Verdi Sings Erminia Frezzolini

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Armgart: [Gluck] sang, not listened: every linked note
Was his immortal pulse that stirred in mine,
And all my gladness is but part of him.
Give me the wreath.

(Shewurms the bust of Gluck.)

Leo: (sardonically) Ay, ay, but mark you this:
It was not part of him—that trill you made
In spite of me and reason!

—George Eliot, Armgart (1870)

When the diva heroine of George Eliot’s verse drama Armgart describes her communion with Gluck during a performance of Orfeo ed Euridice, she invokes several familiar rhetorical figures concerning performance and re-creation. Not only does she display her subservience to the composer’s spirit by draping a bust with a wreath—and the fact that one is so conveniently at hand must be another sign of her esteem. Armgart also describes her performance in terms that subordinate her voice almost completely to the composer’s: Gluck sang through her, his very pulse coursed in her veins. These are comfortable sentiments, gracefully expressed, and the devotee of Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda might be forgiven for feeling disappointment at the “sardonic” and gawkily-phrased response Armgart receives from her teacher, Leo. The inelegant language and limping meter that comes with Leo’s ungracious reminder—that Armgart also altered Gluck’s music by adding embellishments—may be a sign that Eliot is not at her best, but this small literary breakdown may also signal an aspect of performance—the intervention of the singer into the creative (or reconstructive) process—for which no such neatly turned expressions and pretty words exist.

This friendly argument captures a tension that lies at the center of most relationships between composer and singer. The struggle for primacy between the composer’s written text and the adjustments necessary to bring it alive in performance is a constant of operatic history, a tension that became particularly acute around the time of Eliot’s play, in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the operatic text became less improvisatory and less flexible. Verdi was, of course, a central figure in this aesthetic shift, not only because he gradually assumed a professional status from which he could exert control over performances of his works, but also because he articulated his attitudes to singers so copiously and so persuasively in his correspondence. As is well known, the period around Macbeth was something of a turning point: the selection of a cast had never been so important to shaping Verdi’s first compositional impulses, but it was also at this time that the composer began to insist that his scores not be altered in performance and became reluctant to supply singers with substitute arias tailored to their needs.

Verdi’s growing insistence on control over his scores moved more or less in parallel with a larger movement toward valuing the work over the singer. However, as is usually the case with such broad cultural shifts, this evolution unfolded in fits and starts, so that numerous exceptions leap to mind, from the persistence of added embellishments well into the age of recorded sound to Verdi’s occasional willingness to cater to singers—in the initial stages of composition, if no longer in post-premiere alterations—as late as Falstaff. Broad surveys tend to obscure the indirect paths by which backstage hierarchies and audience taste gradually tilted away from the singer. I would like to untangle some of these contradictions by pulling at a single thread, focusing on the critical reception of Erminia Frezzolini, whose career spanned roughly the period in question, from a triumphant debut in 1838 to a much-postponed retirement around 1880 after many coolly received comeback attempts. During a brief period in the early 1840s Frezzolini—one of Verdi’s favorite sopranos and the creator of Giselda in I lombardi and of Giovanna d’Arco—was wildly popular in the early 1840s, but she continued to perform long after her voice began to show signs of strain. An unhappy early marriage to a tenor and a taste for playing the stock market prevented her from following the happiest trajectory of the nineteenth-century soprano: marrying minor nobility and retiring early. Frezzolini’s vocal decline naturally colored responses to her later performances, but at the same time her critics, after about 1850, seem so caught up in nostalgia for a “lost generation” of great singers that their remarks become less criticisms of this particular faded voice than elegies for an entire style. It is this tendency to treat Frezzolini as a symbol of larger aesthetic movements that intrigues me; and my purpose in trying to summon her voice from the past will be double: to trace her long career as a metaphor for a general change in performance practice, especially as it touches on florid singing and added ornamentation, and to explore how Verdi’s pulse may have “sung through” her in the two roles he composed for her at the peak of her career.
Verdi Sings Erminia Frezzolini

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Frezzolini is known to contemporary musicology mainly as the first performer of Giselda's preghiera from Act I of I Lombardi, an aria so unusual that an appeal to the special qualities of its first interpreter has seemed almost inevitable. Both Julian Budden and Roger Parker have noted that the piece's harmonies and scoring, and especially its almost complete absence of vocal ornamentation, set it apart in Verdi's early style; the bareness of the vocal line also makes it anomalous as an entrance aria, where a prima donna would usually expect more of a chance to show off her technique. Attempting to account for the number's idiosyncrasies, Budden advises:

In contemplating this astonishing piece of music, one of the strangest entrance arias to be given to any leading soprano, we should remember the special qualities of Giselda's creator, Erminia Frezzolini. A young singer gifted with a pure fresh voice and perfect legato, she belonged to the generation of sopranos which in time was to lead Verdi and his contemporaries away from the more florid style of vocal writing. It was for her that Verdi composed what is perhaps the finest of his early soprano roles, Giovanna d'Arco.

