

Introduction: truth and theatre

Among composers of genius – the philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote in a famous essay – Verdi was ‘perhaps the last complete, self-fulfilled creator [. . .] a man who dissolved everything in his art’. That art, like Bach’s, like Shakespeare’s, was ‘objective, direct, and in harmony with the conventions which govern it’; it sprang ‘from an unbroken inner unity, a sense of belonging to its own time and society and milieu’; it had nothing to do with the reaching out after something lost, infinite, unattainable that marked more self-conscious artists like Berlioz or Wagner. All this made Verdi ‘the last great voice of humanism not at war with itself, at any rate in music [. . .] the last master to paint with positive, clear, primary colours, to give direct expression to the eternal, major human emotions [. . .]. Noble, simple, with a degree of unbroken vitality and vast natural power of creation’, Verdi’s voice – perhaps just because it came from ‘a world which is no more’ – spoke urgently both to sophisticated and to ordinary hearers in our own time.¹

Berlin’s analysis – in some ways questionable – brings out what many have felt when confronted with Verdi’s works. Whatever their defects, those works ring emotionally true; truth and directness make them exciting, often hugely so. Yet they nearly all belong to the most artificial of genres – not just opera but Italian romantic opera, written to agreed formulas for enactment by singers of outstanding gifts, set

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within a proscenium arch amid illusionistic scenery, before an audience visibly arrayed in tiers of boxes. Verdi's twenty-six operas (twenty-eight, if we count major revisions) are at once truth and theatre.

Verdi himself knew that his vocation to write for the theatre meant pleasing the public and filling the house. 'The box office', he wrote late in his career, 'is the proper thermometer of success.'² Even in his venerated old age, empty seats at the first performance of his Sacred Pieces meant failure. At most, if he was convinced that a seeming failure was worth while, as with *La traviata* in 1853, he shrugged, said 'time will tell', and took care to revise the work so that it triumphed next time round (BM, 326–7). Never, it seemed, would he let himself be taken for a misunderstood genius.

Today he could rest content: he is one of only four composers (the others are Mozart, Wagner, and Puccini) whose works nearly always fill an opera house. Verdi's achieved this even between 1890 and 1930, when the composer's reputation was in eclipse among the musically educated. True, the popular works (*Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, and *Aida*) filled theatres equally popular in their social make-up, while elite houses might at times neglect them or fling them on to the stage as box-office fodder. The cognoscenti tended to approve only the refined products of the composer's old age, *Otello* and *Falstaff*; the early operas and the more problematic later works were almost nowhere. People who first came to music in the 1930s recall how some of the knowledgeable shuddered at anything so 'vulgar' as 'La donna è mobile' or the triumphal march from *Aida*.

Today all is changed. Even an opera Verdi himself set aside and cannibalised, *Stiffelio*, has been pieced together, performed with great success, and recorded. The most blatant of his early works, *Attila*, still raised a few titters at Sadler's Wells in 1963; by 1990 at Covent Garden it won roars of approval.

In its dip and rise the curve of Verdi's reputation matches that of some great novelists who were his close contemporaries, Dickens in particular. Mocked in his own time as 'Mr Popular Sentiment' – just as

Verdi was called crude, noisy, and melodramatic – Dickens, about 1900, seemed a writer to be indulged for his comic turns; only in the past fifty years or so have *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend* been studied as great works of art, intricately wrought out of a wide and deep vision of society. Not by accident, that period has also brought a mighty growth of serious critical interest in Verdi: he now earns the attention once confined to Beethoven or Wagner.

For nineteenth-century Italians, opera did what the Italian novel failed to do (Manzoni's *The Betrothed* apart): it both crystallised feelings and relationships in which they could see themselves and let them attain new heights of imaginative experience, grounded in thrilling melodramatic action. Verdi's operas were the Italian equivalent not just of Dickens's but of Victor Hugo's or Dostoevsky's novels, where likewise action at times violent or lurid served to deepen insight into human life. Thanks to the power of music and to Verdi's individual strengths the operas now work in the theatre through almost the whole of their course as, in the reader's perception, the novels do not. Hugo's swollen rhetoric, Dostoevsky's rant, Dickens's false sentiment over young women alienate us from parts of their works; Verdi's early operas are at times blatant or ramshackle, but – as with the Covent Garden *Attila* – a good performance in the theatre lets their joined energy and nobility carry all before them.

