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The Critical Reception of Verdi's Operas in England, 1845-1847

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Verdi's music was virtually unknown to English opera audiences until 8 March 1845, when Ernani reached the stage of Her Majesty's Theatre in London. In the following year (1846) the patrons of that establishment witnessed the London premières of two more of Verdi's operas: Nabucco on 3 March, censored and given under the title Nino, and I lombardi alla prima crociata on 12 May. On 10 April 1847 I due Foscari became the fourth of Verdi's operas to be presented in England preceding the world premiere of I masnadieri, composed specifically for Her Majesty's Theatre (22 July 1847).

Verdi's prestigious reputation accompanied and, in some instances, preceded the performance of his operas in England. Upon the London première of Ernani the journalists for the Morning Post (10 March 1845) noted Verdi's prominent position in Italian operatic circles:

> Verdi [is] at present regarded in Italy as the rising sun of the lyrical horizon. His reputation, now of some years' standing, has been gained, not only by the composition of [Ernani], but of several other pieces, particularly I Lombardi, which have been received con furore in all the Italian theaters.

And, on the same day the Morning Post informed its readers:

> Vast excitement [is] produced throughout Italy by the works of Verdi, and ... the opera of Ernani has been triumphantly performed on upwards of 50 Italian stages. ... Verdi is the author of six great operas which have passed the critical ordeal of his native land, and he has been elevated by the voice of his countrymen to the throne formerly filled by Donizetti and that child of passionate melody, poor Bellini. ... Verdi is the only worthy successor to the intensity of Bellini.

While maintaining that Verdi's "ready-made" reputation necessitated performance of his operas in England, the press did not immediately accept his operas, but rather greeted them with "a feeling of hesitation and doubt." The Morning Post (18 March 1846), for example, noted that "Verdi's works were received on their first appearance on [the] Anglo-Italian stage with distrust, although more fortunate than those of Rossini and Donizetti." The critics' misgivings resulted in intense disagreements about the relative merits of Verdi's works. Benjamin Lumley, impresario at Her Majesty's Theatre, recounted the case of I lombardi alla prima crociata:

> Whilst, by the Anti-Verdians, "I Lombardi" was declared to be flimsy, trashy, worthless; the Verdi party, and the adherents of the modern Italian school, pronounced it to be full of power, vigor, and originality. The one portion asserted that it was utterly devoid of melody — the other, that it was replete with melody of the most charming kind; the one again insisted that it was the worst kind of aspirant — the other, that it was the young composer's chef d'oeuvre. [Lumley, Reminiscences, 149]

Uncertain about the merits of Verdi's works, between 1845 and 1847 the English critics expressed conflicting opinions about each of his operas performed in London. On the negative side, commentators complained that the composer's music lacked originality, was oftentimes devoid of melodic and harmonic interest, and catered to the popular vein.

> It is pretty well agreed that Verdi has no originality, that his themes are dry and monotonous, that the intellect of the composer rarely asserts its presence. [Britannia, 1845]

> ... effects are produced by a broad, simple, and familiar melody, sometimes imposing and expressive, but more frequently trite and common, and with so little variety of phrase, that their uniformity at length becomes monotonous. [Daily News, 12 April 1847]

> ... he writes for the "music shops." There is always a certain quantity of quadrille music, of barrel-organ music, and that vulgar form of popular chorus which is so gratifying to the lower orders in the south. [Morning Chronicle, 9 March 1846]

Other writers implied that despite their novelty, Verdi's operas were boring:

> When we hear his music for the first time, it has an air of novelty and freshness, because it departs from the forms and phraseology repeated and hackneyed throughout the fifty operas of Donizetti. But this prestige is destroyed by further acquaintance with Verdi. As we hear his operas in succession, the peculiarity of his manner remains, but its novelty and freshness disappear. [Daily News, 12 April 1847]

Despite their complaints, however, even antagonists and skeptics (who, in fact, represented a majority) recognized the strong points in Verdi's music. Unable to negate his accomplishments fully, they were forced to concede his strengths. They praised his delicate, colorful instrumentation and vigorous rhythmic energy, acknowledged ensembles and concerted pieces to be among his best numbers, and noted the skill with which he integrated choruses into the musical and dramatic
structure. Above all, however, as the following excerpts attest, critics applauded Verdi's music for its effective and credible musical-dramatic expression.