Parker has carried the possible connection between the aria and its first interpreter further, surveying Frezzolini's early career and perusing reviews for evidence of the qualities that might have inspired Verdi to this stylistic departure; the singer he discovers there may have appealed to Verdi, he suggests, for her "simplicity and dramatic truth, the lack of exaggeration or artificiality that seems to have been a hallmark of her dramatic gestures." 

As we shall discover, a simple and unadorned vocal style was actually the one virtue Frezzolini did not possess, but the perception of her voice that lies behind Budden's and Parker's comments on the "Salve Maria" can probably be traced primarily to a single Verdian authority, Emanuele Muzio's oft-quoted letter comparing Jenny Lind's style unfavorably with Frezzolini's:

[Lind's] trills are incomparable; her agility unequalled, and generally, in order to show off her vocal bravura, she strays into fioriture, gruppetti and trills—things people enjoyed in the last century, but not in 1847. We Italians are not accustomed to this style; and if la Lind came to Italy, she would abandon the mania she has for embellishments and sing simply, since she has a voice even and flexible enough to sustain a phrase in the manner of la Frezzolini.9

Considering that Muzio mentions Frezzolini only in a subordinate clause and that the only thing he imputes to her is an "even and flexible" voice, his praise may have had a disproportionate influence on modern perceptions. This is not necessarily to accuse Muzio of inaccuracy: the linking of Frezzolini with the latest Italian style is a recurring theme of journalistic assessments of the early 1840s. In a short article devoted to the singer in 1841, the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung described her as standing at the top of the new crop of Italian singers, who substitute forceful dramatic truth for displays of mere technical skill. A series of "Etudes et notices biographiques" published that year in the Revue et gazette musicale takes the same line, grouping Frezzolini with her husband, the tenor Antonio Poggi, and baritone Giorgio Ronconi as the leaders of a new generation.

Even ten years later, when Frezzolini may already have been disappointing these early hopes, the Paris critic Marie Escudier echoes the assessment, chastising her for trying to imitate the virtuosic style of Fanny Persiani (the first Lucia di Lammermoor), and insisting that Frezzolini is "anything but a light soprano," her strengths being spianato singing and a melancholy expressivity that "penetrates the soul."12

These early reviews, while characteristically silent about technical matters, depict a coterie of young singers led by Frezzolini, set to scale new heights of dramatic truth through a simple, direct manner of singing and acting. From our current historical vantage point this is an appealing view, placing both Frezzolini and the operas Verdi wrote for her as important in the emergence of "modern" attitudes to the relationship among composer, singer, and operatic work. However, when we turn to the roles Frezzolini specialized in, a type of evidence both more direct and more difficult to interpret than reviews, a different profile emerges. At the height of her career, Frezzolini's repertoire seems to have been remarkable for its narrowness, with repeated outings in two old-fashioned and very florid roles—Bellini's Beatrice di Tenda (the role in which she had made her debut in Florence in 1838) and Donizetti's Lucrezia Borgia—making up the bulk of her appearances. Besides these two cavalli di battaglia, Frezzolini frequently sang similar roles in Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor and Gemma di Vergy, as well as Mercadante's Elena da Feltr. She seems to have "tried on" new parts, such as Anna Bolena and Alaide in Bellini's La straniera, only to discard them after a single season, perhaps because unsuited to her style. This is hardly surprising, since the unusual dramatic intensity required of Donizetti's heroine and the spartan arioso style of Bellini's radical experiment with canto declamato are sharply at odds with the agility and delicacy of Frezzolini's preferred roles. Rather more unexpectedly, in the late 1850s she broadened her repertoire, performing, for example, in Rigoletto and Il trovatore (both roles that fit neat-
ly with the vocal profile she had established over the previous decade) at the Théâtre Italien in Paris. But even during this period, when control over the roles she took on was probably constrained by declining popularity and the deterioration of her voice, Frezzolini managed to maintain her specialization in florid parts, singing in *Linda di Chamounix*, *I puritani*, and *La sonnambula* for the first time around 1850.

