Prelude

THE MODERNITY OF VERDI

In Paris there is no reality without imagination …[1]

We begin with an acute comment by Bruno Barilli. It is strange to think that the same author was also responsible for the perhaps over-celebrated 'mosquito nest' in which many Verdians have wished (and perhaps still wish) to trap the works of the 'heroic peasant' who was born to 'put critical musicology to flight'.[2] The opening sentences of Barilli's monograph ('The huge mosquito nest that is the Po valley between Parma and Mantua would one day cradle the genius of Giuseppe Verdi, and Parma would become the stronghold of Verdians')[3] are also echoed in Alberto Moravia's widely known essay on 'the "vulgarity" of Giuseppe Verdi': 'Whoever knows the Po valley around Parma will easily find in the monuments, the people and the landscape a Verdian aura. […] Verdi is thus our own folkloristic-plebeian Shakespeare, a peasant, and thus "vulgar".'[4] This

[1] Bruno Barilli, 'Parigi' (1938), in *Il paese del melodramma*, ed. Luisa Viola and Luisa Avellini (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), pp. 105–61: here p. 118. This particular collection of Barilli's essays, now out of print, contains, aside from the famous 'Il paese del melodramma' (1930), the lesser-known 'Parigi' (1938) and 'Verdi' (1946). Although a more recent edition of Barilli's essays has been made available by Adelphi in 2000, I will refer here to the Einaudi edition for two reasons: firstly, it offers a preface and footnotes of higher scholarly quality, and secondly, because the essay 'Parigi' is not included in the Adelphi edition.

[2] Bruno Barilli, 'Il paese del melodramma', in *Il paese del melodramma*, pp. 5–76: here p. 27.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[4] Alberto Moravia, 'La "volgarità" di Giuseppe Verdi' (1963), in *Opere 1948–1968*, ed. Enzo Siciliano (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), pp. 1345–51: here pp. 1349–50.

view of Verdi's national identity could also be detected in Edoardo Sanguineti's recent writing about 'Verdi's Realism', which again uses the Barilli quotation as a way of approaching the question of the historical role of a 'corn-fed' theatre, Verdi's theatre, 'born to melodramatise the Italians'.[5] A theatre that, going back to Barilli, wholly 'identifies with its land of origin', Parma and its surroundings.[6] A theatre whose breath 'bears a healthy smell of onions'.[7] The fact that such a myth was created by Verdi himself does not make it any less misleading. I think that if we went through *La traviata* – 'the most Italian opera of all' – we would hardly find any mosquitoes or onions.[8] On the contrary, should we wish to analyse – as critical musicologists – its thematic framework and sonic imagery, we would find ourselves much closer to Paris than to Parma, and closer to modernity than to pre-bourgeois Arcadia or 'plebeian folklore'. To paraphrase Gabriele Scaramuzza, who usefully cites Karl Rosenkranz's *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* (1853), the so-called 'vulgarity' of Verdi should be re-read within the context of a project for the emancipation of the 'ugly' from its negative connotations, which took on European relevance in the years around *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*.[9] Should we really see Verdi as a 'peasant from Le Roncole' (as he loved to call himself)?[10] I prefer to see him, with Giovanni Morelli and Marzio Pieri, as the artistic equivalent of a bold nineteenth-century

[5] Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Il realismo di Verdi', in Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Marco Marica (eds.), *Verdi 2001: Proceedings of the International Conference, Parma, New York, New Haven, 24 January–1 February 2001*, 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 2003), vol. 1, pp. 3–21: here pp. 8 and 19.

[6] Barilli, 'Il paese del melodramma', in *Il paese del melodramma*, p. 15.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[8] Barilli, 'Verdi', in *Il paese del melodramma*, pp. 79–101: here p. 95.

[9] Gabriele Scaramuzza, 'Il tema del "brutto" nell'universo culturale verdiano', in Della Seta, Marvin and Marica (eds.), *Verdi 2001*, vol. 1, pp. 229–40.

