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Giuseppina Strepponi in Paris

with a review by Berlioz

by Marcello Conati

Verdi's biographers have not told us much about the last period of Giuseppina Strepponi's artistic career, which was spent, as is well known, in Paris, from the autumn of 1846 to 1848. Even Frank Walker, who so carefully reconstructed both the artistic and the emotional career of the singer before her meeting with Verdi (some of his conclusions, however, have now been thrown into question by the researches of Mary Jane Matz), produced only an announcement from *La France Musicale* (the magazine of the Escudier brothers, Verdi's French publishers) of 15 November 1846, about the course of singing lessons that Strepponi proposed to give. [It is reproduced at the end of this article.] Walker preceded this by quoting some of an article in *La France Musicale* of 18 October which announced her arrival in the city and described her career:

La Strepponi is known in Italy not only as a great singer but still more as a woman of much wit and spirit. She has always been greatly sought after by the world of the nobility, who, after having applauded her on the stage, loved to applaud and admire her at their most brilliant gatherings.

And he mentions the announcement of two concerts, on November 3 and 5, which she was to give in the Salle Herz. Walker remarks: 'Giuseppina seems to have settled down comfortably in Paris, secured pupils and won friends. Verdi had given her a letter of introduction to the Escudier brothers.' And that is just about all we have been told about Strepponi's Parisian activity as singer and teacher (barring a few items that can be dug from the Verdi correspondence), during the period when she joined her life to Verdi's.

However, the accounts that appeared in *La France Musicale* about Strepponi's public activity in Paris are far more numerous. Many of them were reprinted in the Italian theatre magazines of the period, such as *La Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*, published by Ricordi, *L'Italia Musicale*, published by Lucca, the *Milan Bazar*, the *Bologna Teatri Arte ed Letteratura*, and above all the *Milan Moda* and *Pirata*, edited respectively by G. B. Lampugnani and F. Regli, both of them men on good terms with Verdi. In *La Moda* for 15 November 1846, for example, we can read, in the original French, a review of one of the two concerts mentioned above, put on by *La France Musicale* (i.e. by the Escudier brothers):

Mme Streponi, there is a consummate artist, one of those superior singing beings who bring honor to Italy. Now let them tell us that Italy has no more singers, that the Italian theatres are dying for lack of performers, that the royal musical line of that country is dying out. Not so: beyond the Alps there is still enough to supply all the theatres of the world with music and with voices. At Streponi's first notes, there was a deep silence. Soon the admiration broke out. Three thousand hands were clapping at once, and yet the artist had only just begun the cavatina of Verdi's Ernani. Gradually the enthusiasm grew. At the end of the piece, the applause and the bravos were universal. A triumph! Rarely have we seen admiration mount to so high a pitch. In the *Elisir* duet with Botelli, and in Verdi's original song *Le Ramoneur*, Streponi set out to show that her nightingale organ could tackle light music and dramatic music with equal felicity.

Foreign celebrities are always approached with some suspicion, and it often happens that an artist lauded to the skies in London, Germany, and Italy comes to grief in Paris. But this time fame spoke true. Streponi is a model of taste. Formed in the new Italian school, she has taken art to the highest pitch, and one can affirm that perhaps never has a more appealing voice been united with so fine an intelligence.

Streponi is an artist, a true artist. Listen to her, and you can judge how many hours, days, months, years it takes to achieve those astonishing effects that make the art of singing the most beautiful and most intoxicating of all the arts.

It is clear that Streponi from her first Parisian appearance intended to be a champion of Verdi's music; it provided two of the three works on her program. One was the song *Lo spazzacamino*, one of the *Sei Romanze* published by Lucca in 1845. A month before the concert, in its issue of 4 October 1846, *La France Musicale* had announced the publication of the *Sei Romanze* in French translation; we do not know whether Streponi sang the song in French or in Italian.

Note the emphasis on the 'new Italian school'—the new stylistic direction, toward *canto d'azione*, of which Verdi was deemed the standard-bearer, but which had begun to flower in the late works of Donizetti and Mercadante and with singers of powerful temperament such as Tadolini, Frezzolini, and Streponi herself. About a year later, *La France Musicale* defined the 'new school' more explicitly in a little profile of Streponi. It was reprinted in *La Moda* of 10 October 1847, in Italian translation:

Streponi has become one of the most ardent champions of the new school, one of the most cogent interpreters of dramatic singing. Giuseppe Verdi wrote *Nabucco* for her. The music of the new school is not as easy as some people would make out: the style is fervent, powerful, and demands above all the utmost intelligence. This music is filled with contrasts and unexpected effects. With bad interpreters, the impassioned and graceful melodies would pass unremarked; but when they are sung as the composer conceived them, then they change their aspect and rouse enthusiasm. I have named Streponi: this singer, who is giving lessons, will explain better than I can the difference between the old and the new methods of singing. And thus Streponi can be credited with having taken the first steps to revolutionize singing—a revolution whose fruits will soon be apparent.

To appreciate the full force of that affirmation, we must remember that a few weeks later Verdi's first French opera, *Jérusalem*, the reworking of *I lombardi*, was to be mounted at the Opéra. Its heroine, Julian Van-Gelder, was, as we shall see, working with Streponi at the time. The affirmation should give pause to those who insist so much on the prevailingly Bellinian and Donizettian characteristics of the early Verdi's vocal writing. Perhaps "revolution" is too strong a word. But note the stress, from the point of view of French vocal tradition, on the radical change in dramatic singing effected by Verdi right from *Oberto* and *Nabucco*—during the years when not only Tadolini, Frezzolini, and Streponi but also Barbieri-Nini, Fraschini, Varesi, and Colini—to name only some of the major exponents of the new Verdian manner—were coming to the fore.