The impression of a singer whose greatest success lay in the florid ornamentation of 1830s *bel canto* roles is supported by the most detailed discussion I have found of Frezzolini's voice, an 1848 article in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, signed "R." The author describes Frezzolini as having a range from low B-flat to high D-flat, but with a very weak chest register and a colorless, inflexible middle. The whole lower range, he argues, had been sacrificed to her remarkably developed head voice: in this top register she could create any effect, at any dynamic level. Most interesting of all, "R." asserts rather contemptuously that this unevenness, this lack of a core to her voice, meant that even at the peak of her powers, in her favorite roles, Frezzolini could earn her ovations only in parts adapted to flatter her strengths:

\[\text{In scores not expressly written for her, she does not draw sincere applause except in variations or fioriture she has introduced herself, and which she has had to graft onto the score for the express purpose of pleasing you. Recall} \text{ Beatrice di Tenda, remember Lucrezia Borgia, think carefully of the performer and the applause she received: you will see that, with only a few exceptions, every ovation followed a passage that does not appear in the score. [...] Her forces are so limited that, with the exception of three or four roles, it is impossible for Frezzolini to sing parts not intended expressly for her.}\]

Perhaps even more intriguing than this slightly pathetic picture of a Frezzolini required to adapt every role to camouflage her vocal flaws is the fact that "R." disapproves of this practice on aesthetic grounds. He specifically criticizes the "Baroque fioriture" that Frezzolini has introduced into the *rondo finale* of *Beatrice di Tenda*, arguing that:

\[\text{La Frezzolini has too much intelligence not to realize that her performance of this emotional, touching aria is completely absurd from the aesthetic point of view. It is a bitter parody. How could Beatrice, exhausted, dying, about to be dragged to the scaffold [...] emit this bizarre warbling at such a solemn moment? [...] This is where a false education leads: to the sacrifice of art for the sake of one's own self-interest.}\]

He further insists, rather self-righteously, that such antics win applause only because they are designed to flatter the strongest parts of Frezzolini's voice, and "not because they are superior to the original... because the Milanese public has a just and universal distaste for such variations." Even if we dismiss this last remark as motivated by regional pride, it is clear that "R." has positioned himself as modern and Frezzolini as old-fashioned: the singer is mired in an outdated style of florid performance that "sacrifices true art to individual interest", the critic articulates a lofty commitment to the dramatic "truth" of the unadorned line.

While R's pronouncements would seem to carry us into a future where a composer's "original" score had quasi-sacred authority, I would like to turn back for a moment to the prime of Frezzolini's career, to re-evaluate her influence on Verdi in light of this revised assessment of her performing style—a view that sees her as perhaps more likely to share Jenny Lind's "mania" for ornaments than to correct it. Clearly, "R."'s assessment, combined with the evidence of Frezzolini's favorite roles, makes it nearly impossible to connect her with the peculiarities of the *preghiera* in *I lombardi*: indeed, the *preghiera*'s stark melodic line almost seems designed for a singer with diabolically opposed qualities. These initial doubts are reinforced by the character of the soprano part in *I lombardi* as a whole: the role of Giselda is such a kaleidoscope of contrasting styles that a characterization tailored to suit the style of a single singer seems unlikely. While the Act II *rondo* has a slow movement of a delicate and florid character, its coda full of what might almost be called "Frezzolini" vocal embroidery, the last-act aria "Non fu sogno" adopts a more vigorous but equally virtuosic tone. Only in the ensembles is there any echo of the syllabic declamation and stripped-down melodic line of the *preghiera*.

Despite the disproportionate influence the style of the "Salve Maria" has exerted on commentators, then, the musical traces of Frezzolini's voice within *I lombardi* prove to be just as slippery and internally contradictory as the evidence of the various journalistic accounts. In one sense this seems entirely typical of the quest for any voice of the past century: both the musical style of a role and the opinions voiced in reviews are subject to so many conflicting pressures and contingencies that they must be incomplete and unreliable as historical evidence. But rather than giving up in despair or (what amounts to the same thing) conceding that all history is mere conjecture, perhaps the conflicting accounts can be reconciled, at least provisionally.

It seems clear that recent commentators, impressed by the anticipatory modernism of the "Salve Maria," have been both too eager to value its style over that of the rest of *I lom-
bardi and, perhaps led by Muzio's impressive credentials as a Verdian confidant, to draw conclusions based on a few, possibly inaccurate reviews. And while there may be no alternative but to conclude that Muzio himself was simply wrong, or too caught up in a desire to criticize Jenny Lind, the other accounts of Frezzolini's "simple" or "direct" style are easier to reconcile with "R."s more specific critique of her performances. We can do no more than speculate, but it seems possible, especially given the tendency of contemporary critics to value acting over vocal technique and the bias against affectation on the stage, that the critics were responding primarily to a quality of Frezzolini's acting, perhaps a simplicity of gesture or facial expression that for them overrode the fussiness of her vocal delivery.18

