Introduction

Success at the Paris Opéra had a strong allure for Italian composers in the first half of the nineteenth century, not least for Giuseppe Verdi, whose ambition of matching Giacomo Meyerbeer's triumphs there is well known.[1] Having just arrived in Paris from London in late July of 1847, Verdi hoped for some time to relax with Giuseppina Strepponi and become acquainted with the musical scene, but almost immediately, he was approached by the directors at the Paris Opéra with a request to compose a new opera for the Fall season. Verdi accepted and proceeded with the project immediately, reworking one of his early successes, *I lombardi*, into *Jérusalem*, which he completed in less than two months. Five years later, he signed a contract to produce, in collaboration with librettist Eugène Scribe, an entirely original work, *Les Vêpres siciliennes*. This time, Verdi planned his project very carefully and hoped to land "a decisive coup" by which he meant "to succeed or to be done forever."[2] Although he scored a success when *Les Vêpres siciliennes* was produced in 1855, it was still no match in public popularity with Meyerbeer's works. At last, in 1867, three years after Meyerbeer's death, *Don Carlos* firmly established Verdi among the top composers of French grand opera. Gioachino Rossini could now ask Tito Ricordi to "tell [Verdi] from me that if he returns to Paris he must get himself very well paid for it, since – may my other colleagues forgive me for saying so – he is the only composer capable of writing grand opera."[3] In only three tries, Verdi had successfully adapted his style to the conventions at Europe's most prestigious opera house.

When Verdi began to set French librettos for a French audience, he faced the twin challenge of understanding French poetic rhythm and adjusting to French taste as it had been shaped by composers before him.[4] Understanding the effect of such a challenge on a composer's melodic style has remained elusive for several reasons. While some aspects of French opera – innovations of staging, form, instrumentation, ballet, and dramaturgy – have been successfully described, we do not yet have an adequate understanding of the melodic style nineteenth-century critics considered to be distinctly French. Furthermore, when studying Verdi's handling of French prosody, scholarship has focused on arbitrarily selected theories of French versification, ignoring the highly diverse and often contradictory theories in circulation during the nineteenth century. And, finally, French prosody has been studied only in the form of isolated melodic fragments but not in the broader musical and aesthetic context.

In determining the relationship between French poetic rhythm, musical style, and drama, the operas of Verdi provide the perfect objects for investigation. This book addresses these topics as they relate to Verdi's gradual mastery of French melody from *Jérusalem* to

Don Carlos. It focuses on the mechanics of French verse and stanza and the ways in which they serve to illuminate Verdi's musical development and, by extension, the works of other nineteenth-century composers in the orbit of French and Italian opera.

Italian composers repeatedly complained about the limited rhythmic patterns of Italian verse because these patterns restricted the invention of new and original melodies.[5] By contrast, they realized that French melodies featured greater rhythmic variety because French versification allowed for accents in a greater variety of positions. In praising Verdi's second French opera, *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, the renowned Italian composer, librettist, and journalist Arrigo Boito attributed its success to this flexibility:

> French verse, being less measured than our own, and having smoother and less definite accents, has helped the music since it has removed the tedium of cantilena of symmetry, of that mighty dowry and mighty sin of Italian prosody which generates a meanness and poverty of rhythm within the musical phrase.[6]

The rhythmic relationship between verse and melody turns out to be more complex than might seem to be the case at first.[7] We cannot simply pull from the shelf a manual of French versification and expect to find an explanation of all the prosodic interpretations possible in a particular opera. Theorists espoused conflicting systems of versification, and even those who described basically the same system still disagreed on details, thus impeding the formation of a clear-cut taxonomy. Nevertheless, this book groups the various theories into three broad categories prevalent in the nineteenth-century: an approach based on regular scanning, another based on a fixed number of accents per verse, and a third based on naturalistic declamation oriented to syntax and sense. This variety of interpretations offered composers specific prosodic possibilities, some of which were used for distinct dramatic purposes. In lighthearted, picturesque, and often strophic arias typical of French opera, for instance, Verdi tends to scan the text mechanically, often against tonic accents, whereas in agitated narratives, he tends to respect a greater number of tonic accents than required and to avoid melismas and word repetition. To some degree, it is thus possible to postulate a "rhetoric of prosody," a theory that attributes dramatic meaning to certain prosodic interpretations.

