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Verdi, Victor Maurel and *fin-de-siècle* operatic performance

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Abstract: This article begins with a late Verdian conundrum, one that is arguably distinctive of the *fin de siècle*: even as Verdi seemed to be withdrawing from the stage, he turned repeatedly to a small group of practical musicians, among them the French baritone Victor Maurel, the first Iago and Falstaff and creator in 1881 of the revised role of Simon Boccanegra. An exploration of the circumstances in which Maurel first made an impression on the composer, as Hamlet and Amonasro at the Paris Opéra in 1880, suggests a significant role for the baritone in late Verdian historiography. In particular, Maurel's case reveals a Verdi interested in and even actively encouraging new approaches to operatic acting and declamation, a fact we might want to relate to the composer's larger trajectory in this period. It also reveals a *fin de siècle* in which singers continued to be important, in spite of composers' anti-performance rhetoric.

In the art of music, great innovators keep their eyes fixed on a future that they hope will not be long in coming. In a sense they abstract themselves from present necessities. They head always towards their ideal. . . .

Victor Maurel, *A propos de la mise en scène du drame lyrique 'Otello'* (1888)

'Tis our actors, singers and bandsmen on whose innate instinct must rest all hope of the attainment of even artistic ends as yet beyond their understanding; for it is they to whom those ends will become clear the swiftest, so soon as their instinct is rightly guided to a knowledge of them.

Wagner, 'The Destiny of Opera' (1871)

When we think of the later Verdi, we tend to think of a composer who was withdrawing from the opera house, of a man who by the 1880s and 1890s had arrived at the exalted opposite of his so-called 'anni di galera', or 'galley years', that period early in his career when he composed and supervised the production of ten operas.[1] In comparison, the years after 1879, when Verdi ended half a decade of inactivity to begin working on *Otello* (nearly a decade if you exclude the String Quartet and the Requiem), seem to have been infinitely more stately. In particular, they seem to have been a time when he was able to indulge a certain irritation with the 'real', practical side of opera. Verdi's letters from this period are known for their uncompromising rhetoric, for their pronouncements on the importance of authorial

Early versions of this article were presented at the 68th Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society in Columbus, Ohio, and at Cambridge, Tours, Columbia, the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford.

[1] Although Verdi used the term 'galley years' to refer to his career up to *Un ballo in maschera*, the phrase is more commonly used to mean the 1840s, a period of intense productivity on the composer's part.

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intention and the limits of interpretation.[2] Even more distinctively, these years saw the emergence of a refrain that Verdi conceived of for *Otello* and then took up again during the composition of *Falstaff*: that he was writing for his pleasure, with little thought of his music's incarnation on the stage. 'I have not finished [*Otello*]', he wrote to the tenor Francesco Tamagno on 31 January 1886, 'and even if I finish it, I have not absolutely decided to give it. I have written purely for my pleasure' ('Io non l'ho finita, e quand'anche fosse finita non sono assolutamente deciso di darla. Io ho scritto puramente per piacer mio'). And to his publisher Giulio Ricordi on 9 June 1891: 'In writing *Falstaff*, I have thought neither of theatres nor of singers. I have written for my pleasure' ('Scrivendo *Falstaff* non ho pensato né a teatri, né a cantanti. Ho scritto per piacer mio').[3]

Such claims were originally defensive, a way of fending off over-eager singers and impresarios. However, with each repetition they seem to have become more than that. As James Hepokoski has noted, they invite us to consider whether, in his later years, Verdi was developing a new attitude towards performance.[4] Indeed, read alongside documents like the lengthy and detailed staging manual for *Otello*, or reports of Verdi's indefatigability during the *Falstaff* rehearsals, the letters suggest a composer at once detached from the stage and supremely in control of it: who had managed to subsume the practical into his own sphere.[5] The image is a very

[2] The best known of such pronouncements was in a letter to Camille du Locle, a librettist of *Don Carlos*, dated 7 December 1869: 'For me true success is not possible unless I write how I feel, free from any influence. . . . The artists have to sing not in their way, but in mine; the entire company . . . has to have . . . good will; everything in the end should depend on me; only one will should dominate: my own. This may seem a little tyrannical . . . and perhaps it is; but if the work is to be a single entity [di getto], the idea has to be one and everything should come together to form this *One*'; translation adapted from *Verdi's 'Aida': The History of An Opera in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans Busch (Minneapolis, 1978), 4–5. See also letters to Giulio Ricordi of 27 November 1880, 1 January 1889 and 13 June 1892, in *Verdi's 'Otello' and 'Simon Boccanegra' (Revised Version) in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans Busch (Oxford, 1988), I, 32–3, 350–1, and *Verdi's 'Falstaff' in Letters and Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Hans Busch (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997), 206–8.

[3] Translations adapted from Busch, *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 205, and Busch, *Verdi's 'Falstaff'*, 142; see also *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio (Milan, 1913), 342–3, 713. The letter to Tamagno seems to be the earliest example of this refrain, though versions of it date back to Verdi's revision of *Simon Boccanegra* in 1880–1. For other examples and variants see letters to Victor Maurel of 30 December 1885, the mezzo-soprano Maria Waldmann, 1 January 1886, Ricordi, 7 February 1886 ('I haven't written [*Otello*] for this or that artist and now, looking over the parts . . . I can't think of any [artists] who are suitable'), Gino Monaldi, 3 December 1890, Waldmann, 6 December 1890, Ricordi, 1 January 1891 and Eugenio Tornaghi, 17 August 1892, in which Verdi refers back to his Maurel and Tamagno letters; in *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 188–9, 207–8 and *Verdi's 'Falstaff'*, 97–8, 108–9, 235–6.

[4] James Hepokoski, 'Verdi, Giuseppina Pasqua, and the Composition of *Falstaff*', *19th-Century Music*, 3 (1980), 239–50, here 239–40, where he is referring to claims made during the composition of *Falstaff*; see also Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: 'Otello'* (Cambridge, 1987), 90, where he suggests that Verdi's attitude towards performance at the time of *Otello* was idealised.

[5] For the staging manual (or 'disposizione scenica') for *Otello*, see *'Otello' di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. James Hepokoski and Mercedes Viale Ferrero (Milan, 1990), including Hepokoski's introductory essay 'La disposizione scenica per l'*Otello* di Verdi: Studio critico', 9–90; the

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fin-de-siècle one, familiar from the career of Verdi's great German antagonist, with his own detailed stage directions, fatigued singers and his own theatre, on the occasion of whose founding he wrote an essay praising puppetry as an ideal of theatrical art.[6] And it is an image that suits the later Verdi well, complementing recent writing emphasising what could be described as the composer's 'meta-operatic' aspect: the extent to which, in returning to operatic composition, he was concerned less with 'real' theatre than with communicating lessons to what in the 1880s and 1890s was an increasingly troubled and Wagner-influenced operatic world.[7]

It is against this background of the later Verdi as imagined by himself and by more recent commentators as 'meta-operatic' that I would like to introduce my subject matter. For, as remarkably consistent as were Verdi's claims about *Otello* and *Falstaff*, and as important as are arguments about these works by writers such as Hepokoski, Roger Parker and Emanuele Senici, they have served to obscure a different, more 'earth-bound' side of the composer. My point is not to set up an opposition, to pit against the 'meta' a more flexible and worldly, even 'greasepaint' Verdi.[8] Rather, it is about acknowledging that the two coexisted and that they produced music-historical tensions and 'oscillations'.[9] These tensions invite us to think less literally about the era's anti-performance rhetoric and to consider the reality behind it: the nature of operatic performance at the *fin de siècle* and its contribution to the creation of operatic works. In the case of Verdi, it is Hepokoski

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manual is available in English in *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 481–665. On the *Falstaff* rehearsals, see Hepokoski, 'Under the Eye of the Verdian Bear: Notes on the Rehearsals and Première of *Falstaff*', *The Musical Quarterly*, 71 (1985), 135–56.