[10] 'Sono stato, sono e sarò sempre un paesano delle Roncole' ('I have been, am and always will be a peasant from Le Roncole'); letter of 25 May 1863, in Annibale Alberti (ed.), *Verdi intimo: Carteggio di Giuseppe Verdi con il conte Opprandino Arrivabene (1861–1886)*, preface by Alessandro Luzio (Milan: Mondadori, 1931), p. 26.

entrepreneur: a modern man in search of a modern musical stagecraft aimed at a modern audience.[11] According to the historian Marco Gervasoni, it was partly under the influence of Parisian circles that Verdi sought to establish his role as a 'bourgeois professional'.[12] After all, does Barilli himself not say (of Verdi's Parma) that 'this worn-out and illustrious city strongly resembled a district of old Paris'? It was thus fated that the author of 'Il paese del melodramma' should become – around the same time as Benjamin – the mythographer of Paris as 'Traumstadt' (to use Benjamin's own expression from *Passagenwerk*), a place where it is difficult to distinguish reality from imagination.[13] Barilli begins his essay on the French capital by

[11] Giovanni Morelli, '"Le situazioni riescono quasi tutte d'un colore, mancan di varietà": Cinque glosse ad una lettera di Felice Varesi', in Biancamaria Brumana and Galliano Ciliberti (eds.), *Musica e immagine: Tra iconografia e mondo dell'opera. Studi in onore di Massimo Bogianckino* (Florence: Olschki, 1993), pp. 209–19: here p. 211, states that 'Verdi seems to enforce a preliminary tax on himself, a tax that is both a test and a challenge. This tax is a down payment, an insurance against the vagaries of the risk-taking necessary to the advancement of one's artistic career. In truly modern times, such a risk is necessary for any respectable enterprise. Such is the audacity cherished by the new talented entrepreneurs. They know how to invest daringly to beat the competition, to invent original opportunities for revenue, or to make a bet against time.' A similar point is made by Marzio Pieri, 'Impopolarità di Verdi', in *Mangiati dalla musica* (Trento: La Finestra, 2001), pp. 121–50: here pp. 123–4: 'Given his passionate support for the "unification", which would have greatly favoured business transactions […] Verdi should be understood not, as the old and inane rhetorical formula would have it, as a peasant, but rather as a great nineteenth-century entrepreneur.'

[12] Marco Gervasoni, 'Verdi politico: Il musicista come "bourgeois" e "citoyen"', *Gli argomenti umani: Sinistra e innovazione*, 12 (2000), 77–96: here p. 88. A few pages later (p. 90), the author remarks on the 'risk dynamic' present in 'Verdi as *entrepreneur of himself*'. It was in Paris that Verdi and Ricordi came to agree on a new type of contract: 'From now on, i.e. starting with the contract for *Jérusalem* (signed in October 1847), Verdi will not ask for a one-off, lump-sum payment […] but he will instead share the profits generated through rentals and sales throughout the first ten years. […] Verdi and Ricordi moved from a relationship based on supply to one based on participation.' Stefano Baia Curioni, *Mercanti dell'opera: Storie di Casa Ricordi* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2011), p. 107.

[13] See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), section

associating Paris with consumption: what other city could have given birth to the lady of the camellias?[14] To clear the field of the cliché of Verdi the peasant (or *naïf*, or 'vulgar') is an essential starting point for my argument.[15]

It is also the answer to a long-felt need. I remember my first conference, in 1985. We were talking about the organ prelude and choral prayer with organ accompaniment at the end of *Stiffelio*. It is an effect modelled on the *mélodrame* on which the libretto is based – a play that was also being performed at the theatre of the Porte Saint-Martin in 1849 while Verdi was in Paris: *Le Pasteur ou L'Évangile et le foyer* (to which I shall soon return). The effect of on-stage organs in opera goes back – in Paris – at least to *Robert le diable* (Meyerbeer, 1831).[16] Nevertheless, there were those who preferred to draw on the 'cradle of culture, of local production and consumption of music surrounding Verdi in the Parma area' and particularly on the 'ecclesiastical practices' that were 'crucial to Verdi's first training'.[17] After all, there have also been those who, when discussing the echt-Parisian bacchanal of Shrove Tuesday (the last act of *La traviata*), swore that it was nothing other than a carnival fair with village brass band such as a short-trousered Verdi would have heard in Busseto or Le Roncole.[18]

K ('Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung'), pp. 389–404.

[14] Barilli, 'Parigi', in *Il paese del melodramma*, p. 111, describes the city as follows: 'Paris, luminous surface cloaked in the foam and bloody slaver of consumptive women […]. Paris, damp fog, phthisis-drenched atmosphere'.

[15] See Isaiah Berlin, 'The Naïveté of Verdi', in *Atti del I congresso internazionale di studi verdiani: Venezia, 31 luglio–2 agosto 1966* (Parma: Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, 1969), pp. 27–35, and Moravia, 'La "volgarità" di Giuseppe Verdi'.