Our perceptions have in some ways caught up with Verdi's methods. Critics as late as the 1950s tended to smile at his lightning changes of mood: a character rushes on (*Amonasro* in the Nile scene in *Aida*, say) and the situation changes catastrophically within two or three bars. No one these days seems to notice – probably because we have got used to the jump-cut technique of films made since the New Wave broke in 1959, which has spread to the theatre and to television drama, not to mention advertising videos. In anticipating the jump-cut Verdi was not so much prophetic as impatient: to make his operas work in the theatre he again and again demanded fewer words, more rapid action; he praised the 'supreme courage' that cut good things for the sake of speed (C, 631); he echoed the saying attributed to

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Voltaire, 'I allow all genres except the boring genre.' Verdi's operas are not boring.

If, as Berlin maintained, Verdi 'is his work, for his work is himself', one might expect the composer's life to show the kind of blazing, immediate truth conveyed by the operas. Yet as scholars bring out new details of his career Verdi is often found speaking less than the literal truth. Biographers must decide what to make of this.

He was not even born in the house that came to be revered in his lifetime as his birthplace, or in the year he – as he claimed – for most of his life thought he had been born in. Yet he must have known about his true place of birth (his parents went on living in it till he was thirteen); moving as he did among petty despotic states that required him at every step to show his birth certificate or passport, can he have failed to notice the year correctly named in those documents? The most notorious such slip is Verdi's account of the deaths of his first wife and their two children: he told two biographers, in 1869 and again in 1881, that all three had died in 1840 within three months. In fact the children had died in 1838 and 1839 and his wife in 1840; this harrowing march of death had taken nearly two years.

Another kind of doubt springs from Verdi's account of the libretto for his Paris opera *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855). The librettist, Eugène Scribe, had originally written it for an abortive opera by Donizetti; the subject at that time was the Duke of Alva, the scourge of the sixteenth-century Netherlands. Well after Donizetti's death, Scribe re-used and adapted it for Verdi; it now dealt with the Sicilian revolt against an older tyrannical rule. When, in 1882, Donizetti's *Le Duc d'Albe* was at length performed (in an Italian version completed by another hand), Verdi stated that he had known nothing of it; yet his correspondence in the run-up to the 1855 opera shows that he had.

Again, in a dispute with his publisher Ricordi over the French rights to his opera *Luisa Miller*, Verdi accused Ricordi of having bamboozled him by getting him to sign a contract without pointing out a damaging clause, so that he had failed to notice it. The rest of Verdi's business correspondence shows him unfailingly alert to the terms of

contracts; it seems most likely that he made his charge because, for reasons to be dealt with later, he was angry at having had to give up all the rights in *Luisa* for a fee much lower than he had got used to, and was doing all he could to recoup himself. (The fuss he made worked: Ricordi cut him in on the French rights.)

Last, while Verdi in old age was writing *Falstaff*—keeping it private, with many reservations in what he told the few people in the know: it was a pastime, he might not finish it—he stated publicly in April 1890 that *Otello*, performed three years earlier, was his last work: ‘the decision is irrevocable [. . .] my task is finished’. Yet on 17 March he had finished Act 1 of *Falstaff*.³

For these slips, and a number of others, there may be varying explanations. In Mediterranean societies a sense of drama easily shapes a conversation; those taking part may say outrageous things which, if challenged, they would qualify. Verdi’s account of the deaths of his wife and children may fall under this head: it felt like a hell of pain unrolling through continuous weeks. Wanting to get his own way and to give the impression he chose may explain some of the misstatements about professional and business matters; if so Verdi behaved like many present-day businessmen, not only Mediterranean ones.

He was indeed the most businesslike of composers. His businesslike conduct at most times alerts us to the disconcerting moments when he told less than the truth. Such moments are far outnumbered by the many instances of Verdi’s plain dealing and his determination to meet his commitments (and to see that others met theirs). But his very diligence in keeping up and filing away his correspondence, at a time when letters were quickly and reliably delivered and easily kept, tended to preserve every kind of evidence, including some that showed him as inconsistent or not quite truthful.