[6] Richard Wagner, 'Actors and Singers', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London, 1895–99), V, 157–228. The essay was published after the laying of the foundation-stone at Bayreuth and includes a discussion of a street puppet-show which, with its 'poet, manager and actor all in one', brought to life for Wagner 'the Spirit of the Theatre' (181–2).

[7] See Hepokoski, *'Otello'*, 187–9, who sees the contrast between lyrical and declamatory modes in *Otello* as expressing a larger 'dialectic', between traditional Italian lyricism and a more modern, Wagnerian approach to opera; Roger Parker, '*Falstaff* and Verdi's Final Narratives', in his *Leonora's Last Act: Essays on Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997), 100-25, for whom *Falstaff*'s references to past forms, styles and operas make it 'an elaborate essay written against the grain of contemporary opera . . . a kind of manifesto, an ideological statement' (111); and Emanuele Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's Fin de Siècle', *The Musical Quarterly*, 85 (2001), 274–310, who sees the same references as expressing an almost modernist disillusion. See also Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon, Roger Parker and Emanuele Senici, 'Tutto nel mondo è burla: Rethinking Late Style in Verdi (and Wagner)', in *Verdi 2001: Atti del Convegno Internazionale Parma-New York-New Haven, 24 gennaio-1º febbraio 2001*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Marco Marica (Florence, 2003), 903–43; and, for an early piece in a related vein, Edward T. Cone, 'The Old Man's Toys: Verdi's Last Operas', *Perspectives*, 6 (1954), 114–33.

[8] Thanks to Stephen Hinton for this formulation.

[9] I am borrowing the terminology of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who has argued in his *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* ([Stanford, 2004], here 107–10) that 'a productive tension, an oscillation between meaning and presence' is central to the experience of aesthetic and historical objects. For Gumbrecht we have long neglected 'presence' in favour of metaphysical meaning or the hermeneutic.

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who has come closest to addressing such issues.[10] Late in his book on *Otello* he even provides a glimpse of how performance could have influenced the later Verdi's musical language:

> The aesthetic vision of Verdi's music is more immediate, more direct, more purely 'Romantic' than that of Boito's libretto [for *Otello*]. . . . If in the libretto we sense a cool separation of the writer from the text, the high polish of an aesthetically manipulated poetry, in the music we are confronted with a direct series of body blows. Verdi's music is always direct, aggressive, tactile. We are continually struck by its sheer physicality and energy, by the way that Verdi can repeatedly take a polished, mannered line . . . and convert it into palpable presence.[11]

I will not in this article provide more than my own glimpse of how performance could have influenced the later Verdi's operas. Rather, I will explore the palpable by focusing on one of a group of individuals to whom Verdi turned after 1879. In this group one can include Franco Faccio, once considered the future of Italian composition and conductor of all Verdi's premières from the first European *Aida* to *Otello*.[12] One can certainly include the tenor Francesco Tamagno, whose imposing physical presence and powerful yet strangely nasal voice have long been thought of as having influenced the role of Otello, which he created and which is known for its vocal as well as physical excesses (think of that strident 'Esultate!' as Otello takes the stage).[13] Then there is the French baritone Victor Maurel (1848-1923), whose first Verdian creation was the title role of the revised *Simon Boccanegra* (1881) and who went on to be the first Iago and first Falstaff. Maurel, more than anyone, invites us to think about the implications of a Verdi at once withdrawing from the stage and surrounding himself with a group of that stage's representatives. Indeed, for every letter from Verdi proclaiming his indifference to what he described as 'practical decisions',[14] there is a letter or piece of writing by Maurel insisting, if not that he had inspired Verdi's music, then at least he was significant. To put it more simply: Maurel would have loved the idea that I was going to write about him. Verdi would not have done, to say the least.

Prowling around the divo

Having emphasised Maurel's significance, I should repeat that I will not here focus on composition, but rather on the baritone's performances and a small and partly

[10] See Hepokoski, *'Otello'*, 90–138, 163–89; *'Otello' di Giuseppe Verdi*, *'Falstaff'*, 110–37; 'Verdi, Giuseppina Pasqua, and the Composition of *Falstaff*'; and 'Under the Eye of the Verdian Bear'.

[11] Hepokoski, *'Otello'*, 186–7.

[12] See Raffaello de Rensis, *Franco Faccio e Verdi: Carteggi e documenti inediti* (Milan, 1934).

[13] For more on Tamagno, see Mario Corsi, *Tamagno, il più grande fenomeno canoro dell'Ottocento* (Milan, 1937); Giorgio Gualerzi, ' "Otello": The Legacy of Tamagno', *Opera*, 38 (1987), 122–7; and *Il titanico oricalco: Francesco Tamagno*, exhibition catalogue (Turin, 1997). I should also mention Emanuele Muzio and the mezzo-soprano Giuseppina Pasqua, Eboli in the 1884 *Don Carlo* and the first Mistress Quickly.

[14] From a letter to Maurel of 30 December 1885: '*Otello* is not completely finished . . . I'm not making any practical decisions'; *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 188–9.

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pre-Verdian number of them. The reasons for this are partly to do with Verdi and partly to do with writing about singers. In the study of past singers, a still developing sub-field, there has been a tendency to seize on what is immediately extant: treatises, reminiscences, recordings (if they were made) and documents relating to the composers this or that figure worked with, including musical compositions. The possibility of influence is what has tended to inspire such study, though the standards for demonstrating influence are high: some kind of trace – an altered score, a statement in a letter – seems usually to be required.[15] Yet the most immediately extant sources are not always best for recovering a lost voice and presence. Nor does a lack of documentation mean that creative interaction did not take place.[16] One then ventures into what Michel de Certeau has described as history's 'zones of silence', or the most inaccessible and ephemeral aspects of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's 'phenomena of presence'.[17] The danger in not trying is that one approaches music as if it were not distinguished and indeed constituted by its performed aspect, as if performance in reality (and not merely in musicology) rarely has a role to play.[18]

At the *fin de siècle*, when so much music seems to have been written for posterity rather than for individuals, composerly statements about relationships with singers were perhaps even more tense and uneasy than usual, sometimes even becoming overtly misleading. One could put this boldly, and say that it is from this period that our neglect of performance as a historical and philosophical phenomenon dates. Not only that, but in the revised *Simon Boccanegra*, *Otello* and *Falstaff* Maurel was working with a national institution enjoying a last wave of productivity. Every document relating to the genesis and early performance of the last operas is dominated by this fact, to the extent that, to find a point of entry into the singer's and the composer's relationship, one almost has to circumvent their

[15] Recent writing on Verdian performance has relied on such sources and approaches. See Will Crutchfield, 'Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonographic Evidence', *19th-Century Music*, 7 (1983), 3–54; Mary Ann Smart, 'Verdi Sings Erminia Frezzolini', *Women and Music*, 1 (1997), 33–45; Alison Latham and Roger Parker, eds., *Verdi in Performance* (Oxford, 2001); Roger Freitas, 'Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 127 (2002), 226–57; Naomi André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2006); and Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago and London, 2006).

[16] Recording is a good example of the limitations of the 'immediately extant'. Maurel's generation did record, but towards the end of their careers and on poor and disorientating technology; the results are not necessarily representative of onstage practice. For an interesting account of early recording, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, 2003). Maurel made twenty-seven aria and song recordings between 1903 and 1907, ten of them unpublished; they include three versions of Iago's 'Era la notte' and three of Falstaff's 'Quand'ero paggio'. The published recordings can be heard on *Victor Maurel: The Baritone of the Late Verdi*, Vocal Archives 112, 1995.

[17] Certeau, *L'Absent de l'histoire* (Paris, 1973) and *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988); Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 105.

[18] For Carolyn Abbate we have long passed this point; see her 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 505–36.