Indeed, a strong, unmannered actress with an agile vocal instrument is exactly the profile that Verdi seems to have had in mind when he composed the role of Giovanna d'Arco for Frezzolini, a year after the premiere of I lombardi. If the role of Giselda is a pastiche of vocal styles, the music Verdi wrote for Giovanna is more coherent in both the technical demands it makes on the voice and in overall style, perhaps reflecting the fact that in the course of composing and rehearsing I lombardi not only in Milan but also in Senigallia, Verdi had gained a deeper knowledge of a singer he had previously heard only a handful of times.19 Not only the homogeneity of the vocal style in Giovanna, but also the occasional disjunction between the florid grace of the music and the fierce sentiments Giovanna is required to express as a military leader suggest that Verdi was catering to Frezzolini's particular vocal qualities. In Giovanna's entrance aria, for example, the heroine's appeal to the heavens for a sword to lead her people into battle is surprisingly docile, its melodic line laden with the conventionally feminine wiles of delicate fioritura.20

Indeed, the cavatina seems so suited to Frezzolini's voice as described by "R." that it is almost irresistible to indulge in some circular reasoning, moving backward from the music to a more detailed image of Frezzolini's voice. Stronger even than the sense of agility or of a high register that eclipses the other ranges is the impression of a fragile voice, one that must be treated with care. Throughout the aria, high notes are mostly reached by step or small leap and are sung softly, the melodic line emerges from a chain of ornamental turn and appoggiatura figures, the orchestral accompaniment is light, and the range never descends below the E above middle C. As Giovanna expresses her desire for a sword (mm 14-26), Verdi injects a suitably martial intensity, but he does so without straining or overwhelming the voice. Most of the military effects come from the orchestra's sharp rhythmic motive as Giovanna muses over her last line (mm 18-19); the single dramatic vocal gesture, repeated three times, the leap up to A and then B above the staff (mm 16, 17, and 21), gains in effect from the lyrical, conjunct motion of the surrounding context. Even the form seems designed to flatter Frezzolini's agility: the movement closes with a fioritura-laden coda almost equal in length to the rest of the movement. The aria plays to maximum effect on the vocal qualities that had earned Frezzolini such praise in her performances of Lucrezia and Beatrice, but it perhaps also exploits her vocal deficiencies, resulting in a female warrior far more nuanced than, for example, the shouting Amazon Verdi was to create for Sofia Loewe in Attila the following year.
Spada d'una spada e d'un ci.mier! Sem. pre al l'alba ed alla sera qui vi innal zo a te a te pre-
ghiera; qui la notte mi riposo e te sognai il mio pen-
sier... oh se un di m'avessi il doso d'una

Spada ah! d'una spada e d'un ci.

(va a sedersi sulla pietra)
Even during rehearsals for *Giovanna*, Frezzolini had begun to show signs of the vocal flaws that were to trouble "R." and send her career into premature decline; Muzio reported that she no longer sang with her former force and energy and that she was "always in tears because she says her voice isn't what it used to be." Negative reports began to pour in a few years later when Frezzolini reached Paris, one of several cities where she tried to revive her flagging career. An 1850 review by Pierangelo Fiorentino reinforces this sense of fragility: he worries that an over-taxing role or an insensitive orchestra could be the end of her. Even more revealingly, however, Fiorentino voices what has by now become a familiar complaint:

> Her middle range is rather covered and tired-sounding, but her high notes are very beautiful and very pure. Perhaps she oversungs them a bit; she multiplies the most brilliant and most difficult passages, sometimes she changes slightly the character of the piece she is singing. But it is true that she has energy, range, and élan, and that she puts her soul even into her vocalises.22

An irate Théâtre-Italien subscriber who wrote to the theatre's director around 1860 complaining about Frezzolini's re-engagement for the coming season takes the same line:

> It is with bitter regret that we see our pleasure lessened when these beautiful roles are massacred and most often obscured altogether. Mme. Frezzolini has the habit of skipping the passages that her throat so often refuses to sing—unless it is perhaps simply her caprice that resists them.23

Even more than Fiorentino's review, this letter suggests that the terms of the composer-singer hierarchy had been decisively overturned: although fans might continue to enjoy some light added embellishment, by the late 1850s—at least in Paris—a new respect for the composer and perhaps a desire for a greater degree of dramatic realism dictated that singers were demoted to mere interpreters, while audiences demanded to hear canonic works performed in identical fashion time after time. This notion of a fixed repertory of classic works in the modern sense brought with it a new attention to fidelity to the notes as written and a resulting decline in singers' latitude to embellish, to be regarded as "co-creators."

