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PART ONE

Personal, cultural, and political context

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1 Verdi's life: a thematic biography

MARY JANE PHILLIPS-MATZ

Giuseppe Verdi, born in a country village in the Po Valley in 1813, rose to become the most popular opera composer of his century.¹ Across a career that spanned more than sixty years he won international fame, becoming the venerated and often decorated grand old man of Italy, “il gran vegliardo.” Setting his stamp on two generations of performers, he transformed a showcase for *prime donne* and celebrated tenors into a serious theatre for singing actors. A patriot, Verdi was twice elected to political office and was honored as Senator for Life. He was also a farmer and philanthropist. At his death in 1901, he left behind a legacy of landmark works. Verdi's art has remained as accessible and popular as it was during his lifetime, his major operas constituting the backbone of today's standard repertory. Three of his homes and the home of Antonio Barezzi, his patron and father-in-law, are open to the public as museums. Now, as before, Verdi speaks to us all, even as he remains a beloved symbol of Italy and its culture, a man for his time and ours.

The child, the village, and the land

Verdi was born on October 10, 1813, in Roncole, a hamlet standing in open land about sixty-five miles southeast of Milan with the Apennines looming on the south and west and the River Po flowing to the north, where most income came from wheat, corn, and hogs. In this world of flat fields edged by rows of Lombardy poplars and irrigation canals, the only large buildings were the parish churches, among them Verdi's San Michele Arcangelo in Roncole. The people there spoke a sweet, liquid dialect that was heavily influenced by French and was the only spoken language of Verdi's early years. Peaceful today but chaotic during Verdi's infancy, the area was overrun with troops fighting the Napoleonic Wars.

Verdi's father came from a line of small farmers and tavern keepers whose roots reached back at least to the 1500s in the village of Sant'Agata. Although almost everyone in the area was illiterate, Carlo Verdi could sign his name, read, write letters, and keep accounts. Luigia Uttini, Verdi's mother, came from a family that had left its home in the Italian Alps in 1705 and

[3]

4 *Mary Jane Phillips-Matz*

settled in nearby Cortemaggiore, not far from Piacenza. Her people, also tavern keepers, operated inns and posthouses in tiny Chiavenna Landi and Saliceto di Cadeo. Modest innkeepers such as the Verdis and Uttinis led a life of drudgery and eighteen-hour days, because their establishments were the center of community life. In the Verdi house, the tavern and grocery occupied two rooms; the family lived in five other rooms on the first and second floors. They supplemented their income by leasing land and houses from the diocese, then subletting to tenant farmers. Verdi later used their system on a grand scale on the land he bought between 1844 and his death.

Education, music, and politics

Verdi's iron character was forged in this plain landscape. Seen by his boyhood companions as diffident and reticent, he disliked noisy games and stayed close to home. His closest friend in childhood was his sister Giuseppa, a seamstress who died in 1833. In Verdi's parish and hundreds like it, church music rang out for religious holidays, marriages, and funerals. Baptisms, saint's-day festivities, and fairs brought community dinners and secular music, most of it offered by itinerant musicians and bands of dedicated amateurs, many of whom belonged to local musical societies. Improvised programs were common, and lively concerts on summer evenings always ended with dancing.

Verdi was drawn early to music, and he was particularly fortunate because his intelligence and his musical gift were recognized when he was a child. Priests in Roncole began teaching him Italian grammar and arithmetic when he was about four. Soon he began to study with the organist in Roncole and the priest of the nearby pilgrimage church of La Madonna de' Prati. In 1821, when he was seven, his parents bought him a small spinet, probably using money from a bequest from his maternal grandfather. Verdi kept it until he died and provided for it to be saved afterward. That the son of rural tavern keepers should have had his own instrument at home was astonishing. Verdi proved worthy, learning so rapidly that when he was about ten the vestry of San Michele in Roncole hired him as church organist, a post he held for about nine years.

