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978-0-521-51919-9 - Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich

Gundula Kreuzer

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Verdi and the Germans

From Unification to the Third Reich

This seminal study of Giuseppe Verdi's German-language reception provides important new perspectives on German musical culture and nationalism from the mid nineteenth century onwards. Kreuzer argues that the concept of Germany's musical supremacy, so dear to its nationalist cause, was continually challenged by the popularity of Italian opera, a genre increasingly epitomised by Verdi. The book traces the many facets of this Italian–German opposition in the context of intense historical developments from German unification in 1871 to the end of World War II and beyond. Drawing on an exceptionally broad range of sources, Kreuzer explores the construction of visual and biographical images of Verdi; the marketing, interpretation and adaptation of individual works; regional, social and religious undercurrents in German musical life; and overt political appropriations. Suppressed, manipulated and, not least, guiltily enjoyed, Verdi emerges as a powerful influence on German intellectuals' ideas about their collective identity and Germany's paradigmatic musical Other.

Gundula Kreuzer is Assistant Professor of Music at Yale University. Her work on Verdi's music and reception, the marketing of opera and the theory and history of staging has appeared in various journals and collected volumes, including *Cambridge Opera Journal* and *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and has earned her the Alfred Einstein Award of the American Musicological Society as well as the Jerome Roche Prize of the Royal Musical Association. She is editor of *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi, Series V: Instrumental Chamber Music* (2010), and has been serving as Reviews and Associate Editor for *The Opera Quarterly*.

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Abbreviations

Abbiati	Franco Abbiati, <i>Giuseppe Verdi</i> , 4 vols. (Milan, 1959)
AMz	<i>Allgemeine [deutsche] Musikzeitung</i>
AmZ	<i>Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung</i>
Anbruch	<i>Musikblätter des Anbruch</i> ; from 1929: <i>Anbruch: Monatsschrift für moderne Musik</i>
A-War	Österreichisches Staatsarchiv: Archiv der Republik, Vienna
D-Bba	Bundesarchiv, Berlin
D-Bda	Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin
D-Bmm	Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, Theatersammlung
D-KNth	Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung der Universität Köln, Schloss Wahn (unless otherwise specified, references come from the relevant opera's folder in the review collection)
D-Mhsa	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich
GMM	<i>Gazzetta musicale di Milano</i>
I-Mr	Archivio Storico Ricordi, housed at the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan (unless otherwise indicated, references relate to the <i>copialelettere</i> and provide the year, volume and folio numbers in that order)
MW	<i>Musikalisches Wochenblatt</i>
NBMz	<i>Neue Berliner Musikzeitung</i>
NZfM	<i>Neue Zeitschrift für Musik</i>
Signale	<i>Signale für die musikalische Welt</i>
VB	<i>Völkischer Beobachter</i>
ZfM	<i>Zeitschrift für Musik</i>

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Note on presentation

All translations into English are my own unless otherwise stated. Short extracts are cited only in English, with the original phrases added in parentheses when particularly idiosyncratic. For longer quotations, the original language is included in the notes where readers are unlikely to have access to the relevant source.

For reasons of space, footnotes generally provide only one or a few representative references; numbers refer to pages, columns or folios as appropriate.

Preface and acknowledgements

This book is about crossing boundaries: national and geographic, historiographical and political, academic and aesthetic, social and cultural. The existence of such boundaries is closely linked to the formation of collective identities; and the most important concept to which identity has been related in Western thought of the past 250 years is the nation. In the most general terms, then, *Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich* examines the role of music within the context of nation-building. This role has repeatedly been addressed in recent scholarship, particularly with regard to Germany – a nation which, since the eighteenth century, produced many outstanding composers but which lagged behind other European states in achieving political unity. Music-historical research, though, has focused primarily on Germany's own musical tradition, a tendency that – I argue – inadvertently perpetuates the idealised claim German intellectuals from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries were eager to promote: that of a dominant, homogenous German culture. By contrast, my book investigates the situation of *foreign* music within changing phases of German nationhood. What emerges is a musical landscape shaped (defined, even) by factors that the prevailing historiographical vision has by and large left unexplored; a heterogeneous space in which local ambience, regional difference and a host of conflicting forces surface as both sites and agents of cultural developments.