[16] On this topic, see Michele Girardi, 'Un aspetto del realismo nella drammaturgia di "Stiffelio": La musica da fuori scena', in Giovanni Morelli (ed.), *Tornando a 'Stiffelio' : Popolarità, rifacimenti, messinscena, effettismo e altre 'cure' nella drammaturgia del Verdi romantico. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Venezia, 17–20 dicembre 1985)* (Florence: Olschki, 1987), pp. 223–41: here pp. 230–1.

[17] Claudio Gallico, 'Struttura e funzione dei pezzi sacri nell'opera e radici del linguaggio verdiano', in Morelli (ed.), *Tornando a 'Stiffelio'*, pp. 265–71; later published in Gallico, *Verdi e altri scritti* (Florence: Olschki, 2000), pp. 81–7: here pp. 85–6.

[18] See Chapter 3, n. 8.

The imagery of Verdi as a peasant (and the resulting interpretive framework) yields a distorted reality, a nationalistic fabrication. We should not forget the warning of Pierluigi Petrobelli, who as early as 1971 diagnosed how Verdi studies are in part still influenced 'by the manner in which the composer wanted his life and works to be considered' and warned that 'the image of Verdi "the peasant" […] constitutes a basic cliché that even today enjoys too much currency'.[19]

THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY

To return to the lady of the camellias, it must be said that this Parisian and Verdian myth will prove to be an elusive object, an open thematic field to be discussed by using an archaeological approach; a system of representation (also a musical one), or 'expressive hyper-system'[20] whose latent meaning will be rendered by approximation. The task of deciphering will refer to ideas of trace and aura ('trace is the semblance of proximity, however far that which it has left behind may be. Aura is the semblance of distance, however close the object that causes it may be').[21] My goal will be the reconstruction of a horizon of meaning that transcends the boundaries of Verdi's *La traviata*, of its genesis and reception. This broadened textuality should not be confused, however, with a mere work of contextualisation or of source-tracing. The open and dynamic character of the hermeneutic object that I will reconstruct does not imply the dissolution of Verdi's text into the sources that create it or into the socio-cultural context of which it is an expression. However unstable and heterogeneous, the cluster of elements that constitutes the object of my attention still possesses a degree of autonomy and

[19] Pierluigi Petrobelli, 'Remarks on Verdi's Composing Process', in *Music in the Theater: Essays on Verdi and Other Composers*, trans. Roger Parker (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 48–74: here p. 48.

[20] This expression is found in Fabrizio Della Seta, *Italia e Francia nell'Ottocento* (Turin: EDT, 1993), p. 11.

[21] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, fragment M16a, 4, p. 447.

internal coherence. It should be understood as a sort of intertextual complex or indeed myth (if, with Lévi-Strauss, 'we define myth as consisting of all its versions') whose reconstruction-interpretation will have repercussions for the understanding of Verdi's opera.[22] The critical aim of this book could thus be summed up as follows: to approach *La traviata* via the system of representation (musical and non-musical) to which it belongs. This will call for the treatment of some factual evidence as though it were fiction, without ever renouncing, however, historical explanation. Alphonsine Plessis/Marie Duplessis is no more 'real' than Marguerite Gautier or Violetta Valery (the latter name spelled without the accent, as in Verdi and Piave). We must not – following Foucault – confuse the internal object of a system of representation or of a 'discursive formation' (to cite *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) with its external and pre-discursive referent. The latter acquires meaning only once it is woven into a discourse – once it is interpreted. Yet this recognition of the (relative) autonomy of the representations of a stock of images from its context (whether economic, social, or political) does not mean a detachment from history or an abolition of objective reality – quite the opposite. To take too seriously – as some deconstructionists do – Foucault's statement that discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'[23] implies the risk of abandoning the very idea of historical truth (or of truth altogether). Neither the historical context nor the reality of experience is closed off from its mode of representation. The relation between empirical reality and representation is reciprocal, and it is irksomely multifaceted. The myth of the lady of the camellias does not start with Marguerite Gautier and Violetta Valery but with Alphonsine Plessis/Marie Duplessis (whose real life is already, in a way, mythical). Even the biographical data – not

[22] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', in *Structural Anthropology* (1958), trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, 2 vols. (New York and London: Basic Books, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 206–31: here p. 217.