Both the distinction of prosodic theories and the choice of melodic samples must follow a clear system if they are to be useful in developing an analytical method. Here, the poetic stanza will be helpful to us because it identifies passages generally intended for formal lyricism. Unlike its Italian counterpart, the stanza in a French libretto is often anything but clear. French librettists did not necessarily arrange their verses in visually clear stanzaic structures, that is, by indenting all lines following the first verse of each stanza; in their librettos, indention served to indicate verses of lesser syllable count. Recognizable stanzaic forms, however, are paramount in an opera libretto because composers usually set them to formal melodies, while they set non-stanzaic lines in a freer melodic style or in recitative.

Analysis of stanzaic form has had a long tradition in French literary history. But the available prosodic theories are only of limited use in the libretto, a complex genre mixing

stanzaic and non-stanzaic structures. By demonstrating the ways in which French stanzaic forms suggest a melodic style flexible in phrasing and rhythm, I will propose a set of criteria essential to the analysis of a literary genre that has been neglected until now.

Further, the distinct characteristics of a French melody do not necessarily derive from prosody but may reflect broader aesthetic principles. When describing the melodic quality of *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, for instance, Abramo Basevi was able to draw on the nature of French verse only vaguely,[8] while other critics did not mention French verse at all. In the reformist journal *L'armonia*, for instance, Pietro Torrigiani missed the "transitions and the unity of the melodic ideas" but, at the same time, praised Verdi for having given up those trivial melodies that had titillated the ears of uneducated audiences.[9] Likewise, Hector Berlioz noted progress in Verdi's melodic style when he referred to the "penetrating intensity of melodic expression," which surpassed that of the popular *Il trovatore*.[10] Even though such general observations are not usually discussed in relation to prosody and stanzaic theory, a surprising number of them can, in fact, be traced to structural aspects of the libretto. The absence of "trivial melodies," for example, may be related to the presence of fewer strongly patterned accompaniments (which in turn derived from the lack of a strong tonic accent in French speech) or to the innovative melodic structures derived from the distinct forms of some French stanzas. In other words, the musical characteristics vaguely described by some critics may bear a closer relationship to poetic rhythm and stanzaic form than has been recognized so far. The lack of a systematic study devoted to French and Italian melodic aesthetics has hampered meaningful interpretation of the innumerable observations scattered among well-known and obscure nineteenth-century journals. Now that new bibliographic tools have provided access to specific information, classification and interpretation of these observations have become feasible.[11] The most important sources (whether theoretic or aesthetic) are listed in the Appendix, with brief references to their content.

His growing experience with French opera and familiarity with its melodic aesthetics allowed Verdi, with each of his French operas, to take a clearly defined step toward exploiting the full range of prosodic options. *Jérusalem* shows an overly cautious approach; *Les Vêpres siciliennes* is freer, especially in numbers of a popular tone; and *Don Carlos* draws on the full palette of musical solutions. By the time he wrote *Don Carlos*, Verdi had mastered the various approaches to French prosody so fully that even when the rhythmic structure of the verse or stanza was irregular, he was able to write a formal melody, while at the same time imbuing it with just the right expressive character. This newly acquired virtuosity left clear traces in his work when Verdi returned to Italian verse in *Aida*.

Verdi most probably did not learn about French prosody from manuals but through his knowledge of French operatic repertoire – from which the information in the manuals was, of course, derived – and by setting French text himself. True, he occasionally pretended not to understand what he heard in French theaters, writing to his friend Clarina Maffei on September 6, 1847: "Yesterday I went to the Opéra: I was bored to death but also stunned by the *mise en scène* – they gave *La Juive* by [Jacques Fromental] Halévy."[12] Seven years later, Verdi reported: "I went to the first performance of [Meyerbeer's] *Étoile du nord*, and

I understood little or nothing [of it], while [the Parisian] audience understood *everything* and found it all beautiful, sublime, divine!!!"[13] Like many of Verdi's remarks, however, such statements must be taken with a grain of salt. In fact, he liked to promote himself as a person of "somma ignoranza musicale" who owned hardly any music and never went to a library or a publishing house to examine a work by someone else.[14] His tendency to downplay both his musical interest and knowledge, which thereby absolved him from the charge of influence, stands in contrast to the holdings of his library at Sant'Agata, his astute observations on other composers' music, and the evidence in his own compositions.[15]

Clearly, Verdi realized very early in his career that much of the inspiration for creating exciting and original new works had to come from outside the Italian peninsula. In reaction to a warning by poet Giuseppe Giusti to focus on topics relevant to Italians, Verdi replied: "Oh, if we had a poet who knew how to devise a drama such as you have in mind! But unfortunately (you will agree yourself) if we want something that is at least effective, then we must, to our shame, resort to things that are not ours."[16] This statement obviously refers to drama, not to melody. But, as we shall see, Verdi subconsciously also appropriated and mastered French melody and, in this process, the idiosyncrasies of French verse played a crucial role.

