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Verdi and the Metronome

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During the 1840s the issue of objectively determining and maintaining tempo was very much in the minds of Italian musicisti. One at first imagines that designating metronome markings along with the verbal tempo indications would have been a logical procedure. In Italy, however, resistance to the use of the metronome, the method already adopted in other countries, was apparently so strong that theorists did not consider this a viable solution and, instead, sought alternative methods.

In 1844 Geremia Vitali proposed one alternative in Ricordi's Gazzetta musicale di Milano. Vitali advocated that composers indicate the length of time a piece should last when performed:

The means that I propose would be to indicate above each of the principal sections, above each single piece comprising a score, the precise duration in number of minutes, calculated with a watch in hand. The first movement should last so many minutes, the second so many, the third, and so on. For each change of movement the precise duration should be prescribed. 1

Vitali's recommendation (not surprisingly) met with skepticism and spawned a series of responses in Ricordi's journal concerning the problems inherent in his timing method. 2 Verdi knew of Vitali's "new" method. In fact, in an apparent effort to lead credibility to his idea, Vitali stated that Verdi would experiment with this system of timing in his next opera:

Even Maestro Verdi is not completely unconvinced of the benefit that may come from my proposal and has flattered me by offering to experiment with it in the first new musical work he publishes; it is hoped that others will follow his example. 3

In reality, however, Verdi did not approve of Vitali's proposal and had no intention of implementing the method, as Muzio notified Barezzi:

Mr. Vitali, a contributor to the Gazzetta musicale di Milano, wanted to demonstrate a method for establishing precision in tempo, and he says that the composer, at the beginning of the piece, where he places "adagio" or "allegro", should also place the number of minutes that the piece is to last; and he said that Maestro Verdi approved of this system and that in the next opera he writes he will adopt this system. The Maestro actually said he wouldn't even dream of it and that it is a fotta vecchia. Note how inappropriate it is for one Mr. Vitali to compromise the name of a Maestro as fine and as good as Verdi! 4

The autograph and the printed scores attest that in 1844, when Vitali's proposal appeared in the Gazzetta musicale di Milano, Verdi was using nothing other than verbal instructions to designate tempo in his operas. 5 Of course, no genuine need existed for any further means of tempo designation - as long as Verdi took part in supervising his works and as long as they were performed in Italy, where to some extent, "convention" prevailed. When his operas began to circulate more widely, however, Verdi must have found it necessary to indicate tempo more precisely.

Verdi was not alone. The essays responding to Vitali's proposal in the Gazzetta musicale di Milano make it clear that Italian composers in general were searching for an accurate method of measuring speed in musical compositions. One reason behind the necessity for explicit tempo designations, as contemporary pedagogues and theoreticians remarked, sprang from the demise of vocal art. 6 Critics expressed the opinion that deficiencies in a singer's training often resulted in an inability to determine and convey the appropriate sentimento of an operatic piece in performance. 7 Consequently, then, instructing a performer as to the appropriate tempo, i.e. movimento (speed) and carattere (character), became a matter of vital importance.

Raimondo Boucheron, 8 called attention to the problem of indicating tempo and its solution, again in the Gazzetta musicale di Milano:
All the adjectives that they knew how to devise for greater clarification, nevertheless, always remained inadequate to convey a composer's intentions exactly. Not having a reliable comparison for reference, it was necessary to think about finding an instrument, a reliable machine. Among the various inventions, Maelzel's Metronome seems to have prevailed until now, though it is not commonly used.\\n
Even though Maelzel's metronome was, indeed, the logical choice, Italians opposed its use. Reluctance to change established habits, traditions, pride, and even the cost of the machine accounted for the unwillingness of musicians in primo ottocento Italy to adopt the method. Luigi F. Casamorata's comments shed light on Italian opposition to the metronome:

Much is said and written among us against the metronome; but whatever else one wishes to say about it, it is, it seems to me, in terms of reliability, a perfect instrument; it is at least of a perfection relatively sufficient to its purpose. In this regard, many believe that if it has not yet succeeded in being used generally nor in coming into frequent use in Italy, its cost may be the main reason. But is it possible, in good faith, to permit this assertion? - Of course not: even if its cost may, in fact, deter an individual musician, what are twenty or thirty francs to the management of a large theater, a philharmonic society, a college of music, etc., etc.? Even so, I do not know many of these institutions in Italy where one can find a metronome, and where, even if they possess one, they use it very often. The main reason for opposition to the adoption of this ingenious machine, particularly among us, involves the mixture of ugly laziness and proud presumptuousness in the souls of many of our musical artists. -- There are on the one hand the "scansa-fatica" [those who avoid hard work], who, if the metronome is notated to them, begin screaming: "What metronome! for me my musical instinct [sentimento] suffices! I don't want to rack my brains to figure out the speed of a musical composition by the oscillations of a pendulum, in the way astronomers do the movement of the planets. And for one who has lived for so many years in peace and made music without the metronome, what novelties are these that are now being imposed upon us? -- On the other hand, there are the presumptuous musicians, who believe they themselves know everything, and the composer of the music they perform knows almost nothing. Even if you were to show them, with a metronome in hand, that they mistake the speed, they know how to respond...throwing in your face their ultimatum that cannot be disregarded: "I like it like this. It suits me well like this. It has to be like this, etc. etc."\\n
Despite such objections, however, finally though only gradually, Maelzel's metronome began to meet with greater tolerance and acceptance in Italy. With widespread dissemination and imminent international commission of his works, in 1846 Verdi incorporated metronome markings into his operas for the first time. In a letter dated 30 March 1846, Emanuele Muzio informed Antonio Barezzi about what was, in all probability, the composer's first encounter with the metronome in his works: "In the past few days we have placed tempi in the entire score [of Attila] using Maelzel's Metronome." Verdi's autograph score to Attila contains no metronome markings, however. Instead, after relinquishing the score to his publisher Francesco Lucca, Verdi wrote the metronome markings for Attila on a separate folio.