In this climate, one recurrent detail of Frezzolini's Paris reception seems out of place. Even amidst the complaints, Frezzolini was by this time regularly discussed in tones of almost reverential nostalgia: Marie Escudier described her as possessing "the sublime remnants of a talent that once had no equal in all of Italy," but invocations of a golden age of *bel canto* were often less elegiac and more historically specific.24 Accounts of a series of performances of *I puritani* with Frezzolini at the Théâtre-Italien, for example, devoted almost as much space to reminiscing about the singers of the famous "Puritani quartet" at the premiere twenty years earlier as they did to evaluating the current revival.25 While this strong streak of retrospection, with its idolization of dead or retired singers, might seem to contradict the aggressively modernist view of Frezzolini as a dusty relic of a more singer-oriented era, such nostalgic enshrinement of a supplanted style may be a necessary element of any aesthetic watershed.

Today opera criticism laments the Flagstads, the Melchiors, the Thills and the Lubins. Perhaps in a few decades it will be the Caballes, Joneses, Pavarottis and Domingos who will be missed, since there are no great voices, no great singers, except those of the past, as if a voice needed to have been lost to acquire an idealization that imbues it with the nostalgia of a golden age gone forever.26

I would suggest that by the 1860s, although Frezzolini was still performing regularly, she had taken on this kind of idealized status among her critics. It may be in this capacity, as a symbol of a glorious past, that Frezzolini makes an appearance in Henry James's sentimental satire of late nineteenth-century Paris, *The American*. At the novel's turning point, the allegorically-named upstart Christopher Newman (the "American" of the title) announces that he plans to throw a party for the aristocratic Parisian family he desperately hopes to impress, with entertainment by "all the best singers from the opera," pre-eminent among them Madame Frezzolini. As we have seen, two decades earlier such an occasion might reasonably have included Frezzolini among its stellar cast, but by 1868—when the novel is set—she would hardly have been the best choice to enhance such an atmosphere of celebration. Although her last season at the Théâtre Italien had been 1864-65, critical reception had been cool, and her vocal problems drove her into near-retirement (and marriage to a Paris doctor) soon afterward. James may simply have picked the name more or less at random—he often proclaimed his lack of sensitivity to music—but, whether by accident or design, Frezzolini seems exactly right for the occasion: by this stage of her career, she must have stood for both a connection to that noble past so proudly paraded by Newman's Parisian associates, and perhaps also a dignity in the face of humiliation that Newman himself is to learn from his contact with the European aristocracy.

Unfortunately, the party never takes place; we do not "hear" Frezzolini sing. But another American author, Mark Twain, writing around the same time, gives a description of a performance in Naples in the 1860s that perhaps captures a sense of what that fictional occasion might have been like:
Everybody spoke of the rare sport there was to be. They said the theater would be crammed, because Frezzolini was going to sing. It was said she could not sing well, now, but then the people liked to see her, anyhow. ... every time the woman sang they hissed and laughed—the whole magnificent house—and as soon as she left the stage they called her on again with applause. Once or twice she was encored five and six times in succession, and received with hisses when she appeared, and discharged with hisses and laughter when she had finished—then instantly encored and insulted again! ... White-kidded gentlemen and ladies laughed till the tears came, and clapped their hands in very ecstasy when that unhappy old woman would come meekly out for the sixth time, with uncomplaining patience to meet a storm of hisses!28

Echoing one of James's favorite themes, Twain goes on to castigate the Neapolitan audience for their cruelty, and to assert that the singer's tranquil dignity would have won the respect of an American audience. Twain's use of Frezzolini to advance his own opinions, to portray his "innocent" Americans as superior to corrupt Europeans, is a particularly striking appropriation, but the technique is hardly confined to literary contexts: as we have seen, "R." was not averse to congratulating Milanese taste, and Muzio similarly seems to have indulged in some Italian patriotism at the expense of Jenny Lind and her English fans.

It is one of the challenges of reception history that even journalistic accounts and memoirs tend to reveal as much about the preoccupations of the world that shaped them as they do of the events they describe. Frezzolini's career was long enough for the reception documents that surround her to reflect changing attitudes to opera, and to opera singers, over several decades. From her early position as a pioneer of the operatic hierarchy, Frezzolini even surived to appear in the press—at least on one occasion—as a representative of the modern style that had earlier dismissed her. In an article published just after her death in 1884, Frezzolini sets forth her feelings about performing:

I have never been able to step onto the stage without feeling an extreme and painful, but at the same time sweet, sensation; but this feeling disappears immediately. I submerge myself in my part and, until the end of the first act, the public ceases to exist in my eyes. I sing for myself, and the hall could empty out completely, but I would keep singing the rest of the opera for my own pleasure, if only the other singers and the orchestra would continue the performance with me.29