Many events reported from Verdi's childhood remain unverified anecdotes, but two that can be substantiated happened during religious services. As an altar boy in Roncole, he once failed to pay attention during Mass, irritating a priest who knocked him down the altar steps. The boy responded by cursing the priest, "May God strike you with lightning." As if in response to the boy's curse, the priest was killed in September 1828, when lightning struck the nearby church of La Madonna de' Prati during a holiday service.

5 *Verdi's life: a thematic biography*

Verdi, whose parents were catering a dinner for the clergy there, remembered the shattered altar and the charred bodies of four priests, two laymen, and two dogs who lay on the floor. He often told friends and relatives about the horrifying sight. In the countryside, where superstition ran abreast with the Catholic faith, Verdi's curse became a part of local lore. Still a teenager, he won new respect and was even a bit feared.

In 1823, Verdi's parents sent him to the *ginnasio* or upper school in Busseto, an ancient market town that was also a cultural center and seat of municipal government. Busseto offered the boy a classical education and a chance to work with the forty-odd amateur musicians of the local Società Filarmonica. A group that gave public concerts and served as the town band, they also invited singers to take part in concerts they presented in the grand town house of Antonio Barezzi, a distiller and grocer. In the summer, they rode around the countryside in lumbering, horse-drawn omnibus coaches, playing sacred and secular music in nearby towns. The teenaged Verdi served first as the Filarmonica's music copyist, then as its conductor and composer, writing hundreds of pieces for it and learning to compose for band, orchestra, and voice. In 1832, Barezzi became Verdi's patron, took him into his home, and treated him as if he were one of his own children.

In the 1830s, Verdi became ensnared in local politics, somewhat against his will. At that time Austria occupied much of northern Italy, including the major cities of Milan, Venice, Brescia, Padua, Verona, and Mantua. After Napoleon's defeat and exile, the duchy of Parma, where Verdi lived, was ruled by his wife, the Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria. Like other towns, Busseto was torn apart by factions: the Reds (including many members of the Filarmonica) were pro-French, anti-Austrian, anticlerical, and nationalist; the Blacks (including most of the clergy) supported Austria and the status quo. Verdi, still young, was regarded as the darling of the Reds because of his association with the Filarmonica. The bishop and local priests treated Verdi vindictively, calling him "the creature of Barezzi" and effectively preventing him from becoming parish organist. So much strife erupted over his candidacy that the Duchess sent soldiers to quell the riots. And Verdi had other issues with the clergy: in 1830 his parents' priest-landlords had evicted the family from the house they had rented for almost fifty years. Verdi's profound anticlericalism stayed with him all his life. He never forgot and never forgave.

Opera as an art and a trade

Needing further training, Verdi applied for admission to the Milan Conservatory in 1832 when he was eighteen, but was turned down. He then studied

6 *Mary Jane Phillips-Matz*

privately until 1835 with Vincenzo Lavigna, a composer of operas who had taught at the Conservatory and had played for many years at the Teatro alla Scala, northern Italy's most important opera house.

As the rehearsal pianist and conductor for the Milanese Società Filarmonica, an amateur group that gave concerts and operas in the Teatro dei Filodrammatici, Verdi gained valuable experience before circumstances forced him to leave the city. Forced back to Busseto, he fulfilled the duties of municipal music master for more than two years. In 1836 he married Margherita Barezzi, a spirited redhead who was his patron's daughter. A piano teacher whose father had once considered sending her to study singing at the Milan Conservatory, she fought fiercely for Verdi's cause both before and after their marriage. The couple soon had two children, named after heroic characters from the tragedy *Virginia* by Vittorio Alfieri, a revered poet and dramatist. Their daughter Virginia died in 1838. While teaching in Busseto he composed his first opera, which he tried in vain to get produced in Parma. Struggling to support his family and seeing that he could never advance his career from Busseto, he resigned his post in February 1839; and he and Margherita set up house in Milan, where their little son, Icilio Romano, died eight months later.