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most important work. To borrow again from Certeau, one has to prowl around the margins of their history.[19]

My prowling will begin with Maurel's offstage or, perhaps more appropriately, 'extra-vocal' interests. Numerous and more concretely documented than a past voice or performance, they have dominated what little literature exists on the singer. In a career of over forty years (1867 to 1908), Maurel's achievements included: becoming the leading Franco-Italian baritone of his day (the term 'dramatic baritone' did not exist, but he was a popular Don Giovanni, Alphonse in *La Favorite*, Rigoletto, Conte di Luna and Méphistophélès in Gounod's opera); creating three Verdi roles, not only in Italy but also around the world, and in 1892 becoming the first Tonio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*; and making an important contribution to the first British Wagner stagings (he was the first London Telramund and Wolfram in 1875-6 and the first Covent Garden Dutchman in 1877).[20] He was also involved in a number of offstage projects, and not simply the teaching and treatise-writing one might expect of such a figure, particularly later in his career.[21] Maurel taught and gave lectures on the art of singing. He also co-directed a theatre, a revival of the Théâtre-Italien in Paris in 1883–5, where he oversaw and performed in the first French production of the revised *Boccanegra*. He painted, towards the end of his life designing the sets for a production of Gounod's *Mireille* at the Metropolitan Opera.[22] And he 'worked out', a hobby he apparently picked up in America and which, with typical *fin-de-siècle* panache, he discusses in an 1896 essay alongside the evolution of the Verdi baritone and one of Marcel Proust's favourite thinkers, the

[19] Here is the full Certeau citation: 'A strange phenomenon in contemporary historiography must be observed. The historian is no longer a person who shapes an empire. He or she no longer envisages the paradise of a global history. The historian comes to circulate *around* acquired rationalisations. He or she works in the margins. In this respect the historian becomes a prowler [rôdeur]. In a society gifted at generalisation, endowed with powerful centralizing strategies, the historian moves in the direction of the frontiers of great regions already exploited. He or she "deviates" by going back to sorcery, madness, festival . . . the forgotten world of the peasant . . . all these zones of silence'; *The Writing of History*, 79.

[20] A lengthy overview of Maurel's career can be found in the biography published by his son in 1923, Berty Maurel, *Victor Maurel: ses idées, son art* (Paris, n.d., copy at the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, Paris, C.6910[2]). Other discussions include Francis Rogers, 'Victor Maurel: His Career and His Art', *The Musical Quarterly*, 12 (1926), 580–601; Desmond Shawe-Taylor, 'A Gallery of Great Singers: Victor Maurel (1848–1923)', *Opera*, 6 (1955), 293–7; Jacques Gheusi, 'Le Premier Falstaff: Victor Maurel (1848–1923)', *Opéra International*, 54 (1982), 15; Sylviane Falcinelli, 'Victor Maurel ou la Préfiguration de l'homme de théâtre moderne', *L'Avant-scène Opéra* [on *Falstaff*], 87–8 (1986), 135–8; Harold Rosenthal, rev. Karen Henson, 'Maurel, Victor', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (rev. edn, London, 2001), XVI, 155–6; and K. J. Kutsch and Leo Riemens, 'Maurel, Victor', in their *Großes Sängerlexikon*, 4th edn. (Munich, 2003), 3000–3001.

[21] In a forthcoming article in *19th-Century Music*, I discuss the recent discovery of papers relating to Maurel's later career, including his emigration to the US. The papers include an exchange with Verdi about the role of Falstaff and documents relating to Maurel's second wife, Frédérique Rosine de Gresac, who moved to New York City with the singer and became a musical theatre librettist.

[22] Photographs of the 1919 sets, which Maurel was invited to design because of his Southern as well as painterly background – he was born in Marseilles – are in the Metropolitan Opera Archives.

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philosopher of memory Henri Bergson.[23] By the 1890s he was writing regularly and his output includes two pieces that discuss – and criticise – Verdi's oeuvre. A staging manual for *Otello* (1888) was drawn up as 'complement' and corrective to the 1887 Verdi-authorised volume. An essay on *Falstaff* (1894) argues for a more sympathetic view of the title role.[24] The *Otello* manual includes musical as well as dramaturgical criticisms. Referring to Iago's famous 'Temete, signor, la gelosia!', for example, Maurel reproaches Verdi for marking the vocal line sotto voce. According to the singer, this makes the line inaudible above the full orchestral accompaniment.[25]

Perhaps understandably, such interests have tended to be dismissed in the Verdi literature as not much more than arrogance on the part of a man who, after *Falstaff*, began writing to Verdi on paper embossed with his own miniature photograph (see Fig. 1; at about the same time, Verdi began referring to Maurel as 'il Divo'). In particular, scholars have distinguished between Maurel's interests and what took place on the stage – again understandably, since Verdi himself seems to have made such a distinction. In one of his earliest letters about the singer, written when he was thinking about the cast for the revised *Boccanegra* (on 5 December 1880), he proclaimed that 'there is no better singer and actor than Maurel', but that he was also 'crazy'.[26] And as the baritone's offstage endeavours proliferated, Verdi sought to distance himself from what he perceived as their excessive modernity. Responding to an unfinished copy of the *Otello* staging manual Maurel sent him on 14 December 1887, for example, he replied that he found some of his ideas – in particular his use of silent stage action to 'complete', or add details to, the libretto and music – 'too modern' and wanted this to be noted in the finished volume (it was).[27] Later, when sending Maurel his part for *Falstaff* (on 8 November 1892), he alluded discouragingly to the baritone's recent theories of 'scientific' singing, published that year as *Le Chant rénové par la science*, warning him against excessive study for the role. Maurel published these comments too.[28]

Verdi's comments were part of an anti-modern as well as anti-performance rhetoric in his post-1879 letters. We usually think of this rhetoric in terms of Wagner, but it was also directed towards spoken theatre, in particular the emerging

[23] Victor Maurel, 'Les Exercises physiques et la profession du chanteur' (1896), reprinted in Maurel, *Dix Ans de carrière, 1887–1897* (Paris, 1897; rpt. New York, 1977), 279–94.

[24] Maurel, *A propos de la mise en scène du drame lyrique 'Otello'. Etude précédée d'aperçus sur le théâtre chanté en 1887* (Rome, 1888) and 'A propos de *Falstaff*' (1894), both in *Dix Ans de carrière*, 1–148 and 179–97. In the latter essay Maurel argues that the historical Falstaff was a distinguished soldier and statesman and that Verdi's character should therefore be played as a synthesis of different character-types (186–8).

[25] Maurel, *A propos de la mise en scène du drame lyrique 'Otello'*, 10. Maurel's other publications include *Le Chant rénové par la science* (Paris, 1892), *Un Problème d'art* (Paris, 1893), *A propos de la mise en scène de 'Don Juan', refléxions et souvenirs* (Paris, 1896), rpt. in *Dix Ans de carrière*, 307–404, and *Conférence d'ouverture du cours d'ésthetique vocale et scénique professé par M. Victor Maurel à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales* (Paris, 1904).

[26] *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 36–7.

[27] Quoted in Maurel, *A propos de la mise en scène du drame lyrique 'Otello'*, 89 n1. Using silent stage action to clarify or change the meaning of a scene is of course common directorial practice today.

[28] *Verdi's 'Falstaff'*, 277, and Maurel, 'A propos de *Falstaff*', 189–90. For more on this exchange, see my forthcoming article in *19th-Century Music*.

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Fig. 1: Maurel as his own letterhead (courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris).

vogue for naturalism, with its pared-down, de-melodramatised acting styles.[29] Verdi's staging manual for *Otello* in fact urges actorly 'naturalezza' ('naturalness'). However, when Ricordi took the cast of the unfinished *Otello* to see a performance of the Shakespeare play starring the proto-naturalistic actor Giovanni Emanuel, Verdi and Boito made their position on histrionic innovation apparently clear. 'If we, Boito and I, have hit the right mark, there is no need of another interpretation', wrote Verdi on 24 December 1886, later joking with Ricordi about his 'extremist [theatrical] obsessions'. '[Emanuel] is . . . cold, monotonous, unsympathetic. . . . [Ernesto] Rossi and [Tommaso] Salvini, they are the two giants!' wrote Boito, recalling an earlier, more Romantic style of Italian Shakespeare acting, a style one might expect an opera composer to prefer.[30]

[29] For more on anti-modern rhetoric in Verdi's letters, see Parker, '*Falstaff* and Verdi's Final Narratives', 109–11.