Verdi's decision to use metronome markings in his operas was by no means arbitrary but was influenced by contemporary thought, in particular, a series of articles in the Gazzetta musicale di Milano during February and March 1846 written by Luigi F. Casamorata. These essays, previously unnoticed by modern scholars, declare the advantages of incorporating metronome markings into operatic scores, explain how the device works and explicitly instruct composers and performers on how to use one, (and even how to construct one).
performance of his operas. Casamorata's repeated assertions concerning how metronome markings provide the composer with a secure means of indicating his intentions with the utmost precision, thereby insuring regulation of the movimento or speed of the tempo and injecting objectivity into the battle with obstinate, presumptuous performers, surely caught Verdi's attention. There can be little doubt that Verdi's incorporation of metronomic equivalents into the score of Attila at the end of March 1846, contemporaneous with Casamorata's journal articles, was a manifestation of the composer's contact with the theorist's tenets. From the spring of 1846 onward, incorporating metronome markings into his operas as precise performance instructions to his executants continued to be one of Verdi's priorities. He thus became one of the first major composers in ottocento Italy to assign metronomic tempo equivalents in his scores as a routine matter. By July 1846 he had incorporated metronome markings into the Escudier's Italian edition of I due Foscari. Verdi wrote metronome markings into the autograph for his next new opera, Macbeth (Florence, Teatro Pergola, 14 March 1847) as well.20 (Macbeth was thus evidently the first of Verdi's operas in which he notated metronome markings in the autograph itself; the first documented instance of his participation in designating metronomic equivalents, however, is Attila.) The autograph scores for I masnadieri (London, Her Majesty's Theatre, 22 July 1847) and Jerusalem (Paris, Opéra, 26 November 1847) also contain metronome markings.21

The next completely new opera Verdi composed after I masnadieri, Il corsaro (Trieste, Teatro Grande, 25 October 1848), however, contains no metronome markings either in the autograph or in the first printed edition. This is not surprising, however, since, having lost interest in this opera, Verdi neither attended its premiere nor participated in its publication. Moreover, the autograph score for Il corsaro22 contains little evidence of revision or of the meticulous attention to detail observed in other autographs. The autograph score for La battaglia di Legnano (1849)23 contains metronome markings in Verdi's hand, and Verdi's participation in establishing metronomic tempo equivalents in Luisa Miller has been discussed by Jeffrey Kallberg in his introduction to the critical edition of that opera.24 All of Verdi's autographs from Stiffelio (1850) to Falstaff (1893) contain metronome markings, with the exceptions of Rigoletto (1851) and La traviata (1853).25 Adopting the metronome provided Verdi with an explicit means of retaining control over a critical aspect of performance. By supplementing, reinforcing, and clarifying Verdi's verbal tempo directions, metronome markings enabled the composer to differentiate fine gradations of movimento "exactly" as he wanted them, thereby eliminating, at least theoretically, one potential performance difficulty. Traditional verbal designations could then, perhaps, assume a more significant role in expressing carattere, a principle considered all-important in the musical milieu of the time and in Verdi's personal conception of truthful musical-dramatic gesture.

NOTES

1. "Proposta d'un nuovo mezzo per determinare con esattezza i tempi musicali," Gazzetta musicale di Milano, 3/20, p. 79.


