works themselves. Indeed, this small, though rich and varied, collection of articles highlights the vitality and diversity of current scholarship on *ottocento* opera.

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