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Abstract: Verdi's Patriarch and Puccini's Matriarch or 'Through the Looking Glass and What Puccini Found There'

**Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi, Don Carlos, Giacomo Puccini, Suor Angelica

## Abstract\*: Verdi's Patriarch and Puccini's Matriarch or 'Through the Looking Glass and What Puccini Found There'

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Puccini, known for borrowing from already proven sources, recomposed Verdi's scene between Philip and the Grand Inquisitor from *Don Carlos* (1867, 1884) in the scene between La Zia Principessa and Angelica in his one-act opera, *Suor Angelica* (1918). While no two scenes could appear outwardly to be more dissimilar or reflective of the contrasting tastes and disposition of their respective creators, each is a unique and powerful psychological confrontation in which repentance, family, and honor are key issues. Closer examination reveals that one scene is a mirror image of the other, a visual metaphor inspired by the central figure of each composer's vision: a powerful, older, physically infirm individual who cannot see -- Verdi's unable, Puccini's unwilling.

Both scenes have similar orchestration, tonal dimensions, structural design, and *mise-en-scène*, but Puccini's scene is a reflection in miniature of Verdi's. This is most obvious in the displacement of Verdi's powerful male casting, vocal timbre, and global political issues with entirely feminine sonorities and

concerns, exemplified by the invocation of Christ in one scene and Mary in the other.

No two composers who worked within the same genre could be of more divergent temperaments than Verdi and Puccini. Yet Puccini is thought to have inherited the mantle of Verdi, to have closed the "Great Tradition", even to have "left no crown Prince." It is, therefore, all the more surprising that no clear case has been made that Puccini, the product of a thorough and sophisticated musical education -- the last descendent of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti -- was influenced by or actually borrowed from his predecessor, Verdi, the acknowledged master of this "Great Tradition". By exploring these two scenes, both from mature works, we can see precisely those features of a Verdi opera to which Puccini reacted, and thereby establish a clear musical and dramatic lineage between the two composers. Within a greater context, Puccini's act of recomposition can be seen to reflect the aesthetic challenge of the early twentieth century, an era that sought to "remake the past".

### *New Verdi document discovered*

While reading microfilmed letters, Archivists at the American Institute for Verdi Studies came across a document which sheds new light on Verdi's activity just prior to the composition of his final opera, *Falstaff*. A letter from Giulio Ricordi, dated August 22, 1890, congratulates Verdi on the successful launching of a new business devoted to the sale of pork prepared at the composer's Sant'Agata farm. Ricordi, having purchased a "G.V. brand" pork shoulder, reports that he found the bill "a bit salty", but for such exquisite meat he would pay "neither a lira more nor a lira less."

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\* Paper read at a joint meeting of the AIVS and the Greater New York Chapter of the American Musicological Society, February 22, 1992.