[30] *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 283, 286–7, 282–3. For more on 'naturalezza' and the Emanuel incident, see Hepokoski, 'La disposizione scenica per l'*Otello* di Verdi', 29–33. For an introduction to actorly naturalism, see Claude Schumacher, ed., *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850–1918* (Cambridge, 1996) and John Stokes, Michael R. Booth and Susan Bassnett, *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The Actress in Her Time* (Cambridge, 1988).

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Given such a context, it is hardly surprising to find Julian Budden dismissing Maurel's interests as 'over-reach[ing] himself' or Hepokoski describing projects such as Maurel's staging manual as 'egotism' and claiming that Verdi only tolerated them for the sake of the singer's onstage talents, in particular his 'interpretive intelligence' and 'vocal maestria'.[31] Again, this is a view suggested by the composer, whose letters and public utterances about Maurel, though typically brief and guarded, are consistently positive about him on the stage. In particular, they single out his acting and his 'pronuncia' or 'dicitura'. In a letter of 26 November 1880, for example, Verdi wrote that '[Maurel is an] exception above all because of his enunciation [dicitura]. I have never heard any Artist carry his words to the ears of the Public with that clarity and expression [he] has.'[32] In his letter about *Falstaff* of 8 November 1892, he insisted to Maurel that 'with your great talent as a singing actor, with your accentuation and pronunciation [pronuncia]', he had no need of detailed study.[33] The lengthiest of such comments dates from 11 November 1886, when Verdi was thinking about a revival of *Otello* in Rome. He had not yet worked with Maurel on the opera, but on being told by Ricordi that he might not be available for the revival, he wrote:

> The Rome affair is a bit muddled. I don't know the actors you're suggesting . . . [Jules-Célestin Devoyod] is French and I'm very mistrustful of his pronunciation, [since] Iago is not performable nor even possible without pronouncing extraordinarily well, as Maurel does. . . . In that role one should neither sing nor raise one's voice (save for a few exceptions). For example, if I were a singing actor, I would say it all at the tip of the lips, mezza voce . . .[34]

This is also part of a larger rhetoric, one that dates back to Verdi's previous Shakespearean endeavour, *Macbeth*, and to a figure who was in many ways Maurel's predecessor as a Verdi baritone, Felice Varesi, who created the roles of Macbeth, Rigoletto and Germont. In three letters to Varesi about *Macbeth* Verdi had recommended something close to what he is commending here: good acting, attention to the words (particularly the 'effetto', or 'effect', of certain lines) and singing 'sotto voce'.[35] With Varesi, however, the unusual idea of not singing was to be applied only at moments, not to an entire role. The difference seems important, a reflection not only of compositional changes between 1840 and 1880 (and the differences between the roles of Macbeth and Iago), but also of a composer

[31] Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi* (Oxford, 1973–81), III, 324 and Hepokoski, 57, 59.

[32] *Carteggio Verdi-Ricordi, 1880–1881*, ed. Pierluigi Petrobelli, Marisa di Gregorio Casati and Carlo Matteo Mossa (Parma, 1988), 77–9. (Busch in *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 32–3, reproduces only a copy of this letter, which does not include the reference to Maurel. He also incorrectly identifies an earlier reference in the letter as being to Maurel – it is in fact to Federico Salvati.)

[33] *Verdi's 'Falstaff'*, 277.

[34] *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 261–2. For other references to Maurel's acting and 'pronuncia' or 'dicitura', see letters to Giuseppe Piroli of 5 April 1881, Waldmann, 5 April 1881 and Muzio, 10 February 1886; in Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1958), IV, 155, and *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 98, 208.

[35] Verdi to Varesi, 7 and c. 23–30 January and 4 February 1847, in *Verdi's 'Macbeth': A Sourcebook*, ed. David Rosen and Andrew Porter (Cambridge, 1984), 30–2, 36–7, 41.

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interested in rather than hostile to pared-down, de-melodramatised performance styles. In other words, there may have been a reality behind the anti-modern as well as anti-performance rhetoric, one that it would be interesting to pursue.

Two Hamlets

To take this point further, and to think about Maurel on the stage, I would like to explore a production he was involved in just over a year before his first Verdian collaboration: a revival of Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* at the Paris Opéra in late 1879. Maurel had in fact made his début at the Opéra ten years earlier, as Count Di Luna in the French version of *Il trovatore*, *Le Trouvère*. However, he had left almost immediately, unable to create a place for himself alongside the 'glory' of the theatre, the baritone Jean-Baptiste Faure.[36] The first Posa in another Verdi première, the 1867 Opéra-commissioned *Don Carlos*, by the 1870s Faure was almost fanatically appreciated for his lyrical, tender and tasteful singing. An aria such as Posa's 'C'est mon jour suprême' from *Don Carlos*, with its *dolcissimo* high Fs and long, floating lines, illustrates precisely these qualities, which aligned Faure with a tradition of male grand opera lyricism that seems to have been as important to the genre as politics and spectacle.[37] While Faure continued at the Opéra, Maurel worked in Europe and North America, performing at La Scala, where he created roles by the Brazilian composer Carlos Gomes – in particular the tenor-eating chieftain Il Cacico in the 1870 *Il Guarany* – and, from 1873 to 1879, at Covent Garden, where he sang Italian, French and the previously mentioned Romantic Wagnerian roles. He may have met Wagner in London and, according to the press of 1879 and the singer's later reminiscences, he also encountered the new director of the Opéra there, Auguste Vaucorbeil. Persuaded to return to the Opéra, he decided to make his 'rentrée' not as Don Giovanni, Vaucorbeil's idea, but as Hamlet, a role specially adapted by Thomas for Faure and created by him at the Opéra in 1868.[38]

This choice and the confrontation with Faure it implied were discussed in the press, possibly with Maurel's encouragement. Like many of his colleagues, he did his best as a spin-doctor. The 1860s and 1870s had seen an expansion of the Parisian newspaper and review market, giving journalists the power to make careers and bestow celebrity.[39] For the historian of singers, this makes the *fin de siècle* an

[36] See Henri de Curzon, *Jean-Baptiste Faure, 1830–1914: une gloire française de l'art lyrique* (Paris, 1923).

[37] On Faure as Posa, see *Giuseppe Verdi, 'Don Carlos': Dossier de presse parisienne (1867)*, ed. Hervé Gartioux (Heilbronn, 1997). Interestingly, when the Italian *Don Carlo* was premièred, it was with another French singer as Posa, Paul Lhérie (the first Don José in *Carmen*, who had subsequently become a baritone). Faure's other important creation was Nélusko in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865).

[38] Maurel, 'A propos de la mise en scène de *Don Juan*', 322; the story is also recounted in 'M. Maurel dans Hamlet', *Le Figaro*, 29 November 1879, and 'Frimousse' (Raoul Toché), 'Début de M. Maurel', *Le Gaulois*, 29 November 1879.

[39] For more on the expansion of the French press, see *Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Dean de la Motte and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (Amherst, MA, 1999). See also Christian Goubault, *La Critique musicale dans la presse française de 1870 à 1914* (Geneva and Paris, 1984) and Katharine Ellis, *Music Criticism in*

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important time: a period when, before the distractions of film and popular music in the twentieth-century sense, opera and operatic performance were written about at length and regularly. For a revival such as the 1879 *Hamlet*, a weight of paper survives, from pre-performance biographical sketches to post-performance gossip, in specialist music journals like *Le Ménestrel*, emerging liberal dailies such as *L'Evénement*, even proto-tabloids like *Le Sport*, and from articles that devote only a sentence or two to singers – 'There is no need to enumerate here the special talents of M. X. . . .' is one particularly frustrating refrain – to those in which performance is described in detail. One can even think of the press in this period as a recording medium. Like the cylinders and discs that were first being imagined in the 1870s, *fin-de-siècle* operatic journalism even relied for its proliferation on a sort of 'mechanical reproduction'. In the rush to produce copy, opinions were borrowed and repeated, quickly acquiring the status of fact and becoming part of a work or production.