This was probably a "sound bite" polished for journalists, but it reveals a strikingly modern attitude to performance, including a focus on psychological depth and on the interior dimension of performing that seems at odds with the image of Frezzolini we have constructed so far. For while the words attributed to her here say nothing about music, about ornamentation or interpolated high notes, or otherwise altering a score to suit a singer's tastes, what is striking about this passage is its emphasis on the disappearance of both singer and audience as self-conscious, autonomous personalities. The ideal articulated here, of singer and audience melting into a transcendent musical pleasure seems in a sense both to elevate the composer as creator of this inebriating world and to erase the singer: indeed, it is a view of operatic performance not far removed from that with which we began, Armgart's fantasy of the pulse of the dead Gluck coursing through her body. Whether or not Frezzolini ever succeeded in changing her style to adapt to this new focus—and as we have seen, most reports suggest that she did not—she was nevertheless in this one sense swept up in the juggernaut of change, her words shaped after her death to reflect the new reality of the singer's reduced place in the operatic hierarchy.

It is tempting to leave Frezzolini's words hanging in the air, to let her eloquent anticipation of more recent rhetorics of performance stand as a conclusion. But I have left one of the most intriguing questions unanswered: the mystery behind that anomalous Lombardi prayer. The question could perhaps be rephrased as one about what it means for Verdi to "write an aria for" a particular singer, a concept that can take on various inflections depending on the composer's familiarity with a voice, and the particular characteristics he may choose to emphasize or avoid. Apart from these obvious variables, I wonder if the preghiera may have been a wishful or a prescriptive gesture: struck, as so many early critics were, by Frezzolini's dramatic intensity, Verdi may have hoped to capitalize on this quality while weaning her of her beloved embellishments.30 And perhaps—to pursue this fantasy for a moment—this attempt to modify her style didn't quite work, and in Giovanna d'Arco a year later Frezzolini instead bent Verdi to her will, eliciting an aria much more in keeping with her characteristic style. This conclusion may not appeal to late twentieth-century historians as much as did, some years ago, the notion of Frezzolini's voice prodding Verdi to innovation, to an anticipation of his later works, because it requires us to relinquish (or at least soften) the picture of Verdi as a proto-modernist in Lombardi. But if, by elevating Frezzolini in this way, we sacrifice some certainty about where to locate Verdi's voice, we may gain something equally valuable: a sense of multiple voices—some of them female—speaking through Verdi's music.

NOTES
This is an expanded version of a paper read at the conference "Performing Verdi," Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London in July 1995.

1. This image of the composer's spirit flowing through the singer's veins suggest that performers function as mediums, whose principal task is to "channel" the composer's intentions, without adding creative input of their own. Suzanne Cusick has subjected this


5 Her last concert is usually thought to have been a recital at the Salle Corneille (Paris), where she sang the mad scene from I puritani and excerpts from Rigoletto and La traviata with piano accompaniment. However, Frezzolini may have continued to perform almost up to her death in 1884: in an 1883 letter, she writes that, although she had no intention of performing on her current trip to Italy, she has been deluged with offers, one of which was too tempting to refuse. Letter to Luigi Ronzi, 14 August 1883; Piancastelli Collection, Biblioteca Comunale, Forlì.

6 Frezzolini’s stock market misfortunes are reported in John Rosselli, Singers of Italian Opera (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 173.


9 “Il suo trillo è inarrivabile; ha una agilità senza pari, e generalmente per far udire la sua bravura di canto peccare in fioriture, in gruppetti, in trilli, cose che piacevano nel secolo passato, ma non nel 1847. Noi italiani non siamo assuefatti a questo genere; e, se la Lind venisse in Italia, abbandonerebbe quella mania che ha per gli abb出境imenti e canterebbe semplice, avendo la voce eguale e pieghevole per sostenere una frase alla maniera della Frezzolini.” Letter of 16 June 1847, ed. Luigi Agostino Garibaldi, Giuseppe Verdi nelle lettere di Emanuele Muzio ad Antonio Barezzi (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1931): 329.

10 “[S]ie jetzt an der Spitze der neu-italienischen Sängerpartei steht, welche einen ausdrucksvoller dramatischen Gesang herbeizuführen und an die Stelle blossen Kunsftigkeit karaktervolle Wahrheit zu setzen sich bemüht.” Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, No. 27 (July 1841): 530.

11 The article begins: “Today we will consider one of the artists who represents the new Italian school. Frezzolini, the bass Ronconi, and Antonio Poggi [...] comprise a trio that I would call revolutionary and that personifies that young dramatic school whose popularity now extends throughout musical Europe, that is to say, wherever there is singing. Revue et gazette musicale, 19 July 1841.