PART I

Versification and melodic aesthetics

1 Rhythm and stanza in French and Italian librettos

French versification

The French have long taken great pride in the verse forms of their lyric, epic, and dramatic literature. Opera librettos form an important subclass of this corpus, so it is somewhat surprising that comprehensive theoretical works analyzing French verse largely exclude operatic texts. Several reasons may account for this exclusion.

First, librettos are not generally considered to be autonomous works but rather texts subservient to music. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, French librettos were written entirely in verse but at the same time had to provide enough variety of poetic meter, accentual pattern, and stanzaic structure to accommodate the musical style envisioned by the composer.[1] In recitatives, the meters were generally longer and changed more frequently, whereas in arias, they tended to be shorter, more uniform, and more regularly accented to allow for regular rhythms and phrases.

Second, librettos followed neither French drama in maintaining a uniform meter throughout an entire work nor lyric poetry in relying exclusively on stanzas. Thus, the mixture of stanzaic, non-stanzaic, and hybrid forms, as well as the greater freedom librettists took with traditional rules, seem to have caused theorists to regard the French libretto as an unsuitable genre for illustrating the principles of versification, even though many parts of these librettos would have been sufficiently traditional to illustrate particular points. Moreover, there is in fact no single "theory" of French versification.[2] The treatises reflect a wide variety of approaches, some more or less compatible with each other, others contradictory. To understand these approaches, it is indispensable to begin with a brief preliminary survey of syllable counting, which is relatively easy to master with the help of a few basic rules. Then we will sort out the differences among the theories, concentrating on those aspects that are potentially significant for the relationship between text and music.

The length of a verse (the poetic meter, in French terms) is determined by the number of syllables, which normally equals the number of vowels. This basic rule, however, has numerous exceptions due to the *e muet* (mute "e"), contraction of adjacent vowels into one syllable (syneresis), and separation of adjacent vowels into two syllables (dieresis). The *e muet* can appear in three different positions: at the end of a verse, at the end of a word in the body of the verse, or in the body of a word. The position determines whether or not

the *e muet* counts as a separate syllable. At the end of a verse, it does not count, as in this example:[3]

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 []
O mes amis, mes frères d'armes (*Jérusalem*, III,6)

If the *e muet* appears at the end of a word within a verse and precedes a vowel, it elides and does not count as a separate syllable. If, however, it precedes a consonant, it does count as a syllable. The following two examples illustrate each of these two cases (with underlined numbers highlighting the syllable in question):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Et je l'implore à vos genoux. (*Jérusalem*, III,6)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 []
Et devant Dieu l'innocente victime (*Jérusalem*, III,6)

An *e muet* in the body of a word counts as a syllable if it follows a consonant, but not if it follows a vowel or diphthong; if, within the body of a verse, it concludes a word by immediately following a vowel, it must elide with the opening vowel of the subsequent word:[4]

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Vous chargera de votre iniquité. (*Jérusalem*, III,6)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 [] 8
Payer un pareil dévouement? (*Les Vêpres siciliennes*, III,2)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 []
L'infamie! ... O mon Dieu! prenez, prenez ma vie! (*Jérusalem*, III,6)

Cases where two or more vowels follow each other within a word frequently cause problems in determining whether they are subject to syneresis or dieresis. Contemporary critics admitted the lack of clear rules and thus the necessity to examine models of the way in which the most prestigious poets handled a particular case.[5] Except for the *e muet*, no final vowel of a word may elide with any opening vowel of the subsequent word. Such sequences of vowels are subject to hiatus, a phenomenon censured by classical theorists but treated more liberally in the nineteenth century.