Vitali referred again to Verdi in a rebuttal to his opponents [Gazzetta musicale di Milano, 3/32 (11 Aug 1844), p. 135, n. 2]: "I have already stated that Maestro Verdi has proposed to make use of the method
as soon as he writes new music. I think it may be a good idea to tell you how this came about. One morning singing rehearsals were taking place at the house of one of the most distinguished dilettantes of Milan; and after going through the new trio finale of Ernani, in which the tempos are so lively, the lady said to the Maestro: "You know, Mr. Verdi? Yesterday I went to the Ricordi firm, where Maestro N.N. was rehearsing this trio, and at the words "Ferma, crudele, estinguere," instead of speeding up the tempo as he should have done, he went half as fast. I told him that it should go more than twice that speed; he was amazed and almost did not believe me." - Just in the last few days I had begun to talk about my project with my friends, and had communicated with this lady among others. So she then added: "Do you see? If you had thought about designating the duration of the piece, I bet that no one would have made a mistake, while as it stands everyone does it poorly." Maestro Verdi replied that the song lasted perhaps only a minute. - "Well," I then added: "in the last measure I would have written three quarters of a minute, or slightly longer." - One is to use his watch to make sure it lasts that long. Maestro Verdi is convinced that the method can be advantageous, he proposes thus to make use of it the first chance he has."


5. Verdi's intense concern with tempo is evident in several of his letters concerning performances of his early operas, Nabucco, Ernani, and Giovanna d'Arco, in particular. The most enlightening of these has been discussed by Martin Chusid in "A Letter by the Composer about Giovanna d'Arco and Some Remarks on the Division of Musical Direction in Verdi's Day," Performance Practice Review 3 (1990): 7-57. Additional discussion of this letter can be found in my Verdi's I masnadieri: Its Genesis and Early Reception (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1992/Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1992), pp. 377-89.

6. For example, Gianagostino Perotti [Guida per lo studio del Canto Figurato (Milan: G. Ricordi, 1846)] lamented the scarcity of good singers, and Francesco Lamperti [Guida teorica-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto (Milan: Ricordi, 1864)) noted that singers often possessed a "voice" but lacked a "conception of their art."

7. For example, Luigi Lablache [Metodo completo ossia Analisi ragionata dei principi sui quali diriger gli studi per isviluppar la Voce renderla pieghevole e formar il gusto (Milan: Giovanni Ricordi, 18 [--], Ch. 1, p. 71] noted that the first of three primary elements in the arte del canto was sentimento. Leone Giraldoni [Guida teorica-pratica ad uso dell'artista cantante (Bologna: Marsigli & Rocchi, 1864), p. 5] stated that one of the primary qualities requisite to a singer was "molta sensibilità d'animo e l'arte dell'espressione." Enrico Delle Sedie [L'arte lyrique. Traite complet de chant e de déclamation lyrique (Paris: Escudier, 1874)] outlined a detailed table of inflexions for instructing singers in the expression of sentimento and for helping them to develop buon gusto (good taste).

8. Early ottocento theoretical writings normally classified tempo designations in five basic categories: largo, adagio, andante, allegro, and presto. When a need for clarification existed, theorists advocated that composer further limit these terms of speed (movimento) with qualifying adjectives to describe style or character (carattere).

9. Boucheron (1800-1876) was a composer, conductor, theorist, and teacher, active in Milan during the mid-nineteenth century. For more information, see Dennis Libby, "Raimondo Boucheron," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, vol. 3, p. 95


11. In 1815 Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (1772-1838) "perfected" his machine for measuring musical tempo. He
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obtained a patent shortly thereafter and by 1816 was manufacturing metronomes in Paris as "Mälzl & Cie." For further information concerning the development of Maelzel's metronome, see, for example, Alexander Wheelock Thayer, "Johann Nepomuk Maelzel," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 11:484-85; and E. G. Richardson, "Metronome," *op. cit.*, 12: 222-23.

No manuscript or Italian printed edition of operas by Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti (that I have had the opportunity to consult) contains metronome markings. An early Parisian edition of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (premiere Paris Opéra, 29 February 1836), Schlesinger plate number M.S.2134 [reprinted in the series *Early Romantic Opera* (New York: Garland, 19--)] contains metronome markings. [My thanks to Philip Gosset for bringing the information concerning Rossini to my attention.]

12. Casamorata (1807-1881) was a lawyer, mathematician, music theorist, composer, and music critic who contributed not only to Ricordi's *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* but also to the *Rivista musicale di Firenze*, and *Nazione*. For further information, see Sergio Lattes, "Luigi Ferdinando Casamorata," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 3, p. 848.


17. The autograph folio is in a private collection. I am indebted to Martin Chusid for providing me with a photocopy of this manuscript from the archive of the American Institute for Verdi Studies.

18. Casamorata's series of four articles appeared in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* in 1846: vol. 5; no. 6 (8 February), no. 9 (1 March), no. 11 (15 March), and no. 13 (29 March).


20. The autograph is in the Ricordi Archive in Milan.

21. I wish to thank the staff of the G. Ricordi in Milan for their cooperation in allowing me to study the autograph score for *I masnadieri* in their Archive. Lengthier discussion of Verdi's tempo and metronome markings in *I masnadieri* can be found in my "Verdi's Tempo Assignments in *I masnadieri*," *Report of the Fifteenth Congress of the International Musicological Society, Madrid 1992* (forthcoming) and in Chapter 5 of my *Verdi's I masnadieri: Its Genesis and Early Reception*.

22. The autograph is in the Ricordi Archive in Milan.

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