The piece sparked a vitriolic exchange between tenor Napoleon Moriani and the journal’s editor. While Moriani’s primary concern is the personal slight of his omission from this pantheon, he also takes time to criticize Frezzolini, rating almost all the leading sopranos of the day above her. He criticizes her performances in Lucrezia Borgia and Norma in scathing terms, and concludes that “the celebrated [Felice] Romani was not mistaken to praise her performance in Beatrice [di] Tenda, the only opera in which she displayed any talent, since it was the work that her teachers had chosen to launch her career.” Letter of 23 August 1841, Museo teatrale alla Scala, Collezione Autografi #3643.

12 The full passage concerning Frezzolini reads: “Mme. Frezzolini a eu un tort, selon nous, c’est d’avoir changé de style et de manière un peu trop tard; elle veut imiter Mme. Persiani, et ce n’est pas son genre; le chant expressif, le chant spianato avec ses vibrations qui vont à l’âme, est le seul qui convienne à son organisation, son caractère, à sa nature tantôt ardente, tantôt mélancolique, mais assurément fort peu légère. Qu’elle revienne bien vite au style qui lui a valu ses plus beaux triomphes et elle peut espérer de retrouver parmi nous le succès d’autrefois.” Review of I puritani, Théâtre Italien, La France musicale, 4 December 1853.

13 “[N]egli spartiti non appositamente per lei composti ella non vi trae giuad ad un sincero plauso se non nelle varianti o nelle fioriture da essa introdotte, e le quali pur troppo ad oggetto di piacervi e costretta ad ogni istante innestare. Traete alla mente Beatrice di Tenda, ricordatevi Lucrezia Borgia, e rammentate con precisione la esecutrice e gli applausi che le impartivano: vedrete che, salvo poche eccezioni, ogni plauso susseguiva un passo che nello spartito non è scritto.” “Dell’organo vocale della signora Frezzolini. Pensieri,” Gazzetta musicale di Milano, 8 March 1848, 78.

In an 1840 letter to the Florentine impresario, Alessandro Lanari, the tenor Napoleon Moriani reported the same flaws in a Vienna performance of Beatrice di Tenda: “La Frezzolini [...] ha piaciuto molto solo trovano che fa troppo uso di suoni acuti e che vuol fare uso del trillo mentre è mancante.” [La Frezzolini was very well received, but it was thought that she relied too heavily on high notes and that she added trills where none were written.] Letter of 5 April 1840 in Marcello de Angelis, Le carte del impresario. Melodramma e costume teatrali nell’Ottocento (Florence: Sansoni, 1982), 215.

14 R’s accusations are perhaps supported by a letter from Frezzolini to her teacher Pietro Romani, written just before her departure for her first season in Russia, in which she asks him to rush her the “abbellimenti” he is writing for her for Sonnambula and Beatrice, since these are the first two operas in her repertory in St. Petersburg (15 September 1847; Museo teatrale alla Scala, Collezione Casati #457).

15 “La Frezzolini ha troppo buon senso per non comprendere che tutta la sua esecuzione di quell’aria affettuosa, toccante, e quanto di abbellimento e canterebbe semplice, avendo la voce eguale e pieghevole per sostenere una frase alla maniera della Frezzolini.”
Verdi Sings Erminia Frezzolini

“Dell’organo vocale della signora Frezzolini,” 78. In fact, Beatrice's *rondo finale* (conceived for and created by Giuditta Pasta) is quite florid, even as notated, raising the suspicion that "R." may be mistaking or deliberately exaggerating the extent of Frezzolini's interpolations.

16 The full passage reads: "E tal passo non applaudivasi perché fosse migliore dell’originale, e meno ancora per retribuire il genio inventivo dell’artista nelle varianti, no: perche, e giustamente, il Pubblico milanese abborre generalmente delle varianti: egli era solo perché tale passo, adattato con fina intelligenza alla specialità de’ mezzi dell’esecutrice, faceva spiccare le più belle note del suo organo.” “Dell’organo vocale,” 78.

17 In fact, Verdi transposed the cabaletta of this final aria down a tone, from G to F, judging the original version to be too tiring for Frezzolini. In a letter to her husband, Antonio Poggi, concerning a proposed revision in *I Lombardi* for the July 1843 production in Senigallia, Verdi wrote, "I plan to put in F the last spurt of the *finale secondo*, just where it goes into the major mode...It seems to me that it will become less tiring and more powerful because all those high B’s would become A’s, and that note is extremely effective for Signora Erminia." (Letter of 30 May 1843, quoted in Lawton and Rosen, “Verdi’s Non-Definitive Revisions,” 197-8) In light of descriptions of Frezzolini’s voice in reviews and the music she specialized in, it seems likely that the problem was not simply a higher tessitura, but the fact that the *Lombardi* cabaletta requires the soprano to sing in this high range loudly and with considerable force over a sustained period, while what Frezzolini excelled in was delicate, pianissimo high notes.