Verdi at first floundered in the rough world of impresarios, rival composers, singers, greedy publishers, librettists, agents, and publicity hacks. Only with the help of Lavigna and other friends was he able to persuade Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario of La Scala and of the Kärntnerthor in Vienna, to stage *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*, which premiered successfully in 1839. With Merelli wanting more, and Verdi's career finally under way, misfortune struck again. Margherita died in June 1840, leaving him depressed and bitter, a childless widower at twenty-six.

Verdi closed the apartment in Milan, returned to Busseto, and tried unsuccessfully to get a release from his La Scala contract. Under pressure, he finished his second opera, *Un giorno di regno* (1840), a total fiasco that survived only one night. Afterward Verdi vowed to stop composing altogether; but Merelli turned a deaf ear and soon convinced him to try a new libretto, *Nabucco*, for which he finished the music in a remarkably short time. Despite Merelli's support, Verdi had trouble getting his new opera produced at La Scala until the *prima donna* Giuseppina Strepponi took up his cause. She and Giorgio Ronconi, a leading baritone, persuaded Merelli to put *Nabucco* on the calendar (March 1842), with Ronconi in the title role and Strepponi as the female lead. Its premiere, a triumph known by few composers, made Verdi a celebrity almost overnight and truly launched his career; its chorus "Va pensiero," sung by the Hebrews during their captivity in Babylon, remains Italy's favorite patriotic song and its unofficial national anthem.

7 *Verdi's life: a thematic biography*

As Verdi, the former music master from Busseto, began feeling his way through the labyrinth of the opera business, he was often helped by Strep-poni, a gifted singing actress who knew the inside workings of the theatre. A graduate of the Milan Conservatory, she was the daughter of one composer and the niece of another. Her short but important career began in 1834 and ended in 1846. Traveling from one engagement to another, she adroitly manipulated agents and impresarios, among them Merelli and the powerful Alessandro Lanari of Florence, whose reach at various times extended from Tuscany and Milan to Verona and Venice and south to Rome and even Naples. Once Strep-poni devoted herself to Verdi's career after *Nabucco* the pair soon became lovers.

Strep-poni was an indispensable collaborator, fiercely loyal to Verdi, but their relationship created problems with his family and friends. She had tarnished her personal reputation with reckless love affairs, pregnancies, and the births – all in less than four years – of three (or perhaps four) illegitimate children. She abandoned all of them, leaving two with foster parents and one in a foundling home, although she did provide some money for her son. Unrecognized by her, all died as charity cases and were given third-class funerals. Her emotional scars never healed, and her tarnished reputation cost her dearly.

The composer and his librettists

Following *Nabucco*, Italian impresarios besieged Verdi with contracts and commissions; soon agents from European and American theatres were also courting him. His operas became so popular that they brought him a substantial income and filled the coffers of his Italian publisher, Giovanni Ricordi. His next opera for La Scala, *I lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843), was followed by the hugely successful *Ernani* (Venice, 1844), the first of five works Verdi composed for the Teatro La Fenice. *I due Foscari* (Rome, 1844) was followed by *Giovanna d'Arco* (Milan, 1845), *Alzira* (Naples, 1845), *Attila* (Venice, 1846), *Macbeth* (Florence, 1847), *I masnadieri* (London, 1847), *Jérusalem* (Paris, 1847), *Il corsaro* (Trieste, 1848), and *La battaglia di Legnano* (Rome, 1849). In all of these (apart from *Alzira*, which got a mixed reception and was written off as a failure), Verdi made steady progress and, above all, showed a growing ability to rule the box office.

Verdi remained constantly on the alert for promising librettos, the quality of which often determined the success or failure of a work. He closely managed the process of creating librettos, from scenario through finished poetry. After *Nabucco*, he might have looked back to Antonio Piazza, the journalist-poet who wrote the libretto of *Oberto*, or to the highly respected

8 *Mary Jane Phillips-Matz*

Felice Romani, the author of *Un giorno di regno*. Instead, he collaborated again with Temistocle Solera, the headstrong poet and composer who had revised the libretto of *Oberto* for Merelli and had written *Nabucco* as well. Verdi engaged Solera as his librettist for *I lombardi*, *Giovanna d'Arco*, and *Attila*. But in 1845, when Solera fell behind on his work, the composer replaced him with the Venetian poet Francesco Maria Piave, who had written *Ernani*.