So while it perhaps began life as a comment by a previewer, it seems quickly to have become a 'fact' about the 1879 *Hamlet* that Maurel's confrontation with Faure began with a change of costume. Faure favoured a low neckline, apparently corresponding to a certain Romantic emotionality in the part (though critics agreed that Faure was never a gifted actor – see Fig. 2). Maurel opted for an up-to-the-neck look, again corresponding to a histrionic approach, to what 'Panserose', a society columnist in *L'Evénement*, described as 'another Hamlet, more nervous, dark, cold, in the end more British' ('un autre Hamlet, d'une nature plus nerveuse, plus sombre, plus froide, plus britannique enfin' – see Fig. 3).[40] In particular, reviewers recorded a singer inspired by developments in Shakespearean acting, who had introduced greater restraint to the part and certain gestural and even spoken 'effets' ('effects'). For some this made him the equal of great recent Shakespeareans such as Boito's Rossi or the 1850s French tragedian Philibert Rouvière. For others, it 'trampled on the sacred rules of the art of singing'. Here are longer excerpts from two reviews, the first of which begins with a description of Maurel's voice:

> M. Maurel's voice is pleasant and of a supple, clear timbre; the vocal emission is good, the pronunciation excellent. The artist uses the soft colours of *voix mixte* with infinite charm and skill.[41] To speak frankly, his voice suits effects of softness more than it does bursts of power, but it lends itself with ease to everything the singer asks of it. . . . The dramatic composition of the role is as important as the music, perhaps even more so. M. Maurel has had the good taste not to try to recall Faure; his style is personal and a little bit reminiscent of the Italian Rossi. His gestures are well chosen, his physiognomy mobile and expressive.[42]

Nineteenth-Century France: 'La Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris', 1834–1880 (Cambridge, 1995).

[40] 'Panserose', 'Paris la nuit', *L'Evénement*, 30 November 1879. In the Shakespeare play, Hamlet's neckline is a reflection of his (increasingly deranged) mental state: in Act II scene 1 Ophelia complains of the prince having burst in on her 'his doublet all unbrac'd, / No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd'.

[41] *Voix mixte* was defined in the nineteenth century as a 'false' falsetto, created using a mixture of chest and head registers or a 'middle' register, between chest and head. Since such a mixed or middle register is now thought physiologically impossible, it is better described as a light chest voice.

[42] Henri Lavoix, 'Début de Mr. Maurel dans Hamlet', *Le Globe*, 29 November 1879.

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Fig. 2: Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet, Paris Opéra, 1868 (courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris).

[La voix de Mr. Maurel est agréable, d'un timbre souple et franc, l'émission est bonne, la prononciation excellente. L'artiste emploie, avec infiniment de charme et d'habileté, les teintes douces de la voix mixte. A dire vrai, sa voix convient mieux aux effets de douceur qu'aux éclats de puissance, mais elle se prête avec aisance à toutes les intentions du chanteur. . . . La composition du personnage est aussi importante, plus important peut-être que la partie musicale. Mr. Maurel a eu le bon goût de ne chercher en rien à rappeler Faure, son goût est personnel et sa manière rappelle quelque peu celle de l'Italien Rossi. Ses gestes sont justes, sa physionomie mobile et expressive.]

M. Maurel, they say, is a Shakespearean, he has studied the role of Hamlet with the English tragedians, with Irving; he has not seen Faure and plays the role entirely differently. Mon Dieu! I wish he wouldn't. . . . The artist's preoccupation with not making the role too tender stopped him from singing . . . as well as he should have with a voice like his. It also has to be noted that Maurel carelessly trampled on the sacred rules of the art of singing and too

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Fig. 3: Maurel as Hamlet, Opéra, 1879 (courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris).

often had recourse to fantasy, to explosions from the throat and to spoken declamation, dramatic effects of questionable quality.[43]

[M. Maurel, nous dit-on, a des allures shakespeariennes, il a étudié ce rôle d'Hamlet avec les tragédiens anglais, avec Irving; il n'a pas vu Faure et joue le rôle dans une manière toute

[43] Philbert Joslé, 'Théâtre national de l'Opéra. Débuts de M. Maurel dans *Hamlet*', *L'Evénement*, 30 November 1879.

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différente. Mon Dieu! je le regrette. . . . La préoccupation de l'artiste de ne pas attendrir trop son rôle l'a empêché de chanter . . . aussi bien qu'il aurait dû le faire avec la nature de sa voix. Il a bien fallu constater aussi que M. Maurel foulait facilement aux pieds les sages règles de l'art du chant et qu'il demandait trop souvent à la fantaisie, aux coups de gosier et à la déclamation parlée, des effets dramatiques de mauvais aloi.]

Descriptions such as these, with their rich metaphorical language, do not of course provide direct or uncomplicated access to what would have been a series of shifting performances. However, they do, in their quantity and repetition of certain themes, offer glimpses of a voice and a presence. They even invite us to attempt what Gumbrecht has described as a 'presentification', a bringing of a past presence to life.[44] That is, there are moments when critics, struck by a particular number or performerly strategy, interrupt the usual ordering of a *fin-de-siècle* opera review – a discussion of the plot, then the music, then a concluding paragraph or so about performance – to indulge in a moment of lyricism that is itself a presentification. In the 1879 *Hamlet*, what seems to have inspired this was the 'Scène de l'Esplanade' in Act I, when Hamlet first encounters his father's ghost. With its sparing supernatural orchestration and declamatory vocal lines, it was one of Thomas's most forward-looking scenes musically.

In contrast to Faure, whom critics describe as having performed this scene fearfully and distractedly, Maurel was a model of self-containment, remaining expressively 'immobile' even during his opening F-sharp minor Invocation (Ex. 1). Another singer might have invested the number with more overt emotion, perhaps with the occasional sob, as suggested by the text. Maurel only emoted during the ghost's following oration and then only at specific points. On hearing the voice of his dead father, he was overcome by a 'tresaillement' ('shudder') and looked anxiously around him, ready to flee (see Ex. 2: the 'effect' perhaps occurred at the end of bar 6). At mention of his mother, he let out 'muffled groans mixed with tears' ('des plaintes étouffées et mêlées de larmes') with which he prefaced the more stylised reaction Thomas had given him, an arc of melody (see Ex. 3: the groans and tears perhaps began in bar 4).[45]

Plotting reviewers' descriptions onto the score of course risks textualising the ephemeral. However, it also seems to tell us something, giving the impression of a singer not only keeping the histrionics of this scene in check, but also keeping a check on Thomas's musical style. As well as introducing a more modern, reserved

[44] 'Presentification' is for Gumbrecht a range of techniques to be employed to encourage contemplation of presence as well as metaphysical meaning. He defines it further as 'produc[ing] the impression (or, rather, the illusion) that the worlds of the past can become tangible again. . . . Instead of asking for a meaning, presentification . . . makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects . . . if we had encountered them in their own everyday historical worlds.' Gumbrecht argues that these techniques are already successfully employed in museum culture and popular history; *Production of Presence*, 94–5, 121–5.

[45] Frimousse, 'Début de M. Maurel'; Lavoix, 'Début de Mr. Maurel dans Hamlet'; Joslé, 'Théâtre national de l'Opéra. Débuts de M. Maurel dans *Hamlet*'; Georges Lefebvre, '*Hamlet*. Débuts de M. Maurel', *Paris Journal*, 30 November 1879; and Panserose, 'Paris la nuit'.

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Ex. 1: Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act I, 'Scène de l'Esplanade', Hamlet's Invocation [Hamlet (*with fright, in a contained voice*): Infernal ghost! Venerable image! O my father! O my king! Reply, alas, to my tear-stricken cries! Speak to me, speak!]

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Ex. 2: Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act I, 'Scène de l'Esplanade'
[Marcellus and Horatio: Let's stay near so that we can help him! (*they leave*). Hamlet: Speak! We're alone now. The ghost: Listen to me! Hamlet: I'm listening! The ghost: I am your father's spirit. A divine power tore me from the fires below and puts me before you.]