With all [his] faults — grave ones, calculated to destroy and degrade taste beyond those of any Italian composer in the long list — Signor Verdi has one merit, and this is a great one — earnestness in attempting dramatic expression. [Chorley, Thirty Years' Musical Recollections (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862), 185]

Though Verdi's melodies are not distinguished for originality, and he often imitates himself in his airs, he has a great deal of dramatic perception, and contrives to produce striking effects with his choruses. [concerning I Lombardi; Times, 15 May 1846]

There is a peculiarity in the operas of Verdi with regard to the contrivance and adjustment of the scenes and the succession of the different movements of the composition, which renders them less dependent on extraordinary individual powers than any of the other productions of modern Italy. They spread over a large surface that interest which, in the generality of lyric dramas, concen ters in one or two personages. They introduce more scenery and situations; the recitative, dialogue, and action is fuller of movement; the chorus is raised to greater importance, and its combinations are more artfully and variously introduced. The orchestra is also studiously elaborated to produce novelty of impression in passages that essentially are not new. . . . no scene is protracted to a greater length than it can well be rendered amusing. . . . It is to be regretted, however, that so excellent a system is not carried out with more genius. [concerning a performance of Ernani at Covent Garden on 3 July 1847; Atlas, 9 July 1847]

While English criticism of Verdi's works written for Italy is enlightening, the commentary pertaining to I masnadieri offers an opportunity to assess the English critics' opinions of a work composed specifically for England and presumably designed to appeal in some way to English tastes and sensibilities.10 The remainder of this essay, therefore, will focus on the judgments passed on this opera.

Public anticipation of Verdi's new creation was stimulated by the impresario's ceaseless advertisements and the enthusiastic reports about the rehearsals.11 Even without Lumley's commercial "hype," Verdi's opera was destined to be a "great object of attraction" since it was "one of the first operas ever written for the Anglo-Italian stage"12 in the nineteenth century. But the newly composed work by Italy's foremost composer did not meet with unconditional success on the London stage. The opinions expressed by the English press suggest, in fact, that I masnadieri fared no better (and perhaps worse) than the other Verdiian operas performed in London between 1845 and 1847. The nature of the complaints leveled by the London journalists against I masnadieri ranged from mild disapproval of specific musical elements to total condemnation of the entire work. The Daily News (23 July 1847) reported:

[The positive] effects, great as they were, derived no aid whatever from the music; and this, indeed, was the case throughout the greatest part of the opera, which certainly has owed its success more to its striking dramatic character and its admirable performance than to its merit as a musical work.

Writing for the Athenaeum (24 July 1847), Chorley, always antagonistic toward Verdi, stated:

I masnadieri, at all events, must increase Signor Verdi's discredit with everyone who has an ear. We take it to be the worst opera which has been given in our time at Her Majesty's Theatre. Of the libretto we have no need to speak; since Schiller's "Robbers" has already been put upon the Italian stage as "I Briganti,"13 — and in a much more "wise-like" form than it wears at present.... [Maffei's libretto is] awkward [and] deficient in its arrangement. . . . The performance must be recorded as the failure of a work which richly deserved to fail.

Charles Gruneisen, avid supporter of the recently formed rival opera company at Covent Garden, observed in the Morning Chronicle (23 July 1847):

There was little difficulty amongst the dilettanti in the stalls as to what place I Masnadieri must occupy in lyric annals. It is, beyond a doubt, the weakest of [Verdi's] operas known in this country. There is a total absence of those massive concerted pieces which so compensate for the want of melody in his other works. He has given more scenes to the artists, but, lacking inspiration and originality, he has not been able to call into play the talents of the artists for whom he has composed.

The Morning Herald (23 July 1847) denigrated Verdi's compositional ability and his music:

Schiller's cumbrous and inhuman tragedy was far from being an appropriate subject for Verdi to grapple with. No one but a Beethoven should have dared to meddle with a theme of such gigantic proportions — that is, if any musical interpretation at all could be given to its scenes of ruthless terror, or there was any probable chance of reflecting the metaphysical ideal which the hero represents. . . . Serious music of this character — naught but the iterations of the commonest Italian forms, and presenting but few features which grasp the attention, certainly none to keep it alive for an entire evening — should be brought within a narrower compass than that which it is now the custom to prescribe. . . . The music seems to present precisely the same characteristics as those we have listened to before in the Ernani, the Nabucco, and the Lombardi, and the melodies are no better suited for the displays of vocalization, being equally antagonizing to the comfort of the singers. The concerted pieces and finales are of bulky build, and are susceptible of imposing delivery — not unattractive in themselves, were the ears vigilant and untired with rounds of orchestral clamor, and the sense of enjoyment not blunted by profusion. The science involved in the composition of the score
amounts to very little, and thirds, sixths, and octaves are plentiful. The harmonization, indeed, is of a very jejune and meager kind; it is jotted down with a thoughtless hand, but well trimmed with the glittering effects and the noisier instruments. The choruses are spirited and tunable, and in them the unisonic tendencies of the writer are made more manifest than ever.