In their attempts to form a coherent theory of verse, nineteenth-century critics and theorists were confused by the fact that poets of the preceding three centuries had explored a variety of approaches. Some of these poets had applied the quantitative meters of classical Greek and Latin to French verse, while others, as a reaction, proposed a system based on stress accents.[6] As a consequence, nineteenth-century theorists often used terminology from both systems but failed to clarify how the two related to one another or, of greater importance, what this duality meant for a composer. For instance, Alexandre Choron, the French theorist, publisher, and composer, emphasized that French syllables have both a

"valeur fixe et inaltérable [a fixed and unchanging value]" and either a stress or no stress, but then he continued to use quantitative terminology ("short" vs. "long") and qualitative terminology ("strong" vs. "weak") seemingly without discrimination.[7] Castil-Blaze, the French critic, translator, and librettist, similarly concentrated on a system relying on regular patterns of stress accents but nevertheless drew on quantitative terminology.[8]

In mid-nineteenth-century France, the leading theorists emphasized stress over quantity. The following passage appears in Louis-Marie Quicherat's widely known *Traité de versification*:

> But the principle was found and this principle is irrefutable: "In the verses of whatever language, it is impossible to admit any harmony without rhythm, *nor any rhythm without accent*." ... The modern system differs essentially from the ancient one in that accent has been substituted for quantity: instead of *long* syllables, one took accented syllables, and weak syllables instead of short syllables.[9]

Antonio Scoppa tries to reconcile the two views. He does not deny that French knows both quantitative accents and stress accents but claims that because a contradiction of the two would offend the ear, they must always coincide, with the stress accent submerging the quantitative one.[10] This approach does not reflect the fine shades of recited verse, where lengthening or shortening a syllable can refine the recitation, but it does suggest the priority of stress accent. It may, in fact, have been Scoppa's goal to convince the French of this priority: in an attempt to prove that French verse could be just as musical as Italian verse, he superimposed on French verse Italian principles of versification, including the concept of a dominant stress accent.[11]

In contrast to nineteenth-century studies, current scholarship has attempted to prove that the main French accent is primarily one of duration and not stress. In his *Dictionnaire de poétique*, Henri Morier defines "accent tonique ou temporel" as a "natural accent of spoken French that consists of a more or less perceivable lengthening of the final sounding vowel in a rhythmic measure. It is thus an accent of duration."[12]

The nineteenth-century theoretical sources usually agree that the tonic accent (i.e., the accent of a short rhythmic group consisting of a polysyllabic word, article plus noun, pronoun plus noun, pronoun plus verb, etc.) falls on the ultimate syllable of rhythmic groups not ending with an *e muet* and on the penultimate syllable of those ending with an *e muet*. Not all theorists adopted this view without qualification, however. The French tonic accent is so weak that it was sometimes perceived as falling on the first or second syllable of polysyllabic words, especially those with a circumflex accent.[13] Even in the following words, devoid of circumflex accents, Jules Combarieu, a late nineteenth-century French musicologist, suggested accentuation on an early syllable: "be**au**té," "ét**e**rnité," "r**e**fuser," "c**ou**rroux," and "b**ou**rgeois."[14]

In cases of two adjacent accented syllables, the one with the stronger accent takes precedence and weakens the other. In such cases, the strength is determined by the accent's position (at the end of a syntactic group, at the caesura, or at the rhyme) or its function as

accent oratoire or *logique* (discussed below). The syllables in question appear in boldface; the stronger one is also underlined:[15]

Mon dern**ie**r j**ou**r me sera doux (*Jérusalem*, III,6)
Liss**e**z-m**oi**, laissez-moi mourir! (*Jérusalem*, III,6)

While theorists generally agree on the position of the accent in an individual word, no such agreement exists in regard to the obligatory accents in an entire verse. Theorists take four basic approaches to accentuation: they avoid the issue; they discern regular patterns of metric feet, the approach most commonly occurring in musical writings; they observe a set number of accents per verse, which fall on the most important syllables; or they see irregular rhythmic groups, defined by syntax and sense, as punctuated by accents. Those who avoid the issue describe French verse primarily in terms of syllable count, rhyme, and caesura. They concur with most authors that accents highlight both rhyme and caesura, but they do not take their discussion of rhythmic aspects beyond this point.[16]