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Ex. 3: Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act I, 'Scène de l'Esplanade'
[The ghost: Avenge me, my son! Avenge your father. Don't wait for him to repent before striking. But don't be angry with your mother. We must let heaven punish her! Hamlet: O my mother! My mother!]

approach to acting, in other words, Maurel seems to have made Thomas's musical language more modern, smoothing over his sometimes slightly awkward grand opera transitions (Ex. 2 again) or making his lyricism more declamatory (Ex. 3). The added gestural and spoken details seem here to have been key – details that, according to the society columnist quoted earlier, were not in Thomas's score, but were nonetheless 'human' and 'true' ('vrai').[46]

[46] Panserose.

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Mention of 'humanness' and 'truth' brings us back to Maurel's relationship with Verdi and to issues of anti-modernism, actorly naturalism and histrionic innovation. For just as some of Verdi's comments about performance invite us to be less literal about his anti-modern rhetoric, descriptions of the 1879 *Hamlet* encourage us to think more flexibly about Maurel. In particular, they suggest that it is difficult to separate the on- and offstage singer and that, *on* the stage as well as off, he could be excessive and modern. As Verdi would later discourage him from doing, he had carried out extensive study for *Hamlet*. He had added details to the libretto and music, silent and gestural but also spoken. Most interesting, he had introduced these innovations at the inspiration of 'modern' spoken theatre. Although several actors are mentioned in reviews, and though drawing comparisons with actors was becoming a journalistic cliché, there seems to be a meaningful link with the British actor Henry Irving, who in 1874 at the Lyceum Theatre in London premièred a Hamlet notable for its simple costume and avoidance of the role's conventional 'points'. Irving was not as 'extremist' as Emanuel, whose approach to acting Verdi and Boito disliked (theatre historians categorise Irving as a realist rather than as a proto-naturalist). For a French observer, however, and particularly an operatic one, the differences may have been slight, for British acting had long been more unconventional and psychologised than French and Italian acting styles.[47]

I have been unable to establish whether Maurel ever had contact with Irving, but he was in London in the years before *Hamlet*, singing at Covent Garden. Indeed, it is in London that we first find the kind of comments made in Maurel's Opéra reviews: the comparison with actors, praise for a lack of melodramatic 'attitudinising' and criticism as well as praise for what in the British context is described as his dramatic and declamatory 'special effects'.[48] According to Berty Maurel, Maurel's son and author of the only biography of the singer, London was the scene of a larger transformation. Disheartened by the lack of success of his first Opéra début, and inspired by his years in Italy but still feeling something was missing, Maurel had turned in London to a Russian painter called 'Sprint', with whom he spent a year

[47] On Irving and his Hamlet, see Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1991), Madeleine Bingham, *Henry Irving, The Greatest Victorian Actor* (New York, 1978) and W. Davies King, *Henry Irving's Waterloo: Theatrical Engagements with Arthur Conan Doyle, George Bernard Shaw, Ellen Terry, Edward Gordon Craig: Late-Victorian Culture, Assorted Ghosts, Old Men, War, and History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993). For British, French and Italian acting styles in the period, see Michael R. Booth, John Stokes and Susan Bassnett, *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge, 1996). The idea that Maurel was inspired by and even studied with Irving is discussed in 'M. Maurel dans *Hamlet*', *Le Figaro*, 29 November 1879 and Joslé, 'Théâtre national de l'Opéra. Débuts de M. Maurel dans *Hamlet*'.

[48] For example, *The Illustrated London News* of 18 April 1874 reported that 'the good phrasing and artistic style of M. Maurel were effectively apparent in the music of Nelusko [in *L'Africaine*, sung in Italian as *L'africana*], while his acting was especially successful in indicating the fierce impulse of the daring slave without . . . melodramatic exaggeration'. The *Sporting & Dramatic News* of 3 April 1875 claimed: 'In a dramatic sense, M. Maurel eclipses all his predecessors except [the retired British actor William Charles] Macready. His fine commanding person and handsome features [as Guglielmo Tell] are in his favour; but he does not rely on attitudinising. He throws himself completely into the realisation of the character . . . [and] is always helping to produce the *vraisemblance* which is one of the highest charms of dramatic art.'

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estranged from the theatre and even from his family, studying painting, the body and gesture, the history of costume and the great theatrical masterpieces. Turning to Shakespeare, Irving and Wagner (Berty gives few details, but in the case of Wagner it seems to have been as a performer), he finally found his mission, one that Maurel himself emphasised in his writings. This was no longer to be a mere singer, but to adopt a new persona in which the on- and offstage cannot be separated: a modern, all-encompassing 'Interprète'.[49]

Two/three Amonasros

Berty Maurel's story, which is probably partly true, is also a creation-myth: of a figure who turns his back on the French and Italian operatic traditions, both characterised – in the story and to some extent historically – by lyricism and old-fashioned histrionics, to immerse himself in the artistic currents of 1870s London and emerge what we would call not an 'Interpreter' but a dramatic baritone. Interestingly, though, he does this not in collaboration with a composer, creating new roles, but by revitalising old ones, an aspect of the story that invites us to think about the relationship between histrionic innovation and the emergence of an operatic canon in this period. Of more concern to me here, though, is how to get from this baritone-interpreter back to Verdi.

The story of how Maurel first made an impression on the composer is usually told as follows: having decided to return to operatic composition and to begin by revising *Boccanegra*, Verdi engaged Maurel to sing the title role, which he described, using a word he would use later of Maurel, as requiring a certain 'autorità' ('authority').[50] So impressed was he with the singer in rehearsals that he apparently exclaimed: 'If God gives me health, I will write Iago for you!'.[51] On being reminded of this by Maurel later, Verdi denied the claim, insisting that he could only have said that 'the role of Iago would be one of those which perhaps no one would be able to interpret better than you'.[52] He nonetheless engaged the singer for *Otello* and, by the time of *Falstaff*, there was no discussion: his participation was a given.[53]

The story, then, not just of their first encounter, but of the entire relationship, is usually wholly Verdian. A little-known letter from the *Boccanegra* run suggests that we need to add something to the story. Specifically, it takes us back to *Hamlet*. Writing to his friend, the *salonnière* Marie Trélat, from Milan, Maurel claimed: 'I'm bringing

[49] Berty Maurel, *Victor Maurel*, 15–20; the London years are described as 'le moment psychologique où de la chrysalide du chanteur va sortir l'Interprète' (16). I have been unable to identify Sprint, though he was perhaps the minor portraitist Leon Sprinck, who exhibited in London in the 1890s; see J. Johnson and A. Greutzner, *British Artists 1880–1940* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1976), 475. Maurel himself only makes general references to Irving in his writings.

[50] This is how the story is told in Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 323–4, Hepokoski, *'Otello'*, 103–7 and Rosenthal, rev. Henson, 'Maurel, Victor', 155–6. For the authority comment, see *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 27–9.

[51] *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 188. Verdi may have meant *Otello* as a whole, for 'Iago' (along with 'Otello' and 'the chocolate') was how he was referring to the opera at this point.

[52] *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 188.

[53] Hepokoski, 'Verdi, Giuseppina Pasqua, and the Composition of *Falstaff*', 240.

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back from [here] one keen regret, that of not having had you in the audience for one of the Simon Boccanegra performances. Verdi says that in this new creation I've surpassed *the great impression my Hamlet made on him*' ('J'emporte [d'ici] un bien vif regret, celui de ne pas vous avoir eu comme spectatrice à une des représentations du Simon Boccanegra. Verdi trouve que j'ai surpassé dans cette nouvelle création la grande impression que lui avait produit mon Hamlet').[54] As Maurel mentions in passing, Verdi seems to have had the opportunity to see and enjoy his Hamlet, very probably in Paris in early 1880, when he was at the Opéra overseeing preparations for a new *Aida*. Maurel was still performing in the Thomas, this time alongside Marie Heilbron, whom the press report as giving a new character to Ophélie by modelling herself on Irving's leading lady, Ellen Terry.[55] Maurel was also about to sing Amonasro in the new *Aida* production.