The less than successful reception of *I masnadieri* in London may not have been caused solely by the intrinsic traits of the work, however, various external factors may well have contributed to the problems the opera encountered. One circumstance that may have fostered a negative attitude toward the opera involves the difficulties that plagued the management of Her Majesty's Theatre. First, after disputes with Lumley in 1846, singers and instrumentalists resigned from the theater and formed a rival company at Covent Garden, and in 1847 the Royal Italian Opera, as it was named, was staging a full season of performances. The split caused a rift in critical circles and among opera-goers, who were divided into two factions: those who supported the new company and those who remained loyal to Lumley. Thus, competition in the Italian opera arena played a role in the critical reception of productions at Her Majesty's Theatre. Second, for the 1847 season in addition to Verdi's new opera *Lumley had advertised three “major events”: Mendelssohn was to compose a new opera, *The Tempest*; Meyerbeer was to stage his *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*; and the renowned “Swedish nightingale” Jenny Lind was to be the featured soprano in the company. Much to the management's dismay, however, both Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer canceled their London engagements, and due to a contractual dispute with Alfred Bunn, manager of the Drury Lane Theater, Lind delayed her arrival in England. Her Majesty's Theatre was, therefore, in a precarious position with the public and the press for not delivering all that it had promised.

In addition, Verdi himself may have been partially to blame for the antagonism directed toward his work. As a result of illness, during the previous year Verdi had failed to produce a promised opera (*Il corsaro*) for London. The cancellation of his 1846 engagement, after its public announcement, could not have been appreciated by the English. Of even greater significance, Verdi's reclusive behavior while in London in 1847, especially his aversion to social functions (culminating in his refusal to meet with Queen Victoria), may have alienated the public and the press. Finally, despite his efforts to eliminate distractions and finish *I masnadieri*, Verdi did not finish the score in time for its anticipated mid-June premiere. Verdi's delay in completing the opera resulted in multiple postponements of its production, increasing critical discontent with him and with the theater. (In the end it was not staged until 22 July 1847, just two weeks before the end of the season, and then evidently only under Royal Order of the Queen.)

One other factor influencing the reception of Verdi's music may have been the low opinion of several English writers (though not of the public) toward Italian opera in general. These commentators believed that little more than immediate aural gratification could be expected from Verdi's music, for:

To look for genius, for mighty inspiration, for large and unexpected originality, for curious applications of art, in such a quarter [as Italian opera] would be silly and useless; a modern Italian opera is essentially an ephemeral thing, and if a good vehicle is constructed for the excursiveness of a flexible voice, and a succession of airs provided, variously passionate according to the tact and skill of the singer, the common ear is enchanted for the time being, and the full yearning is satisfied. [Morning Herald, 10 March 1845]

There can be little doubt that these circumstances contributed to an entrenchment of negative criticism toward Verdi's operas, *I masnadieri* in particular. But, even though the critics' observations about *I masnadieri* were less than complimentary, the opera should not be considered a total failure. First-hand accounts suggest that it achieved some degree of success at its first performance. On 21 July 1847 *L'Italia musicale* reported: "Expectations are high; and at this time, it is said that there are no more tickets, not even at four times the price." At the 23 July premiere, it was reported that "as soon as the doors opened, the theater filled in a moment, as if by magic," and "the stalls were so chock full that no one remembered ever having seen so many people."

As for the performance, although it is difficult to separate fact from fiction in the printed commentaries, Verdi himself indicated that he was pleased with the outcome: *I masnadieri* "went well, and without causing a furor, it was successful enough to have earned me several thousand francs." Emanuele Muzio, who as always reported about his teacher's music with great enthusiasm, reinforced Verdi's view.

The opera was a hit. From the prelude to the last finale there was nothing but applause, evvivas, recalls and encore. As soon as the Maestro appeared in the orchestra there was continuous applause, which lasted a quarter of an hour. . . . The performance was good; the orchestra was wonderful. . . . The singers did everything well . . . The Maestro was quite satisfied; the manager was so satisfied that he made an offer [to Verdi] . . . for a contract for as many years as he wants. . . . This is the best proof of whether or not the opera was liked. [Muzio to Barezzi, 23 July 1847, Garibaldi, p. 344-45, 349]