In November 1846, Streponi, evidently to draw Paris's attention to her singing course, took part in another concert organized by *La France Musicale*, in the 'halls of M. Orfila'. From *Il Pirata* of 15 December 1846 we learn that the singer

performed only music by Verdi, the composer of the day: a duet from *Nabucco*, with Sig. Torrighioni, and the aria from *Attila*. Halévy, who was present, offered Mme Streponi his liveliest congratulations, and also complimented her on her choice of pieces, which were of uncommon beauty.

But there was an even more famous guest at the concert: Hector Berlioz. His account of Streponi's singing (reproduced in the original French in the issue of *Il Pirata* mentioned above) forms the closing section of a long feuilleton about recent musical events in

Paris, in the *Journal des Débats* for 20 November 1846—a document overlooked by Verdi biographers:

... I attended two very interesting concerts, one offered to its subscribers by *La France Musicale* and the other given by M. Michel Lévy and the *Société de chant* which he directs ... The *France Musicale* concert offered different attractions: there one heard four virtuosos two of whom were unknown to us. I need not mention the two solos performed by Dorus and by Charles Dancla: those two virtuosos merit the praises that are invariably their due. Mme Clary was heard in an aria from *Giovanna d'Arco*; she has an incisive voice of wide range which needs to be suppld and steadied by study. But Mme Strepponi, who followed her on the bill, is a magnificent prima donna. She sings broadly and nobly, with an exceptionally powerful voice, a good style, and irresistible warmth. This is the great Italian school in all the splendor of its array [dans tout son luxe un peu empanaché].

A distinctly favorable review from a critic as severe, sometimes cutting, as Berlioz, and one that reveals a certain sympathy for the new school of dramatic singing of which Strepponi was becoming in France the chief exponent.

In the following months, Strepponi took part in other concerts. In March or April 1847 there were two, one given by Vieuxtemps and the other as a benefit for a workhouse. *La Moda* of 25 April 1847 reprints the reviews of *La France Musicale*. At the first,

Mme Strepponi created a great sensation: the famous singer sang the aria from Verdi's Ernani and the aria from his Attila. Enthusiastically applauded, she was called back by all the audience. She has one of those sympathetic, vibrant voices which carry you away and stir you to the utmost.

At the second concert,

*Mme Strepponi surpassed herself in the Ernani cavatina. Never before, not even at the Vieuxtemps concert the day before, had the prima donna shown more power, flexibility, and purity of voice, or more truth of emotional expression. Moreover—a rare distinction, a unique honor at this matinée!—Strepponi was called back with unanimous applause by the intelligent and sensitive section of the public. She was equally well able to bring out the melodic beauties of a piece from M^o Alamy's *Rosmunda*, deliciously written, whose principal part was sung by Mme Bren.*

Ten days earlier, in its issue of 15 April 1847, *Teatri Arte e Letteratura* had published the following:

In Paris, Mme Strepponi is now the singer of the day: she is to be found on all brilliant occasions and at the parties of the great and fashionable. Recently she sang at Countess M....'s, where she gave indescribable delight. A few days later, Strepponi was at the Chevalier P....'s, where the foreign ambassadors were gathered: and Mme Strepponi had a decisive triumph. She sang the cavatina from Verdi's opera Ernani, written for her.

The first Odabella in *Attila* was Sophia Loewe. On stage, Strepponi sang in only two Verdi operas, *Nabucco* (in Milan, Parma, Verona, Alessandria, and Modena) and *Ernani* (in Bergamo and Palermo). As David Lawton and David Rosen have established [*Arti del IIIo Congresso*, 206-8], Verdi wrote only two alternative arias for *Attila*, both for tenor—one for Ivanov (at Rossini's special request) and the other for Moriani. This mention of an *Attila* cavatina composed for Strepponi has all the air of being a French journalist's muddle, taken up by the Bolognese magazine. All the same, it should be looked into, since Verdian biography brings its daily surprises!

In June 1847, while Verdi was in London mounting *I masnadieri*, Strepponi took part in an "academy" given at Versailles by Sig. Torriglioni (who seems to have been a 'dilettante' baritone). *La Moda* for 15 July reprints a notice from *La France Musicale*:

Strepponi sang in Sig. Torriglioni's concert at Versailles. The famous artist gave a peerless account of the aria from Ernani, the Lombardi trio, and the Nabucco duet. The applause was unfailingly enthusiastic.

One may conclude—at any rate for the moment—this brief account of Strepponi's Paris activity with two notices from *Il Pirata*. The first appeared on 22 December 1847:

Strepponi's singing lessons are all the rage in the 'great world'. She has produced distinguished pupils. Jullien, who is having a great success at the Opéra, owes a great part of her skill to her.

'Jullien' is probably Julian Van-Gelder, who at the time was singing Hélène in *Jérusalem*. But who were the other singers, famous or not, whom Strepponi taught? Someone should find out. The second announcement appeared on 17 January 1848:

Mme Strepponi, who has assumed a leading position among Paris singing teachers, has, at the request of many families, decided to arrange lessons to take place in her residence, from 3 February next.

But Strepponi's days as a singing teacher were drawing to an end. Her life was undergoing a radical change. For some months—

from 27 July 1847, to be precise—Verdi had been in Paris. The singer Giuseppina Strepponi was in the process of becoming the Signora Giuseppina Verdi, realizing her secret ambition, her dream as a woman: to live beside that Verdi who she revered as a great man even more than as a great artist. In the summer of 1849 Strepponi left Paris, going first to Florence, and then to Busseto, to join her life forever with Verdi's.