On the more concrete level, my book explores the presence in German-language countries of Italian opera, which traditionally constituted the most popular foreign musical influence in the repertory. From the late 1850s, this success was largely due to a single person: Giuseppe Verdi. It was he who secured Italy's grip on the one musical genre in which Germans had yet to find their own voice – a genre, moreover, that remained the most opulent, most spectacular and, thus, most politically charged among the performing arts. The greater his international esteem, therefore, the more Verdi cut across German music-historical constructs. After all (according to the account that was then generally accepted in German lands), Germany had long since taken over the lead from Italy in all things musical, while French music had lost coherence and Italian opera was caught in steady decline after Rossini's retirement in 1829: his successors were mere epigones

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who momentarily satisfied the needs of an audience-driven entertainment industry. The resulting rift between the operatic status quo and its historic-aesthetic idealisation in mid-nineteenth-century German countries is the point of departure for *Verdi and the Germans*, which sets out to trace multiple ways in which German-language musicians and intellectuals rejected, ignored, tolerated, appropriated and altogether wrestled with Verdi – his fame, his works, his personality. His persistent attraction in the opera house presented the educated bourgeoisie with a stark choice of either discarding their belief in German musical supremacy or somehow integrating Verdi into their universe. Against this background, I maintain that Italian opera was a crucial catalyst in forming definitions of ‘Germanness’ in music and other cultural arenas. At the same time, *Verdi and the Germans* can be read as a case study of the compound (and often inconsistent) processes at work in the public, critical and musicological canonisation of a composer.

Since such processes are deeply rooted in slowly changing societal structures, this book necessarily employs both in-depth synchronic and longer-term diachronic modes of investigation. In so doing, it crosses further boundaries typical of musical reception studies. First, it embraces a wide range of sources. I give equal weight to reviews from the musical press and from daily papers: because the latter were written under greater time pressure and for a larger audience, they tend to react more immediately to musical events and relate them more readily to topical concerns. In addition to drawing on a broad spectrum of published materials, moreover, I consider what might be called the mechanical end of reception: documents from political, administrative and theatre archives. These diverse sources enable a rich contextualisation of musical responses, uncovering many surprising – and often surprisingly banal – backdrops to the Verdian scene. (There is one boundary, though, which this book straddles only occasionally: that of mediality. My foci are verbal and iconographic sources; analysing in detail performance and production styles or Verdi’s influence on compositional history – his *Wirkungsgeschichte* – would explode the book’s scope and methodological framework.)

Second, *Verdi and the Germans* relates the emerging patterns of reception to cultural and socio-political developments by crossing customary bounds of periodisation. Its chronological starting point is motivated by both musical and political considerations: the year 1871 marked not only the birth of the German nation-state but also the climax of Verdi’s international fame with the premiere of *Aida*. Taking off from this coincidence, the book’s expanded timeframe constantly draws attention to historical continuities. These disclose many cultural biases that have come down to us from nineteenth-century German discourse, shedding light also on the roots of

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the discipline of musicology itself. What is more, true to mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of Germany as a ‘cultural nation’, the book does not focus exclusively on the politically defined state of Germany. Although the latter’s development has proven seminal for demarcating turning points of modern Austro-German history (as evinced in my subtitle), and although Germany embraces the majority of German-language opera houses and music journals, I will discuss facets of German-language reception within and beyond Germany’s frontiers. When talking about ‘the Germans’ or anything ‘German’, in other words, I refer to the German-language intellectual community at large unless a specific distinction is made. Naturally, the political capitals of Berlin and Vienna feature prominently, their rich cultural lives often illustrating differences between north and south, Prussia and Austria, Protestant and Catholic milieux. (Switzerland, by contrast, plays a marginal role: new operas tended to arrive late in the Alpine state and were tenuously covered by the press.) *Verdi and the Germans*, then, addresses the transmission of culture at large: not just from one nationally defined space to another, but also across time; not just of canonised works and composers, but also of stereotypes attached to them.

Given this broad methodological direction, my book is not *about* Verdi’s works (I have, on the contrary, refrained from commenting on the music myself). Nor does it aspire to be a systematic survey of Verdi reception in German-language countries between 1871 and 1945: I do not provide anything like a complete inventory of Verdi performances or relevant writings. Instead, I will alight on different geographical or discursive spheres, emphasising both obvious and more hidden trends that underlie musical life and reception. Some of these trends will be explored in great detail; others require a certain degree of generalisation to be distilled across the timeframe of the book. While I contextualise individual voices wherever possible, my arguments are based on so copious a number of writings on Verdi that – for the sake of keeping footnotes at bay – I usually reference only one or two typical examples. I shall also venture occasional statistical approximations: since reception studies are principally dependent on testimonies of those privileged enough to express themselves in public (just as the idea of the nation was mostly nurtured by upper-middle-class men), gauging how well a work fared at the box office provides at least a little insight into the responses of the larger and more diverse community of opera-goers. In all, *Verdi and the Germans* offers a ‘thick description’ of discourses surrounding Verdi, bringing various musical and extra-musical contexts to bear on selected moments in the composer’s German-language reception history.