18 This conclusion is supported by the emphasis on the naturalness and dignity of Frezzolini’s acting style in the reviews quoted by Roger Parker (*Studies in Early Verdi*, 155-7).

19 Verdi had admired Frezzolini’s voice since hearing her at La Scala in 1841, after which he wrote to Giuseppe Maldele that “[in *Beatrice*] Frezzolini aroused rapture, and rightly so.” (4 April 1841; quoted in Roger Parker, “Introduction” to the Critical Edition of *Nabucco, Works of Giuseppe Verdi* [Chicago and London; Milan: University of Chicago Press and Ricordi, 1987], xiv.) That Verdi was well-acquainted with Frezzolini’s vocal abilities before beginning to compose *Giovanna D’Arco* is made especially clear by the passage quoted in Note 17. Even after Frezzolini was beset with vocal problems, Verdi continued to speak highly of her, writing to Vincenzo Flauto in 1849 of his hope that Frezzolini and the baritone De Bassini could be secured for the “two magnificent roles” in the opera he proposed to write on the subject of Hugo’s *Le Roi S’amuse* (this is the first reference to the opera that would become *Rigoletto*); 7 September 1849, *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Commissione esecutiva per le onoranze a Giuseppe Verdi nel primo centenario della nascita, 1913), 84-5.

20 One reviewer of the premiere even noted a resemblance between Giovanna’s cavatina and the slow movement of Lucrezia’s: “The first movement is an andante in A major in the style of the cavatina from *Lucrezia Borgia*...” [Il primo tempo è un andante in la maggior del genere della cavatina della *Lucrezia Borgia*...]. G. Vitali, “Critica melodrammatica: Giovanna d’Arco,” *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 2 March 1845.

21 Letter from Muzio to Baretti, 29 December 1844; Garibaldi, 179; quoted in Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 1: 206.

22 “Sa voix de médium est un peu voilée et fatiguée; mais ses notes du haut sont très-belles et très-pures. Peut-être en abuse-t-elle un peu; elle multipie les traits les plus brillants et les plus difficiles; elle altere un peu quelquefois le caractère d’un morceau qu’elle interprète. Mais il est vrai de dire qu’elle a du jet, de la portée, de l’élan, et qu’elle met de l’âme jusque dans ses vocalises.” Fiorentino, *Les grands guignols* (Paris: M. Levy frères, 1870/1872), 189

23 “C’est avec amertume que nous voyons notre plaisir trouble, quand de si beaux roles sont massacrés et la plupart du temps, escamotés: Mme. Frezzolini ayant pour habitude de passer les endroits que son gosier refuse si souvent de chanter, quand ce n’est pas son caprice qui s’y oppose.” The author’s signature is illegible, but may read “M. Bris.” The letter probably refers to the 1862 season, when Frezzolini returned to the Italian for a single season after several years of performing in New York and Havana and one year of complete rest, although the author’s reference to Rosina Penco’s performances in *Trovatore* (which he prefers to Frezzolini’s) raises the possibility that it dates from 1855-6. Dossier d’artiste (Erminia Frezzolini), Bibliothèque de l’Opéra, Paris.


25 Escudier’s nostalgic remarks on the Puritani quartet are found in the same review that compares Frezzolini unfavorably with that other icon of the mid-1830s bel canto style, Fanny Persiani; *La France musicale*, 4 December 1853 (see n.12).


28 Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress* (New York: New American Library, 1984; originally published 1869), 245-6. Martin Chusid has suggested to me an alternative explanation for the apparently cruel and unusual behavior of the Naples audience: that Twain, unschooled in Italian opera-going habits, misunderstood the enthusiastic shouts of “bis” that accompanied Frezzolini’s repeated curtain calls as hissing.

29 “Io non ho mai potuto comparire in iscena senza risentire una estrema e penosa e insieme dolce emozione; ma questa sensazione dispare subito. M’immedesimo nella mia parte, e, sino alla fine del primo atto, il pubblico non esiste più a miei occhi. Io canto per me, e la sala potrebbe vuotarsi interamente che, per mio piacer continuare a farne un successo, e se gli altri e l’orchestra volessero continuare con me la rappresentazione.” Undated obituary (1884), Piancastelli Collection, Biblioteca Comunale, Forli.

30 Pierluigi Petrobelli has suggested to me that the style of the *Lombardi* aria might also be attributed to the sacred character of its text: in contrast to Giovanna d’Arco’s cavatina and several other *preghiere* in Verdi that adopt the situation of prayer but not the specific words, and are often in a florid style, the text of Giselda’s aria is much closer to that of an actual prayer.