Like his contemporary Gladstone, Verdi lived through nine-tenths of a century when people of means communicated by letters written for the most part on long-lasting paper. Each of the two men carried on a steady correspondence with many people, often keeping copies or minutes of his own side; each was famous from an early age, so that

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his acquaintances tended to keep his letters; each lived to see the telephone but scarcely to use it; each acquired a large house, undisturbed at his death (Verdi's still belongs to his heirs), where the evidence of his manifold activity could be stored. The result in each case is vast archives such as we shall never see the like of in the age of e-mail and fax; happily for his biographers, Verdi was laconic where Gladstone was prolix.

Another notable difference is that where Gladstone's diary has, in our own time, given away some of his convoluted inner life, Verdi defended the privacy of his personal ties and emotions, fiercely and with remarkable success. Though we know a great deal about his professional career, we still know almost nothing about his brief first marriage, and little more about some crucial episodes in his relationship (through nearly sixty years) with his second wife; the crisis in his second marriage over the singer Teresa Stolz, friend to both husband and wife, has come under intense scrutiny but remains in part baffling. More generally, Verdi's sexual life is a closed book. We are left – a good thing perhaps – to plumb, from the evidence of his life and work, the deeper truthfulness that ruled both.

Here we move beyond the kind of truth that concerns a judge and jury. 'A refining of the sense of truthfulness' – Willa Cather wrote in her novel about a great opera singer, *The Song of the Lark* – is the mark of artistic growth: 'The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is.' Verdi himself said as much. At a time (1876) when *verismo* was in the air – the Italian term for naturalism – he wrote: 'copying the truth may be a good thing, but inventing the truth is better, much better'; the difference was that between photography and painting (C, 624).

So far, both Cather and Verdi have in mind the truth in what an artist makes or enacts. We say that it 'rings' true, 'convinces', 'hits us in the solar plexus' – all attempts at putting into words our sense of a communication we can take in unalloyed and wholeheartedly make our own.

Whether our assent says anything about the artist's personal truthfulness is a moot point. Many artists put the best of themselves into their work; to go from that to their everyday lives and opinions may disconcert. Wagner is a well-known example. As for Verdi, those writers who, since Carlo Gatti's 1931 biography, have pointed out his exaggerations and misstatements have all shown that they none the less admired him as a man, faults and all.

A personal statement. Working on this book has led me to conclude that I do not very much like the man Verdi, in particular the autocratic rentier-cum-estate owner, part-time composer, and seemingly full-time grumbler and reactionary critic of the later years, from about 1860; yet it has deepened my admiration and respect for him, indeed my trust. Verdi can be trusted in a fundamental sense: not only would one rather have professional or business dealings with him – at the cost of some rough moments – than with many other people; a deep integrity runs beneath his life, and can be felt even when he is being unreasonable or wrong. This guiding thread helps to explain the astonishing self-renewal that marked Verdi's life – one that spanned the Napoleonic empire and the age of broadcasting. The biographer's task is to hold on to this guiding thread without blinking the awkward moments, but also without niggling over them.

A biographer writing in this series must also make hard choices. Verdi's legacy is at once the supreme product of Italian opera and a highly individual body of work, shaped by an original mind that went its own way: a live refutation of the theory that 'writing' is all, one text is as good as another, and individual creativity does not matter. There is a lot of it and we know a great deal about the making of it. The music must be considered – it is after all the reason why Verdi interests us – but, in this format, only some of the operas and the Requiem. I assume that the truly important works are the indestructible quartet already named (*Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, *Aida*), followed at a slight distance by *Un ballo in maschera* and, among the early works, by *Ernani* and *Macbeth*, among the late ones, by *Don Carlos*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*. This

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means saying little about fine works such as *Luisa Miller*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and *La forza del destino*, and, at times, less than one would like about the chosen operas themselves.