Each of the roughly chronological chapters takes advantage of distinct approaches and specific foci while also attending to diachronic perspectives.

Somewhat transcending the timeframe, the introductory chapter defines my methodological premises in more detail: it reviews the scholarly treatment of the nexus between music and (German) nationalism in relation to the origins of the German–Italian dichotomy that so prominently shaped nineteenth-century German music historiography. Looking at the notorious opposition of Beethoven and Rossini, I show how the Italian pole functioned as the more clearly defined Other against which (perceived or desired) German characteristics were delineated. After Rossini’s retreat, the anti-Italian clichés – sensuality, effeminacy, superficiality, populism, shallow tunefulness, cheap effect, noise and so on – came to stand for Italian opera in general. Cultivated above all by the increasingly influential educated bourgeoisie, they also carried a strong anti-aristocratic flavour. This background helps explain why the more cosmopolitan French musical scene took a back seat in discussions of German musical identity; and it allows me to describe Verdi’s ascent from mid-century onward as equalling, in German eyes, both a reindividualisation of the genre and an acute threat to their musical preconceptions.

However, it was not until Verdi’s triumph with the *Requiem* (1874) that Germanic attitudes towards the composer changed radically. In Chapter 2, I argue that the mere fact of Verdi having written religious music undermined the established music-historiographical constructions, as became evident when Hans von Bülow denounced the work as an ‘opera in ecclesiastical robes’: Verdi, he believed, was incapable of writing anything but opera. Yet this polemic was far from typical of German-language responses. Instead, the work’s unprecedented success necessitated readjustment of cultural beliefs: launched as part of a pioneering marketing tour, the *Requiem* became the most widely circulating religious composition of the period, reaching many places long before *Aida*. Although its trajectory reveals regional differences, popular acclaim was so uniform that critics eventually had to take stock of the work. Here they were confronted with another inconvenient truth: Verdi’s unexpectedly careful elaboration elicited a heated debate about genre and style, national traits and the essence of ‘truly religious’ music. This debate was amplified by ongoing discourses about Caecilian church-music reforms and by attempts in the recently unified German Empire to bolster ‘cultural Protestantism’. Both foreign and popular, the *Requiem* provided a unique stage on which musical, regional, confessional and national Selves and Others could be enacted. Ultimately, I suggest that commentators in Germany grappled not only with Verdi’s appearance in an allegedly new (stylistic, generic) dress but also with their own cultural identity in the new *Kaiserreich*.

Chapter 3 temporarily steps back from politics in favour of concerns with Verdi’s personality. These, I hold, were sparked off by Verdi’s visits to Austria

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and Germany in the 1870s, during which his physiognomy and behaviour belied previous (sinister) ideas about the composer no less than did his *Requiem*. As a result, interest in the man surged, being further incited by his remarkable late creativity. The century's last decades, with their relative political stability and the waning of inner-German musical partisan battles, thus saw Germans catching up on knowledge about Verdi. In the second half of the chapter, I will argue that the bourgeois celebrity image of the composer as promulgated in the mass media also influenced the critical reception of his last operas. *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893) challenged scholars because they transgressed Italian operatic conventions without wholesale adoption of Wagner's principles. For want of generic models, Germanic commentators invoked Verdi the man as a structural leitmotif – an auxiliary move familiar from Verdi scholarship until recently, and one that bridged popular and elitist views. The critical debate also re-engaged issues of nationalism, since his supposed musical transformation was often explained by German influence: something believed to assert Germany's colonial conquest of opera even in Italy. I suggest that these allegations allowed the aged Verdi to ascend into the pantheon of German masters. And yet, by the time of his death his reception in German lands remained bifurcated between the bourgeois public and intellectuals, works pre- and post-dating *Aida*, sentimentalising accounts of his life and critical assessments of his works. Beneath these rifts, the dichotomy between German and Italian viewpoints remained largely intact.