At first glance the Italian journalists too seemed to believe that "I masnadieri was received by the public with signs of the most spirited satisfaction." Their critiques contained eloquent discussions of the libretto, especially the mastery with which the librettist condensed a complex Schillerian drama.
to operatic proportions and the perfection of the versification; as well as the technical mastery and artistic value of the music. One informative and perceptive review in the Gazzetta musicale di Milano (4 August 1847) noted how in several numbers Verdi had achieved “a more melodic, more spontaneous, more flowing, and less agitated manner of vocal writing than in his previous works by avoiding the excessive instrumental doubling of the voice at the unison,” not catering to the voices for which he was writing to too great an extent, respecting the text more conscientiously, and not overwhelming the voices with deafening orchestration. Another critique issued in Teatri, arte e letteratura (12 August 1847, but dated 23 July 1847) defended Verdi’s skills, remarking that the plot was

a horrible thing from beginning to end, that only a masterful hand could touch [and] that required an expert superior mind to make the music reflect ... metaphysical ideals of terror and piety, guilt inseparable from honorable sentiments, the most horrible passions accompanied by the condemning cry of conscience. Verdi knew how to treat a theme of such gigantic proportions.25

But, having commended Verdi for his compositional mastery and after mentioning the repeated ovations that several numbers in the opera received at its premiere, even the sympathetic correspondent of the Gazzetta musicale di Milano (4 August 1847) called attention to the possibility that the audience’s enthusiasm may well have been influenced by the performance’s being the first one since 1844 in which they “had been called upon to judge an Italian opera composed expressly for them.”26 In the end, like the English, the Italian journalists were hesitant to pronounce a final verdict on the opera, drawing on the usual excuse that one hearing of the work proved insufficient for adequately judging it: “On the intrinsic and total merit of the opera the public and the journalists all seem to agree on one thing, although the latter are wary of expressing an absolute opinion after only one performance.” [Teatri, arte e letteratura, 12 August 1847]

To conclude, the journalistic evidence pertaining to Verdi’s operas upon their first appearances on the London stage presents a distorted and at times confusing picture.27 In many ways this phenomenon seems to validate the comment made by the critic for the Morning Post (18 May 1846): “those judges who are entitled to our respect as possessing scientific lore, too often forget that music is made for general enjoyment, and to be judged by its impression on the educated masses.” It may, therefore, be that the truth lay in the words of the commentator for the Morning Post (3 March 1847): “Whatever be the opinions published by certain critics on the merits of Verdi as a composer, the fact is indisputable that his operas produce great enthusiasm, and have achieved an immense popularity.”

NOTES

1. The cast consisted of Napoleone Moriani as Ernani, Botelli as Carlo, Fornasari as Silva, Rita Berio as Elvira, Bellini as Giovanna, Dai Fiori as Riccardo, and A. Giubilei as Iago; with Michael Costa conducting. The ballet performed with the opera was M. Perrot’s Eoline, ou La Dryade. [Morning Post, 7 March 1845]

2. The cast consisted of Fornasari as Nino (Nabucco), Corelli as Idaspe (Ismaele), Botelli as Orotasphe (Zaccaria), Sanchioli as Abigail, Corbari as Fenena, Dai Fiori as Abdalio, and Bellini as Anna. The opera was performed with M. Perrot’s ballet (with music by Pugni) Catarina, ou La fille du bandit. [Morning Post, 2 March 1846]

3. The cast included Corelli as Arvino, Fornasari as Pagano, Corbari as Viclinda, Grisi as Giselda, Botelli as Pirro, Dai Fiori as The Prior of Milan, Giubilei as Acciano, Mario as Oronte, and Bellini as Sofia. [Morning Post, 9 May 1846]

4. The opera scheduled to be performed on 10 April 1847 was Donizetti’s L’elisir d’amore, which was canceled due to the indisposition (laryngitis) of the bass Luigi Lablache [Morning Post, 8 April 1847]. In its place I due Foscari was produced unprepared, ten days before its projected premiere [Morning Post, 12 April 1847]. The cast included Coletti as Francesco Foscari, Fraschini as Jacopo Foscari, Montenegro as Lucrezia, Bouché as Loredano, and Solari as Pisana [Morning Post, 10 April 1847].

5. Among the authors who contributed to the journals and newspapers cited in this essay during the years under consideration were Morris Barnett (1800-1856), Morning Post; Henry Fothergill Chorley (1808-1872), Athenaeum; James William Davison (1813-1885), Times (after 1846); Charles Grünseisen (1806-1879), Illustrated London News, Morning Chronicle, Britannia; George Hogarth (1783-1870), Daily News, Illustrated London News; W. H. Holmes, Atlas; and Desmond Ryan (1816-1868), Morning Herald (1847), Morning Post, Morning Chronicle.

6. These operas include Oberto, Nabucco, I lombardi alla prima crociata, Ernani, I due Foscari, and Giovanna d’Arco. Verdi’s second opera, Un giorno di regno, a failure at its premiere, is omitted.