For more than twenty years, Piave remained Verdi's close collaborator and cherished friend. Their association lasted from 1843 until the late 1860s, when Piave was felled by a stroke. During Piave's protracted illness and after his death in 1876, Verdi provided financial assistance to him and his family. No other poet brought so much to the composer over such a long span of time: Piave not only wrote serviceable poetry but also provided expertise as a stage manager and tact as a negotiator with impresarios and censors, helping Verdi in Venice and elsewhere. Verdi wrote frankly to Piave about his joys and tribulations, sharing concerns that he rarely revealed to others. He called Piave "Dear Tom-Cat" and "Dear Lion-Cat," while Piave responded with salutations to "Adorable Bear" and "Dear Peppino," at a time when almost everyone else addressed Verdi as "Illustrious Maestro." The two men worked together in shared good faith, surviving private and professional crises even as they brought many successful operas to the stage. In addition to *Ernani*, Piave wrote *I due Foscari*, *Macbeth*, *Il corsaro*, *Stiffelio*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Simon Boccanegra*, *Aroldo*, and *La forza del destino*.

Salvatore Cammarano, a Neapolitan librettist, sure-handed man of the theatre, and author of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and many other successful librettos, wrote *Alzira*, *La battaglia di Legnano*, and two operas of Verdi's maturity, *Luisa Miller* and *Il trovatore*. He also worked with Verdi on the libretto of *Re Lear*, based on Shakespeare, an opera that was never completed. Verdi trusted Cammarano's instincts because of his practical experience in poetry and stagecraft. Andrea Maffei, a distinguished translator and poet – and Verdi's close personal friend – was perhaps the most prominent literary figure among the composer's librettists. Maffei wrote *I masnadieri* and added sections of text to *Macbeth*. When Verdi got his first contract with the Paris Opéra, he collaborated with the French librettists Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz. For his later French operas, he had several partners, including the venerable Eugène Scribe, Joseph Méry, Charles Duveyrier, and Camille Du Locle, who completed *Don Carlos* after Méry died and also translated several of Verdi's works into French. Among Verdi's later librettists in Italy was Antonio Somma, a former theatre manager, attorney, poet, and journalist, who helped with *Re Lear* after Cammarano died. Somma also wrote the libretto for *Un ballo in maschera* (Rome, 1859). The poet of *Aida*

9 Verdi's life: a thematic biography

(Cairo, 1871) was the eccentric former baritone and journalist Antonio Ghizlanzoni, the only Verdi librettist who had sung professionally.

Although Arrigo Boito eventually wrote the librettos for Verdi's sublime late operas, his association with the composer was not always cordial. After collaborating with Verdi on the *Inno delle nazioni* (1862), Boito insulted Verdi and the novelist Alessandro Manzoni when at a banquet he read aloud a nasty ode he had written about the decrepit "old men" who were ruining Italian art. Verdi, taking the insult personally and outraged over publication of the poem, kept Boito out of his inner circle for about fifteen years. However, when he read Boito's draft of a scenario of *Otello* their new collaboration began. It produced the revised *Simon Boccanegra* (La Scala, 1881), *Otello* (La Scala, 1887), and *Falstaff* (La Scala, 1893). A composer in his own right, Boito possessed a wide-ranging imagination, a sound understanding of the stage, and an impressive familiarity with Shakespeare, some of whose tragedies he translated into Italian; and he became indispensable to Verdi in the last years of his life.

