

3-1-1979

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Mary Jane Phillips-Matz

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Recommended Citation

Phillips-Matz, Mary Jane (1979) "Flying with Verdi: The First Letter," Verdi Newsletter: No. 6, Article 4

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Keywords

Giuseppe Verdi, correspondence

FLYING WITH VERDI

The First Letter

by Mary Jane Phillips Matz

As a research junkie who has been mainlining documents and archives for decades, I faced cold-turkey despair on the morning of 11 September 1978. Ahead lay eight or nine hours of flight, TWA 843 from Milan to New York; and no in-flight library has yet been able to fill needs like mine. An onset of nerves drove me toward TWA's passenger service facilities, where several Verdi buffs regularly hold forth. Here I can usually hope for a quick fix before boarding, because some of these TWA employees are already working for the AIVS Archive, as volunteers who do research for us in their free time, carry important messages and information, and help the Institute in other ways.

Whom to hit? Maybe the chief *Lieder-Lunatic* in Milan, who works behind the

TWA ramp desk and comes to New York for three-day or two-day concert weekends. (Not enough *lieder* in Milan to satisfy him.) But for the moment he was busy. Next: a friend of Pavarotti and Bergonzi, always good for a half-hour of chat. But he was plotting routes with the captain and crew.

Trembling at the prospect of a whole work-day, or its equivalent, without a bibliography or a private collection to plunder, I went to the Ambassador Lounge, where I was filing the label of a bottle of Tanqueray under several categories in my mind: Alcohol; Gin; Temperance; and Transparent. Suddenly the *Lieder-Lunatic* rushed in, and muttered something to me about Anthony Schippers, the Flight Service Manager of TWA's 843 that day. I registered the "A"

because I can always handle the first part of the alphabet better than the last, which includes such dangerous areas as V---- and W-----, to say nothing of Mo----- (see page 6). I filed Anthony away before both 'Gin' and 'Tanqueray.'

About six hours later, near the end of the flight, I began a conversation with Schippers, using my usual ploy: 'Where are you from?' (This goes under 'B' for 'Birthplace' and 'P' for 'Place of Family's Origin.') 'Bari' was his answer. By this time, we had checked over my cabin baggage, which was stashed under several adjacent seats and stuffed with research material on Verdi. We talked of opera, the usual banalities exchanged for no useful purpose. Schippers then found a free moment, but just one, which proved invaluable to all Verdi scholars, and not just for a solitary research junkie.

'I have a Verdi letter,' Schippers said, in faintly accented English... Nothing more, nothing less... Just as one would say 'Electric blanket' or 'Food processor.' We were all preparing to leave the plane at Kennedy when I finally grasped what he was really saying: *he owned a Verdi autograph!* I handed him my address and telephone number, and the next day found Anthony Schippers sitting in my living room with a briefcase at hand.

In it he had his Verdi document, which appears to be the earliest datable Verdi letter yet discovered. (The earliest document in Verdi's hand is the application to become organist at Soragna, a town near Verdi's parish, where the sixteen-year-old prodigy vainly sought to be taken on as music director for the church.) Schippers' letter reads:

Caro Silva Ho terminato adesso adesso lo sbozzo dell'Ode di Manzoni. Quando avrete mezz'ora di tempo venetela a sentire, e se accompagnaste anche il Pretore mi fareste un regalo, perchè, *inter nos*, a porte chiuse sentirei volentieri il suo e vostro parere sull'espressione della musica prima di limarla.

Addio.

G. Verdi

(Dear Silva, I have just this moment finished the sketch of the Manzoni Ode. When you have a half-hour free, come to hear it, and if the Magistrate were to come with you, he would do me a favor, because, between you and me, in private I would be happy to have his and your opinion on the expression of the music before polishing it. Farewell. G. Verdi)

When I took the letter in my hands, I was overcome with emotion, because this was clearly the only early documentation in Verdi's hand of his actual moment of composition of *Il cinque maggio*, Manzoni's ode on the death of Napoleon. Having studied for

months the content and calligraphy of the earliest letters in Busseto (see *AIVS Newsletter* 4, p. 12), I knew that the letter might be as early as 1835, or perhaps earlier.