It is worth pausing for a moment over this second Parisian production.[56] It had taken nearly ten years for the Opéra to secure *Aida*, after a first Paris *Aida* at the Théâtre-Italien in 1876 (in Italian rather than the Opéra's French) and so, now that the theatre had the work, it was concerned to make a statement. The Théâtre-Italien had had the advantage of a cast that included three of the European creators of the work, Teresa Stolz and Maria Waldmann, the first Milan Aida and Amneris, and Francesco Pandolfini, the first Milan Amonasro. The Opéra, however, had an infrastructure and resources that could allow it to produce a lavish and – a word used by the theatre in an internal document – 'archaeological' staging. It set about doing so, consulting Egyptologists and the Egyptian galleries at the Louvre for the sets and costumes, hiring a retired actor from the Comédie-Française, François-Joseph Régnier, to oversee the principals' acting, and asking Verdi to extend the Act II ballet and allow the Opéra to commission more impressive trumpets for the Triumphal March.[57] Yet somehow during the rehearsals and first performances the emphasis shifted back to the cast and to Maurel. First the singer fell ill and Verdi delayed the première until he was better. Then, when he took the stage among the trumpets and the archaeology, he stole it.

As in the 1879 *Hamlet*, the baritone attracted attention because of a change of costume – or because of his *lack* of one, for only a cloak and loincloth covered his blacked-up limbs and his head was bare except for what one critic, perhaps inspired by Henri Regnault's painting, described as a 'head of hair à la Salomé' ('chevelure

[54] Maurel to Trélat, 31 March 1881, Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Lettres autographes, vol. 73, n°281 (emphasis mine). Trélat was a talented mezzo-soprano and favourite correspondent of Bizet; for a brief biography, see Mina Curtiss, *Bizet and His World* (London, 1959), 217–19.

[55] 'Opéra. *Hamlet*. Débuts de Mlle Marie Heilbron', *Le Gaulois*, 12 February 1880.

[56] For a full account of the genesis and visual aspect of this production, see my 'Exotisme et nationalités: *Aida* à l'Opéra de Paris', in *L'Opéra en France et en Italie (1791–1925): une scène privilégiée d'échanges littéraires et musicaux*, ed. Hervé Lacombe (Paris, 2000), 263–97. The production is also discussed in Ralph P. Locke, 'Beyond the Exotic: How "Eastern" is *Aida*?', *this journal*, 17 (2005), 105–39.

[57] I have been unable to establish whether there was any connection between Régnier and Maurel.

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à la Salomé').[58] This simplifying and primitivising of Amonasro visually was accompanied by an emphasis on his 'savage' side, on his ferociously 'African' rather than kingly qualities. Up to this point the two sides of the character – king and African – seem to have coexisted. In comments about Amonasro during *Aida*'s genesis and in the opera itself, Verdi emphasises monarchical pride as much as 'primitive' aggression. During work on the Triumphal Scene, for example, he wrote to his librettist, Antonio Ghislanzoni, that Amonasro was a 'proud . . . King' and should not call out to Aida when he arrives on stage and sees her among the assembled throng. Rather, she should turn and call to him, an instruction followed by Ghislanzoni and outlined in detail in the *Aida* staging manual.[59] In this same manual, however, which Verdi instructed the Opéra to follow 'de point en point' ('faithfully' or 'to the letter'), one senses a shift in characterisation, towards something more violent and racialised.[60] And whether directed to by Verdi, or inspired by his own experiences in exotic roles (Cacico in Gomes's *Il Guarany* or Nélusko in *L'Africaine*), Maurel took this further, using what a critic in *Le Français* described as 'the jerky style of the English tragedians' to introduce gestural and spoken details that gave his part a darker character.

At his entrance, for example – to plot reviewers' descriptions again onto the score – he took to the stage boldly, breaking his chains and rushing to embrace Aida (see Ex. 4: the bond-breaking perhaps occurred in bar 4, at the tremolo D-E interruption).[61] In the tense *tempo di mezzo* of the Act III duet, he 'detailed with astonishing truthfulness . . . and . . . vocal inflexion' ('a détaillée avec une vérité étonnante . . . et . . . une inflexion vocale') the *sotto voce* hints with which Amonasro first tries to persuade his daughter to manipulate Radames (Ex. 5, bars 4–12).[62] The latter would originally have been a moment of disingenuousness, of lyricism and lilting vocal-orchestral exchange put to sinister purposes.[63] As in *Hamlet*, however, the musical language seems in Maurel's performance to have become more modern and declamatory. And, as in *Hamlet*, this inspired criticism as well as praise, in

[58] 'Vert-Vert', untitled, *Le Télégraphe*, 24 March 1880. Regnault's *Salomé* dates from 1869 and is indeed hirsute. Thanks to Jean-Claude Yon for pointing out this connection.

[59] Verdi to Ghislanzoni, 7 October 1870, in Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 74–5; the latter reproduces the *Aida* manual in English, 558–618.

[60] For Verdi's instructions to use the manual, see Henson, 'Exotisme et nationalités', 273–4. The manual emphasises the fear Amonasro inspires in Aida and prescribes the following violent climax for their duet in Act III: 'At the words *Dei Faraoni tu sei la schiava*, Amonasro, at the height of his fury, once more seizes Aida's left arm; she emits a piercing cry, *Ah!*, while her father pushes her back so forcefully that she falls to the ground, almost lifeless; she raises herself with her right arm and lifts her left hand pleadingly towards her father. Amonasro withdraws two steps to the left and turns his back on his daughter, remaining in a gloomy and threatening mood'; *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 598.

[61] My examples are from a French vocal score that communicates a version of *Aida* close to that performed at the Opéra: *Aïda. Grand Opéra en quatre actes. Paroles françaises de MM. Du Locle et [Charles] Nuitter. Musique de G. Verdi* (Paris, n.d.), plate number A[lphonse] L[educ] 7003.

[62] 'Un Strapontin de l'Orchestre', 'La Soirée théâtrale', *Le Figaro*, 23 March 1880 and D. Magnus, 'Revue musicale', *Gil Blas*, 24 March 1880.

[63] Thanks to Elaine Sisman for this point.

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Ex. 4: Verdi, *Aida*, Act II, Triumphal Scene, Amonasro's entrance
[Ramfis and priests: Give thanks to the gods! Aida: What do I see! You! My father! All: Her father!]

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Ex. 5: Verdi, *Aida*, Act III, Aida–Amonasro duet
[Aida: Who will find out the Egyptians' secrets? Who? Amonasro: You! Aida: Me! Amonasro: Radames . . . he's coming here (*with meaning*) He loves you . . . He's the leader of their soldiers . . . Do you understand? Aida: Blasphemy! What are you suggesting? No! no! Never!]

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particular the criticism that the baritone's 'effects' prevented him from singing. Here are four more excerpts from the journalistic record:

M. Maurel (Amonasro) acts his role at least as zealously as he sings it, which sometimes leads him to introduce speech into the middle of his singing; this is a new effect, but one that is contrary to the tradition of *tragédie lyrique*.[64]

[M. Maurel (Amonasro) joue son rôle avec au moins autant de zèle qu'il le chante, ce qui l'entraîne parfois à intercaler le parlé au milieu de la chant; c'est un effet nouveau, mais qui est contraire à la tradition de la tragédie lyrique].

The Opéra troupe as it is currently constituted should offer to the *Aïda* audience two artists of the first order. We are familiar enough with Mlle Krauss's great talents to have guessed that her Aïda would be a remarkable creation. . . . [M. Maurel] has put together the role of Amonasro with real superiority. Wonderfully made-up and costumed, his entry in Act II when he appears in chains behind the victor's chariot, resisting the soldiers who lead him, produces a striking effect. With haughty anger he throws out the protestations of the conquered king; finally, the third act, which is almost entirely his, was a moment of a great triumph for Maurel, whose intelligence and [vocal] suppleness we have praised [in past reviews]. M. Maurel has a great advantage over many of his colleagues: a clear diction which, while obeying the laws of musical accentuation, does not allow a syllable of the text to be lost.[65]

[La troupe de l'Opéra, telle qu'elle est composé, offrait à l'auditeur d'*Aïda* deux artistes de premier ordre. On sait assez l'immense talent de Mlle Krauss pour deviner qu'elle a fait du rôle d'Aïda une création très-remarquable. . . . [M. Maurel] a composé le rôle d'Amonasro avec une réelle supériorité. Admirablement grimé et costumé, son entrée au deuxième acte, lorsque, chargé de liens et résistant au soldats qui l'entraînent, il suit le char du vainqueur, produit un effet saissisant. Il lance avec un fier emportement les protestations du roi vaincu; enfin le troisième acte qu'il remplit presque tout entier a été pour cet artiste, dont nous avons déjà loué l'intelligence et la souplesse, l'occasion d'un véritable triomphe. M. Maurel a sur beaucoup de ses confrères un immense avantage: c'est une diction claire qui, tout en obéissant aux lois de l'accentuation musicale, ne laisse pas perdre une syllabe du texte.]