Singers and impresarios

In the half-century that they lived together, Verdi and Strepponi worked as a team to advance his career. He valued her judgment about singers and leaned on her in battles with such agents and impresarios as Merelli in Milan, Benjamin Lumley in London, Lanari in Florence, and stingy Vincenzo Jacovacci in Rome; with the groups or individuals running the theatres in Paris, Naples, and Venice; and with the priests and local officials who wanted to censor his works. Through all this, Strepponi served as a tactful secretary, handling professional matters and negotiating disputes with colleagues and friends.

Verdi worked with many other celebrated performers, among them the dramatic baritone Ronconi and the sopranos Erminia Frezzolini and Sofia Loewe. In 1847, he wrote *Imasnadieri* for Jenny Lind, who was then Europe's most famous singer. In that year and afterward he leaned heavily on the baritone Felice Varesi, who premiered the title roles in *Macbeth* and *Rigoletto*, sang the first Germont in *La traviata*, and appeared in dozens of other productions of Verdi's operas. Another respected baritone was Leone Giraldoni, who created the first Simon Boccanegra and the first Renato in *Un ballo in maschera*. The veteran tenor Gaetano Fraschini, one of the sturdiest artists of the century, sang Zamoro in *Alzira*, Corrado in *Il corsaro*, Arrigo in *La battaglia di Legnano*, and Riccardo in *Un ballo in maschera*. When Fraschini was almost sixty, Verdi even considered him for Radamès in *Aida*. Verdi

10 Mary Jane Phillips-Matz

admired the technique and versatility of Marianna Barbieri-Nini, the *prima donna* of his *Due Foscari*, *Macbeth*, and *Il corsaro*. For his first Gilda in *Rigoletto*, he chose Teresa Brambilla, who had gone to school with Strep-poni. The German sopranos Sofie Cruvelli and Marie Sass sang in Verdi's operas in Paris; the Bohemian soprano Teresa Stolz and the Austrian mezzo Maria Waldmann were the stalwarts of his late works. At the end of his life, Verdi worked with the distinguished French baritone Victor Maurel, the first Jago in *Otello* and the first Falstaff, while the stentorian tenor Francesco Tamagno became the first Otello. Although he never named any singer as his favorite, Verdi particularly liked the intelligence, intensity, and beautiful voice of the celebrated soprano Adelina Patti, who sang his *Ernani*, *Giovanna d'Arco*, *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, *La traviata*, and *Aida*. He regarded her far more highly than her predecessor, the diva Maria Malibran.

The view from the top

Although Verdi's career cannot be strictly divided along chronological lines, it is clear that he matured early and developed a deep understanding of his art in the late 1840s. His new command of opera, perhaps first foreshadowed in *Macbeth* (1847), gained momentum in the works that had their premieres between 1849 and the early 1860s.

Verdi had lived in Milan from 1832 until 1835 and from 1839 until the spring of 1847. Then Paris was his home base for nearly two years, as he began living with Strep-poni, but he continued to travel to Italy. By then he was a cog in a huge machine, determined to promote his own interests above those of theatre managers and impresarios. As his reputation grew and as he aged, he became increasingly difficult, a tyrant who imposed his will on a whole industry. He also gradually changed the opera business, gaining control over his author's rights and productions of his works and choosing theatres, singers, and even set and costume designers. He amassed a fortune, his royalties coming from sales and rentals of scores and from direct fees paid for his services as composer and producer.

Like every frugal entrepreneur, Verdi sought safe investments; and for him, as for his parents, that meant land. Calling on his father for help, he began buying property in the mid-1840s, first a small farm near Roncole, then the Palazzo Cavalli, a fine town house in Busseto, and his Po Valley farm at Sant'Agata (1848). In 1849, when he decided to settle permanently in Italy, he moved to the Palazzo Cavalli and asked Strep-poni to join him. It was a mistake, for the Bussetani, who remembered the scandals of her past, exploded when they saw her. People insulted her on the street and in church; at night, men hurled vile insults and even stones through the windows of Verdi's house. The ensuing scandal rocked the little community and led to