Theorists discussing regular patterns of metric feet, that is, those who scan the verse, operate from two distinct traditions. The first one, French in origin, takes into account not only the accent of a word but even more especially the rhythm created by the regular recurrence of an accent within the verse, called *ictus* or *temps fort*. Louis Benloew's *Précis d'une théorie des rhythmes* of 1862 perfectly describes this type of scanning:

> We must not confound with the strong syllable another element that contributes even more than this accent to the harmonious movement of the verse; I mean the *temps fort*. It too makes itself felt, like the modern accent, by an emphasis, a vocal stress; and when – as this happens very often – it falls on an accented syllable, it completely escapes the superficial observer. It is only when it falls on a weak syllable that it becomes sensible even to the least-trained ear ...
>
> One would read
> il **e**st un D**ieu** devant l**ui** je m'incl**i**ne
> p**au**vre et cont**e**nt sans lui demand**e**r r**ie**n.
>
> But one would sing
> il **e**st un D**ieu** dev**a**nt lui j**e** m'incl**i**ne
> pauvre **e**t cont**e**nt sans l**ui** dem**a**nder r**ie**n ...
>
> This causes a strongly marked discrepancy between strong syllables and *temps fort* ... But it is evident that this discrepancy cannot be absolute. At the caesura and at the rhyme, *temps fort* and strong syllable always coincide, [but] this correspondence does not necessarily have to occur elsewhere ...
>
> When a reciter of a verse wishes to appeal mainly to the intelligence, he would emphasize the strong syllables, neglecting a bit the *temps forts*. When, on the other hand, he wishes to flatter the ear (and even more so when he wishes to sing), he would inevitably scan. The strong syllable is inherent to the word, to the sense: it is always the same. The *temps fort* is inherent to the rhythm and is positioned indifferently on strong syllables or on weak syllables, on meaningful or empty words. The strong syllable has a logical value; the *temps fort* has only a poetic and musical value.[17]

This method of scanning takes as its point of departure either the iamb or trochee, but these metrical feet can be neutralized for expressive purposes, so long as the accents at the rhyme and caesura still coincide. Indeed, composers often did not follow the *temps forts* but adjusted their setting to the sense of the verse. Without citing any concrete evidence, some sources suggest that the "poetic and musical" way of scanning (occasionally also labeled "monotonous") was still commonly taught at schools in the nineteenth century.[18] Modern attempts at describing French versification in librettos have completely ignored this theory, which in its flexibility has far-reaching implications for the musical setting.

The second tradition of scanning, Italian in origin, came to France through the writings of Scoppa. In the context of the general insecurity regarding the nature of the French accent, Scoppa's straight-forward approach must have had particular appeal. From Italian verse, he not only appropriated the priority of the stress accent mentioned earlier but also the predilection for equal placement of these accents in all verses of a stanza. With his unwillingness to accept the inherent accentual irregularity of French verse, Scoppa influenced a large number of French theorists, all of whom began to advocate verse based on regular accentual patterns.[19] Like Benloew, they considered poetry in which accents coincided with the *temps forts* as particularly appealing to the ear. But unlike Benloew, they criticized verses without such perfect correspondence as lacking in harmony and thus as "rhymed prose." Castil-Blaze offers the following quatrain of regular anapests as a model:

Si j'ai f**ai**m, si j'ai s**oi**f, mon cour**a**ge déc**a**mpe;
Le des**i**r est mu**e**t, l'amour n'**a** plus de f**eu**x.
Oubli**e**z de rem**e**ttre un peu d'h**ui**le à la l**a**mpe,
Le ray**o**n qui brill**ai**t va s'ét**ei**ndre à vos y**eu**x.[20]

These verses show, however, that interest in rhythmic regularity led in at least one instance to awkward accentuation: the tonic accent of am**ou**r in the second verse was forfeited and given to the subsequent "empty" syllable "n'**a**."

The ease with which Scoppa's theory took hold must be seen in the context of the popularity of Italian opera in Paris. It seems that this popularity and the presence of many prominent Italian composers in Paris at the time led some critics to believe that an adaptation of certain Italian principles of versification might help boost the popularity of French opera. Even Meyerbeer, whose melodies of French grand opera have often been contrasted with those of Italian opera, occasionally demanded from Scribe that prosodic accents be placed with strict regularity, exactly as he would have expected in an Italian verse of the same length:

All rhythms are good if the interior points of repose are regular. For the points of repose to be regular, not only must the point of repose in the second line occur after the same number of syllables as in