Turning to Verdi's posthumous reception, Chapter 4 examines what is usually regarded as the apex of the composer's presence in German countries: a 'Verdi renaissance' related by scholars exclusively to the experimental climate of the Weimar era and the involvement of the famous poet Franz Werfel. By contrast, I show that attempts to revalue Verdi's career grew directly out of late nineteenth-century views and became manifest already around 1913, the double centenary year of Verdi and Wagner. The former was increasingly fashioned as an alternative to the latter in order to counter a post-Wagnerian compositional stagnation as well as – particularly after World War I – to banish Wilhelmine values such as national grandeur and (seemingly) apolitical intellectualism. In 1924, Werfel's bestselling novel on Verdi accordingly melded earlier ideas into a vision of a humane anti-Wagner. It was, then, less the composer's image that changed than the ways in which it was used: the former epitome of musical 'Otherness' was now evoked as a paradigm of universal and modern ethical, political and artistic qualities. Economic considerations additionally fostered revivals of unknown Verdi operas. Examining the most successful and the most-often revised rediscoveries (*La forza del destino* and *Don Carlos*), respectively, I maintain

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that German opera houses competed for improved Verdi performances, new translations, topical adaptations and careful *Regie* to satisfy a newly stratified audience's appetite for the seemingly impossible: popular novelties. The emotive middle-period Verdi even became for some composers a signpost towards avant-garde music theatre, while conservative critics tended to evoke the cultural figurehead of a 'complementary' European country as a bulwark against modernist music and Americanism. More widely accepted than ever before in German lands, Verdi thus spanned the divides that shape traditional accounts of Weimar culture – of left- and right-wing politics, popular and elite art, progressive and conservative trends.

Chapter 5 traces the legacies of this multifaceted Verdi revival into the 1930s and 1940s. Thus it counters the still-prevailing notion that the Third Reich was singularly obsessed with (and suffused by) all things German, and that it was marked off from the flow of history by cultural breaks at both ends. Away from the spotlight usually cast on Nazi Germany's emerging 'official' culture, the reception of Verdi reveals more subtle changes of underlying customary values. Hitler's government could simply not stop Verdi's advance: aided by the expiration of copyright, he became Germany's most-often performed opera composer. I argue that this was ultimately tolerated because he had much to offer Nazi ideologists: by emphasising the composer's *völkisch* roots and socio-political engagement, earlier readings of his biography were swiftly coloured with National-Socialist hues. Verdi's operas likewise suited Nazi ideals: they could be made to demonstrate, in turn, Germanic inspiration, the possibility of politically committed art, or a fusion of populism and serious musical aspirations – aspects at the core of (otherwise vague) ideas about a new German *Volksoper*. Verdi thus maintained – enhanced, even – his modernity in German discourse, particularly after the military alliance between Italy and Germany: foreign relations encouraged explicit political instrumentalisation of the most popular Italian composer. This Axis-imbued appropriation of Verdi during World War II was a direct (if only one possible) result – in some sense even the climax – of the composer's reevaluation that had started in the late nineteenth century. This chapter, then, argues for the centrality of the Nazi era in the history of German Verdi reception and of musical culture at large.

My reflections on Verdi productions under politically extreme conditions lead to more fundamental questions about the ways in which Verdi's operas can be made to mean, as well as about the downsides of the association of music and nationalism. I raise these questions more fully in the Epilogue, which gauges continuities and diversifications of Verdi reception in East and West Germany after 1945. On the one hand, Verdi initially advanced his lead in the repertory, with politically resonant productions on both sides of the

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Wall (as evinced particularly in copious revivals of *Nabucco*). On the other, socialist doctrines triggered yet another phase of ideologically charged Verdi images, while the operatic genre temporarily faded from the focus of West Germany's compositional avant-garde and academe. In either case, though, I will propose that Verdi's Italianness – his historically special position vis-à-vis German national identity – ceased to matter. And yet, recent productions on German stages often show remarkable conceptual affinities to earlier adaptations. When Verdi studies began to flourish on an international level from the 1960s, what is more, many analytical issues that surfaced pointed back to nineteenth-century German perspectives: overcoming the German–Italian binary has since been a prime task, just as it had been for earlier German writers. In the end, *Verdi and the Germans* reaches out to contemporary encounters with the composer and with the complex phenomenon that is operatic culture. By transgressing customary boundaries of music-historical research, it sets out a new path through the intricate cultural, social and political ensnarement of musical life from German unification. In so doing, my book ultimately offers a fresh look at how music history has been, and might be, constructed.

*

The complex transnational relations between Verdi and the Germans have occupied me for more than a decade. During this time I have been crossing many boundaries myself, moving between countries and languages. My research has thus brought me into contact with countless individuals and institutions: so many that I fear I cannot acknowledge everyone who has helped me in some way – whether by listening, raising questions, prompting me to venture onto new paths, distracting me when needed or supporting me in the more fundamental quests of life.

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Verdi and the Germans could not have materialised without help from archivists and librarians in locations and institutions too numerous to list (the bibliography may give a slight idea). For the extraordinary attention

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Preface and Acknowledgements

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Gundula Kreuzer

Frontmatter

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