[23] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), p. 54.

in themselves but their representation – can be relevant in forming our thematic (and sonic) field. I will thus start from a place – both real and imaginary – frequented by Alphonsine Plessis/Marie Duplessis, according to the testimony of Jules Janin, who reports having seen the future lady of the camellias 'in the abominable foyer of a boulevard theatre [but if it really was so abominable, what were he and Liszt doing there?], badly lit and filled to the brim with the noisy crowd who usually comes in to appraise the melodramas *à grand spectacle*'.[24]

According to one of the most recent biographers (or should I say hagiographers) of Alphonsine Plessis, the meeting between the lady of the camellias and Liszt occurred at the Ambigu-Comique theatre.[25] In another monograph, however, it is assumed that the place was the Théâtre du Gymnase.[26] This is probably because of an erroneous reading of this slightly ambiguous statement by Janin: 'There were more workmen's shirts than dresses, more berets than feathered hats; […] People talked about all sorts of things, from dramatic art to fried potatoes; from the shows at the Gymnase to the Gymnase's *galette*.'[27] But we are in the *foyer* of a boulevard

[24] Jules Janin, 'Mademoiselle Marie Duplessis', preface to Alexandre Dumas *fils*, *La Dame aux camélias*, 2nd edn (Paris: A. Cadot, 1851); in Alexandre Dumas *fils*, *La Dame aux camélias: Le Roman, le drame, 'La traviata'*, ed. Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer and Gilbert Sigaux (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), p. 481–94.

[25] See Micheline Boudet, *La Fleur du mal: La véritable histoire de la dame aux camélias* (Paris: France Loisirs, 1993), pp. 194–8. Janka Wohl, in *François Liszt: Souvenirs d'une compatriote* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1887), p. 170, recalls the episode as follows: 'In 1849, Liszt had come back to Paris on a business trip. He had to speak with Jules Janin, and went to visit him one evening. He was told that Janin was at the Ambigu, where a premiere was taking place. Liszt went there; while he was strolling in the foyer with Janin during the entr'acte, a very remarkable young woman passed him by and stared at him'. However, Wohl's late account is of dubious value: it may have been the case that the meeting between Liszt and Marie Duplessis took place at the Ambigu, but Duplessis had died two years before 1849.

[26] Christiane Issartel, *Les Dames aux camélias: De l'histoire à la légende* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), p. 14.

[27] Janin, 'Mademoiselle Marie Duplessis', p. 481.

theatre, between two acts of a terrible *mélodrame* (soon afterwards, Janin writes of the encounter as a 'gallant entr'acte to such a terrible *mélodrame*'), and the Théâtre du Gymnase did not put on shows of this kind. References to the 'Gymnase's *galette*' are ubiquitous in texts of those years that describe the behaviour of *grisettes* and *lorettes* – particularly their proverbial gluttony: in the winter these young ladies craved roast chestnuts; in the summer they craved the *galette* that was sold in front of the Théâtre du Gymnase, on the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle;[28] their appetite for the *mélodrames à grand spectacle* of the Boulevard du Temple (also known as the Boulevard du Crime) lasted all year round.[29]

To take the world of boulevard theatres and its undisputed ruler – *mélodrame* – as a starting point means to make room for a type of metropolitan popular culture that no longer has much to do with old-time folkloric peasantry, a popular culture that interested Verdi at least as much as it attracted Balzac, whom Moravia also deemed 'vulgar'[30] and whose work largely inspired the first stages of the archaeology of modernity.[31] Janin remains silent about the name of the theatre and the title of the *mélo*, but since the event must have taken place around 1845 and Alphonsine was (and for good reason!) a

[28] Louis Huart, *Physiologie de la grisette*, illustrated by Gavarni (Paris: Aubert, n.d. [c. 1842]; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1979), p. 37, observes that 'while eating this excessively hard dough, they [the *grisettes*] busied themselves with highly gastronomical disquisitions on the merits of the Gymnase *galette* versus the Porte Saint-Denis *galette*; a veritable course on comparative *galettes*'.

[29] The Boulevard du Temple was generally known by the nickname 'Boulevard du Crime' because of the countless crimes that were performed on the stages of its theatres; see Pierre Gascar, *Le Boulevard du Crime* (Paris: Hachette, 1980).

[30] See Moravia, 'La "volgarità" di Giuseppe Verdi', p. 1347.