7. “The audience of the Italian Opera-house ought to be familiar with those works that have made a sensation on the continent, even though their intrinsic merit does not correspond to the great praise
which the eulogistic admirers of Italy delight to bestow. [Times, 10 March 1845]


9. In addition to the performances at Her Majesty's Theatre, Ernani and I due Foscari were each presented twice by the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden during the 1847 season.

10. Verdi's specific considerations for London in the choice of subject and singers for his "English" commission are discussed in my "Verdi's I masnadieri: Its Genesis and Reception" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1992 / Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1992).

11. As the Gazzetta musicale di Milano (4 August 1847) acknowledged: "public curiosity [was] favorably aroused by the renown of the composer and of the performers, and by the distinction of the chosen poet, and redoubled by Lumley's ... notices, the prophecy of successful rehearsals, and the benevolent provisions of Her Majesty [Queen Victoria] ..."


13. The reference is to the opera by Saverio Mercadante which had its premiere on 22 March 1836 at the Théâtre Italien in Paris and was published by Francesco Lucca in 1836. The opera was first performed in London on 2 July 1836.

14. The singers who defected with the composer/conductor Michael Costa included Giulia Grisi, Fanny Persiani, Giovanni Mario, and Antonio Tamburini.


16. For Alfred Bunn's account of the dispute, see his The Case of Bunn vs. Lind (London: W. S. Johnson, 1848). The progress of the case was also reported in several London newspapers.

17. Verdi himself noted how seldom he ventured out into society:

   I stay in the house a great deal to write (at least with the intention of writing). I go out into society very little, and to the theater only seldom, so that I have fewer disruptions [noi]." [Verdi to Giuseppina Appiani, letter of 27 June 1847, Alessandro Luzio and Giovanni Cesari, eds., I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi (Milan: Commissione esecutiva per le onoranze a Giuseppe Verdi nel primo centenario della nascita, 1913 / Reprint, Bologna: Formi, 1968), 457-58]

   In a letter (29 June 1847) to Antonio Bareazzi, Emanuele Muzio (Verdi's student and assistant in London) attested to the secluded life the composer was leading:

   The Maestro is not receiving anyone; he leads the most secluded life you can imagine; he goes neither to accademie, nor to concerts, nor to dinners. ... Invitations come to him from all parts . . . For the moment he does not go to see anyone. [Luigi Agostino Garibaldi, Giuseppe Verdi nelle lettere di Emanuele Muzio ad Antonio Barezzi (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1931), 336]

   In a similar letter of 17 July 1847, we learn of Verdi's refusal to meet with the Queen.

   The other day [Luigi Lablache] went to see the Queen, who said many things about the Maestro and wants to meet him personally, but he does not want to do that. [Garibaldi, 339]

18. L'Italia musicale was the journal of the publisher Francesco Lucca, the owner of I masnadieri. The reports in this journal are inventively positive, sometimes expressing views opposite to all other Italian, French, and English critiques.

19. Teatri, arte e letteratura, 12 August 1847.

20. Muzio to Bareazzi, 23 July 1847 [Garibaldi, p. 345]. Queen Victoria attended the performance with her entourage in one of her final public appearances before going into confinement.

21. Verdi to Clarina Maffei, 29 July 1847 [Quartetto milanese ottocentesco (Rome: Archivi, 1974), #50].

22. Verdi mentioned the possibility of a contract with Lumley for subsequent seasons; see his letters to Clarina Maffei, 29 July 1847 [Quartetto milanese ottocentesco, #50], to Countess Morosini, 30 July 1847 [I copialettere, 460-61], and to Lumley, 2 August 1847 [Ibid., 42-43].

23. Teatri, arte e letteratura, 12 August 1847.


25. This critique appears to be a rebuttal of sorts to the one published in the Morning Herald (23 July 1847) cited in part above.

26. The writer mentioned Don Carlos (premiere, 29 June 1844), which had been written for Her Majesty's Theatre in London by Michael Costa for a cast that included Grisi, Lablache, Fornasari, and Mario. Though born in Naples, Costa made his career in London and was considered an English composer.

27. It is not surprising that after its four performances at Her Majesty's Theatre (22, 24, 29 July and 10 August 1847), I masnadieri fell into oblivion in England and was not revived in London during the nineteenth century. Even when Verdi's most recent creation moved to Italy (where it was first performed to open the 1847-48 Carnival season in Verona, Trieste and Bergamo), it fared little better. Its performance history in Italy and the role of Italian censorial intervention is discussed in my "Verdi's I masnadieri."