That long life too must be taken as something other than a continuous chain of events. Verdi's professional career falls into distinct phases. He was first – down to the 1848–49 revolutions and *La battaglia di Legnano* – the 'galley slave' who won ready success at the cost of writing on average two operas a year; then, through the 1850s – from *Rigoletto* to *Un ballo in maschera* – the master whose works achieved unprecedented, literally world-wide popularity. The wealth this brought allowed Verdi in the next phase to work more slowly, but the years from about 1862 to 1878 were marked by crises in his personal relations, in his standing within the artistic life of his newly united country, in two great but awkward operas – what amounted almost to a 'male menopause'. The last phase is that of the evergreen, now somewhat pacified composer who – while the society he lived in did its best to freeze him into a national monument – completed one of his most original works in his eightieth year.

The book follows Verdi's life broadly through these phases. It now and then pursues a topic beyond the time when it first comes to notice. Verdi's exploitation of new copyright laws is one example; another is the process by which he bought, built up, and, over half a century, ran his landed estate. Both are more central to the composer's life than has often been acknowledged; both are easily lost sight of in the unfolding year by year of a mainly operatic career. In looking now and then at a single topic over a long span we run small risk of losing the thread of Verdi's individual development. The strength, at all points in his life, of his personality, and the determination with which he shaped his life's work, will see to that.

1 The innkeeper's son, 1813–1842: Oberto to Nabucco

According to a dubious story Verdi liked to tell, his mother, her five-month-old son clutched to her breast, hid in the village church tower from Russian troops which in the last months of the Napoleonic wars swept across northern Italy. What makes the story dubious is that early in 1814 the armies of several nations were fighting in the north Italian plain, but no Russians. The Russians – feared by country people in an area many invaders had plundered – were there, but in 1799–1800. Luigia Verdi probably did hide in the tower, and later mixed up two frightening experiences.

The story she told her son was none the less appropriate. Influences that were to shape his career and outlook sprang from the crucial years around the turn of the century. In 1796–97 young Napoleon Bonaparte's troops imposed French revolutionary ideals on Italy, a land far poorer and more backward than France; in 1799 the French armies fell back before the Russians and Austrians; in 1800–01 they reconquered most of the northern plain and held on to it. The republican governments they set up brought, for a time, the end of the old oligarchical rule in the eleven petty states that had divided the Italian peninsula.

For most people in and around the small town of Busseto, in the former duchy of Parma – as for many elsewhere – the truly notable change was the subduing of the Catholic Church to the new republics, bringing the confiscation and sale of Church lands. Together with the

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oppressiveness of French generals and officials it stirred resistance, at times violent, from the peasant bulk of the population, but it benefited a minority and helped to bind them to the new ideals.

The sale of Church lands benefited people already well off, like Antonio Barezzi, a merchant of Busseto who was to become Verdi's second father and then his father-in-law, rather than small landholders like his natural father Carlo Verdi, who kept an inn at Roncole, a village two and a half miles from the town. This is a general statement about classes: we do not know that Barezzi was a purchaser, though it seems likely enough. He went on admiring the Napoleonic regime (socially more conservative in its later, imperial phase) long after its overthrow in 1814. Under the restored duchy of Parma – a consolation prize for Napoleon's separated Austrian wife Marie-Louise – Barezzi and his kinsman Giuseppe Demaldè stood at the heart of a group of townspeople who, though not necessarily unbelievers, were hostile to priests. Carlo and Luigia Verdi, in contrast, were assiduous members of the Church flock. The dividing line between clericals and anticlericals – etched by the French Revolution throughout Latin Europe – ran between Giuseppe Verdi's two families. In opting for the Barezzis, people at the heart of Busseto musical life, he would in the first place obey the needs of a budding career, but he would also choose a set of ideals and a political stance.

Among musicians these years of turmoil identified some with the republican regime, some with the beleaguered Church. Ferdinando Provesi, who was to be Verdi's main teacher in his formative years, during the 1799–1801 period of Austro-Russian control was in forced residence for theft (from the treasury of the church where he was organist). At the return of the French in 1801 he fled to Busseto, where the protection of a rich family – not the Barezzis but equally close to the new regime – made him organist of the parish church and town music master; this meant ousting the incumbent, who had been Church-appointed and, probably, identified with the old regime. When in 1834 Verdi's candidature to succeed the dead Provesi brought a local 'civil war', it had deep roots.