M. Maurel (Amonasro) is superb in the ferocious guise of the dreadful king of Ethiopia and must be making M. Mounet-Sully of the Comédie-Française jealous. . . . There are passages that he not only sings remarkably, but in which he also brings out certain words with incomparable artistry.[66]

[M. Maurel (Amonasro) est superbe sous les traits farouches du terrible roi d'Ethiopie et doit rendre jaloux M. Mounet-Sully de la Comédie française. . . . Il est telles phrases qu'il ne chante pas seulement d'une façon remarquable, mais dont il détache certains mots avec un art incomparable.]

[64] Léon Pillaut, 'Théâtre: Opéra', *Le Bulletin français*, 25 March 1880.
[65] Octave Fouque, 'Musique. Académie nationale de musique: *Aïda*', *La République française*, 25 March 1880.
[66] Léon Guillet, 'La Semaine théâtrale', *Le Derby*, 27 March 1880.

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If one were to compare the interpretation at the Théâtre-Italien and what it is today at the Opéra, we would not hesitate to say that we much prefer the former. [At the Opéra] La Krauss is the only one who is really fully in her role. She lends to Aïda her great skills as a tragedienne. . . . M. Maurel acts rather than sings. It's true that he acquits himself very well and that one couldn't find a more savage or impetuous Admonasro [*sic*]. But this very impetuousness, the jerky style of the English tragedians, is not conducive to vocal emission and at times prevents it altogether. He nonetheless produced a great effect.[67]

[Si l'on établit un parallèle entre ce qu'était l'intérpretation au Théâtre-Italien et ce qu'elle est aujourd'hui à l'Opéra nous n'hésitons pas à lui préférer de beaucoup la première. La Krauss est la seule qui soit vraiment bien en situation dans son rôle. Elle prête à Aïda ses grandes qualités de tragédienne. . . . M. Maurel joue [son rôle] plutôt qu'il ne le chante. Il est juste de dire qu'il s'en acquitte fort bien et que l'on ne saurait trouver un Admonasro plus sauvage ni plus impétueux. Mais cette impétuosité même, ce jeu heurté des tragédiens anglais est peu propice à l'émission de la voix et contribue par instants à la supprimer tout à fait. Il a, néanmoins, produit beaucoup d'effet.]

Prowling again

I cannot be sure that Verdi approved of Maurel's Amonasro, though he supervised the *Aida* rehearsals and conducted the first few performances. His rhetoric about the production, though characteristically pithy, seems unambiguous. He described Maurel as having been 'excellent' (20 March 1880, to Waldmann), 'stupendous' (24 March, Clara Maffei), 'very, very good' (26 March, Giuseppe Piroli) and an 'uncommon artist' (27 March, Ferdinand Hiller).[68] Even more interesting, when thinking about the revised *Boccanegra* nine months later, he made his first ever comments about the baritone's acting and 'pronuncia' or 'dicitura'. I quoted the relevant letters earlier, but now that we know the context and the histrionic and declamatory innovations to which they perhaps refer, they are worth revisiting. On 26 November 1880, Verdi wrote that '[Maurel is an] exception above all because of his enunciation [dicitura]. I have never heard any Artist carry his words to the ears of the Public with that clarity and expression [he] has.' On 5 December 1880, he continued: 'There is no better singer and actor than Maurel', but he is also 'crazy'.[69]

It seems, then, that Maurel's tendency to be excessive and modern continued in his work with Verdi. It also seems that, at least at this early stage of their relationship, Verdi was interested in this tendency and actively encouraged it. It is even possible that Verdi interacted with Maurel's gestural and spoken 'effects' to produce a new, more exoticised Amonasro. One could take this point further, for it is in Paris, during the Opéra trip, that we have the first evidence for nearly a decade of Verdi writing operatic music. A first step was taken at the end of 1879,

[67] Unsigned, 'Revue dramatique. Opéra. *Aida*', *Le Français*, 29 March 1880.
[68] *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 421–3.
[69] To clarify, Verdi seems not to have worked with Maurel before *Aida* and did not work with him again before making these comments. Before *Aida*, Maurel had sung in the première of *Don Carlos* as one of a group of Paris Conservatoire students recruited to supplement the Flemish deputies; he was also Posa in the first *Don Carlo* in Naples in 1871, a production Verdi was not directly involved in.

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when the composer finally accepted a copy of Boito's *Otello* libretto. By Christmas he had broken his silence to write a Pater Noster and an Ave Maria. It is only in Paris in early 1880, however, that we first hear of him setting *Otello* to music, with a warning from his assistant and former student Emanuele Muzio that no one should interfere 'for it would seem as if [we] wanted to stop him writing an opera in French, which he won't do'.[70] We do not know what, if anything, was sketched at this time; the first musical sources for *Otello* date from four years afterwards.[71] It is surely possible, though, that the experience with Maurel played a role in this development. Can one even hear in Maurel's Amonasro the beginnings of another operatic African, who in Verdi's and Boito's hands was about to become violent and racialised? And is there, in the baritone's spoken effects, one possible source for a vocal style that, above all in the character of Iago, would also be highly nuanced and declamatory?

These are large questions and, in keeping with my aim of prowling around the margins, I would like to end with a simpler point, about operatic performance at the *fin de siècle*. As I mentioned at the start, this was a time when composers seem to have been writing for posterity more than for individuals, an ambition that could motivate tension and obfuscation in claims about their relationships with singers. In Verdi's claims to be writing 'purely for [his] pleasure' or Wagner's praise of puppetry, we even have a glimpse of the modernist disdain for the performer.[72] The case of Maurel shows, however, that there was a reality behind the rhetoric, in which singers continued to play a role, one that, if neither easily documentable nor traditionally vocal, seems nonetheless to have been important. Indeed, perhaps when so much in the operatic world was in doubt, the opinions and strength of purpose of an 'interpreter' such as Maurel provided composers with an important point of reference. Wagner was perhaps referring to something like this when, in a 1871 essay, he wrote that opera's 'destiny' lay with singers. In a piece published a year later, one concerned with a theory of performerly 'self-divestment' ('Selbstentässerung' – itself a kind of proto-naturalism), he even claimed that one soprano, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, 'taught' him how to compose.[73] Perhaps this is in the end the reason for composers' anti-performance rhetoric and a forgotten feature of opera at the *fin de siècle*: in order to ascend to the unworldly, composers relied on the world.

[70] Muzio to Ricordi, 25 February 1880, in *Verdi's 'Otello'*, 18.

[71] For the available sketches and a detailed chronology, see Hepokoski, *'Otello'*, 48–59.

[72] The classic text is Igor Stravinsky, 'The Performance of Music', in his *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, MA, 1942), 121–35, in which the composer asks that, before being 'interpreters', performers be 'flawless executant[s]' adhering to a 'principle of submission' (127).

[73] Wagner, 'The Destiny of Opera' and 'Actors and Singers', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, V, 127–55, 157–228. In the latter essay, Wagner defines 'Selbstentässerung' as 'a real putting-off of self' and 'an offer[ing] up [of] consciousness of self to such a degree that, in a sense, [the actor] never recovers it' (216). For more on Schröder-Devrient, see Susan Rutherford, 'Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient: Wagner's Tragic Muse', in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester, 2000), 60–80.

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