[31] Balzac is at once a witness and an archaeologist. Jeannine Guichardet, *Balzac 'archéologue de Paris'* (1986, repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1999), p. 17, encapsulates this well when she writes that Balzac makes us feel 'le présent en train de devenir passé', the present in the process of becoming the past. I have used the term 'modernity' in Baudelaire's sense, of course: 'la modernité, c'est le transitorie, le fugitif, le contingent' (Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–6), vol. II, pp. 683–724).

reader of the *Mystères de Paris*[32] we can reasonably imagine that the theatre was the Porte Saint-Martin, where a theatrical adaptation of Eugène Sue's *roman-feuilleton* (1842–3), with stage music by Auguste Pilati, had been showing since 13 February 1844.[33] I have explained elsewhere the importance and dramaturgical relevance of the kind of music that accompanied these shows, music that has since left very little trace: without their aura neither *mélodrame* nor the myth of the lady of the camellias can be understood.[34]

In Chapter 1 I will try to describe the sonic landscape of boulevard theatres at the time of Verdi's first journey to Paris. In Chapter 2 I will examine the system of representation (both musical and extra-musical) at work in the lady of the camellias, paying special attention to the role of waltz and polka. In the third and final chapter I will focus on the stage music written by Édouard Montaubry for Dumas *fils*'s play *La Dame aux camélias*, which opened at the Théâtre du Vaudeville on 2 February 1852 (while Verdi was in Paris). The preoccupation with the retrieval of the sonic dimension of the thematic field will not only help to avert the danger of excessive formalism, but will also enrich and inform my evaluation of new interpretative possibilities. From Benjamin to Karlheinz Stierle, every mythic account of Paris has put the issue of 'legibility' (*Lesbarkeit*) at the centre: 'Paris is a world and a book at once', as Stierle would have it.[35] Yet by the same token, and because of some

[32] See Romain Vienne, *La Vérité sur la dame aux camélias (Marie Duplessis)* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1888), p. 85. Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–3), ed. Francis Lacassin and Armand Lanoux (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), p. 119, reminds us that Fleur-de-Marie, the famous *vierge souillée* of the *Mystères de Paris*, had according to Rodolphe (her liberator, who later turns out to be her father) 'la poitrine faible': in other words, she was a consumptive.

[33] Balzac himself turned the most famous character from his novels into a lead character for the boulevard theatre: *Vautrin*, performed at the Porte Saint-Martin in 1840.

[34] Emilio Sala, *L'opera senza canto: Il mélo romantico e l'invenzione della colonna sonora* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995).

[35] Karlheinz Stierle, *Der Mythos von Paris: Zeichen und Bewußtsein der Stadt* (Munich: Carl Hanserl Verlag, 1993), p. 14.

of the issues exposed by the most recent work in sensory anthropology and sound studies, we are faced with the question of 'audibility' (*Hörbarkeit*, if you like), a question often relegated to a physical and perceptual realm.[36]

In this book I shall discuss not only what meets the eye, but also what meets the ear. The ear in question is archaeological, symptomatological. Are sounds not also *a product of culture*? Do they not *speak* to us of imagery, no matter how elusive their trace may be? Can one not *listen* to history? In a book dedicated to the historical significance of imagery, Peter Burke – who did so much to promote a visual approach to history – dwells for a long time on a popular-revolutionary wood-engraving telling the 'myth' of the storming of the Bastille. He altogether disregards the couplets that frame the whole scene and thus function as 'soundtrack'.[37] Does the obliteration of that musical source not imply the loss of part of the meaning of the image – the giving of a deaf interpretation? Is it not time to promote an approach to history that is also sonic? Bruce R. Smith poses the question of 'how to listen to history'.[38] The ensuing pages attempt to give a response – even if partial and provisional – to this question.

The question implies (as we will see more clearly by the end of the book) the meeting of history and ethnography. After all, both historical ethnography and anthropological history are fairly common today. I will attempt to reconstruct the Parisian

[36] See for example David Howes (ed.), *The Variety of Sensory Experience* (Toronto University Press, 1991). On the 'histoire des sensibilités', see Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (1994), trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[37] See Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 145. This 'Récit mémorable du siège de la Bastille' was published in Orléans by Letourmi about 1789. The six couplets, 'dédiés à la Nation par M. Déduit', are sung over the famous air by Jean-Joseph Vadé 'Dans les gardes françaises'.

[38] Bruce R. Smith, 'Tuning into London c. 1600', in Michael Bull and Les Beck (eds.), *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 127–35: here p. 129.