Abbiati had attributed *Il cinque maggio* to the year 1836, precisely the month of May (Abbiati, *Verdi*, i, 229), apparently without any documentary source for his attribution. In the last volume of his biography, however, Abbiati included a letter from Verdi to Aldo Noseda, president of the Società Orchestrale di Milano, where the composer dated the piece: 'Circa 60 anni fa,' Verdi said, in a letter of 1 April 1890 (Abbiati, iv, 399).

I sent off a hurried appeal to Italy for further information, to our advisory board member, Professor Corrado Mingardi, Director of the Library of Busseto. He replies: 'The Magistrate is Ferdinando Galuzzi. . . . I published a ferocious letter from Verdi to Galuzzi dated 1839, in *Biblioteca* 70, Number 2. Silva is Francesco Silva, chancellor of the Magistrate's court in Busseto. . . . Gustavo Marchesi [the distinguished Parma musicologist] had among his papers [information that] the chancellor Francesco Silva wrote a sonnet attacking a certain 'Don [or Priest] Ciacco.' [The priest, Don Andrea Pettorelli recognized himself in this 'Don Ciacco' and filed a complaint. Silva defended himself, saying that this 'Don Ciacco' was not Pettorelli and that he had not used the work for propaganda, having read it only before a restricted circle of friends. This was in November, 1834.]—Thus Mingardi in a recent letter to me.

Here we are back once more on familiar battlefields, recently described in *Opera News* (9 December 1978, 51). The clergy of Busseto were at war with the pro-Bonapartist party, which was the party of Verdi's mother's family and of their friends, the Barezzi. The chancellor Silva attacked Verdi's implacable enemy Don Andrea Pettorelli (whom Barezzi and Giuseppe Demaldè dubbed 'Don Fart-o-relli' by removing one 't' from his name, while Silva's "Don Ciacco" might be rendered as Father Windbag). [There may also be a reference to Ciacco, the gluttonous hog, of *Inferno*, canto vi.—Ed.]

The substance of the letter suggests a very young Verdi indeed. If we accept Verdi's date, of 'about 1830,' we have before us a letter from a teenager, who looks to two of his staunchest supporters from the pro-Verdi faction to give him their private opinion of his new composition, which is in rough draft, before he puts the finishing touches on it. This glimpse of a teenaged composer at work confirms fully what we know about the older Verdi's work habits—the hurried writing-down of a composition, the quick polishing of the work. Use of the words

'addesso addesso' and 'mezz'ora' tell us a great deal about the pressure this youth was under.

As for the letter itself, it cannot in any circumstances have been written after 1833 or 1834, when the quarrel between Galuzzi and Barezzi split the Verdi party and led to Verdi's eventual estrangement from Galuzzi; but a date of 1829 or 1830 seems likely.

About Anthony Schippers, the owner of this earliest known Verdi letter, there is also something to be said. A native of Bari, now an American citizen, he has been with TWA for twelve years, and served with American government forces in Genoa, on the Refugee Relief Act staff. But, much earlier, he had been a conservatory student in Bari, where he mastered piano, composition, and voice. The composer Nino Rota was among his maestri. Commuting to evening performances at La Scala, Schippers was able to hear many of Callas' greatest performances of the mid-1950's. After emigrating to the United States, he set up an opera studio to train American singers in Italian roles, diction, and voice technique. He speaks five lan-

guages fluently, and continues to teach, although he flies a full schedule on TWA. With his rank, he flies only on 747s. At home, he relaxes by listening to selections from his large private record collection, which includes seventeen different recordings of *Aida*. Another diversion is entertaining other music buffs at salon evenings—'like Clara Maffei.' A 4' × 6' blow-up of Boldini's famous portrait of Verdi is part of the décor of his house. Naturally, all Schippers' friends see in him an unmanageable Verdi freak.

The Verdi autograph owned by Schippers was a birthday gift, which awakened such reverence in him, he confesses, that when he got it, he touched Verdi's signature with his hand, thinking: 'Yes, his hand touched this paper too, just in this place.' That TWA should have such a dedicated Verdi partisan in the corporation is not only the airline's good fortune but that of its passengers as well. And, as we now see, the good fortune of the American Institute for Verdi Studies, which now includes Anthony Schippers in its membership.
