Appendix (Verdi and Tannhäuser)

Marcello Conati

Centro Internazionale di Ricerca sui Periodici Musicali

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf

Part of the Musicology Commons

Recommended Citation

Conati, Marcello (2001) "Appendix (Verdi and Tannhäuser)," Verdi Forum: No. 28, Article 7.
Available at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss28/7
Appendix (Verdi and Tannhäuser)

Abstract
A postscript to Conati's article, "Verdi vs. Wagner," in Verdi Forum 26-27.

Keywords
Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Tannhäuser, Léon Escudier

This article is available in Verdi Forum: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss28/7
Appendix (Verdi and Tannhäuser)

Marcello Conati

In my essay “Verdi vs. Wagner,” which appeared in Verdi Forum 26-27, with regard to the Parisian premiere of Wagner’s Tannhäuser at the Opéra on 13 March 1861 I commented:

The failure of Tannhäuser at the Opéra (only three performances) had been the cause of endless discussions. Verdi, kept in Italy by political obligations, was informed of it not only by the press (particularly the Gazzetta musicale di Milano, which gave ample room to the event), but also by his publisher, Escudier. It was in fact Giuseppina Strepponi who pressed for “the most exact news.” We do not know how seriously Verdi took Escudier’s report, which dwelled on superficial observations filled with anecdotes, such as the one of an officer on duty at the theater: “Sir, I fought in the Crimean War, I fought in the Italian war, I was at Solferino, and I never trembled; well, sir, this music frightens me, and I am leaving.”

In reality, we do now know “how seriously Verdi took Escudier’s report.” This point in my essay indeed attracted the attention of J. Rigbie Turner, Mary Flagler Cary Curator of Music Manuscripts and Books at the Pierpont Morgan Library, who with unsurpassed kindness and courtesy (for which I cannot find sufficient words to express my gratitude), sent me a photocopy of a letter of Verdi’s dated 22 March 1861 (probably unpublished), which contains a response to Escudier’s letter of 14 March. Turner accompanied his missive with the following suggestion: “Perhaps you would like to publish it in a future issue of the Verdi Forum?” His suggestion compels me to make Verdi’s letter known here, preceded, for greater clarity, by the text of Léon Escudier’s communication. First, however, I shall review some circumstances surrounding Verdi’s activities in those early days of the new Kingdom of Italy.

Upon the explicit request of Count Cavour (10 January 1861) the composer agreed – albeit reluctantly – to become a candidate for the constituency of Borgo S. Donnino (today Fidenza) in the elections of the first Italian Parliament. He succeeded in winning in the second round (3 February); ten days later (18 February) he went to Turin with his wife to be sworn into office. Meanwhile, after a long siege, on 13 February the Piedmontese army forced the surrender of the city of Gaeta, where the Bourbon Francis II had taken refuge, thus putting an end to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. One month later (17 March) Verdi participated in the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy under the sovereignty of Victor Emanuel II, and on 27 March – five days after Escudier’s letter – he participated in the proclamation of Rome (at that time still under papal rule, overseen by the ironclad protection of the French army) as capital of Italy.

But in the meantime, another important event had occurred, this one of a strictly artistic nature: at the end of December 1860 Verdi had received an invitation from St. Petersburg (through the tenor Enrico Tamberlick) to write an opera for the Imperial Theater. In January he accepted this invitation provisionally, pending receipt of the terms of the contract. The opera was to be La forza del destino. Verdi did not mention this prospect in his letter to Escudier; instead, he referred to the possibility, however much hypothetical, of writing for the Paris Opéra. But it would be four years later, in summer 1865, before this possibility would begin to take shape – and then the opera would be Don Carlos.

Escudier’s letter to Verdi

Paris, 14 March 1861

Dear master and friend,[,]

I want to be the first to tell you about the failure – French style, colossal failure – that Mr. Wagner has just had with his Tannhäuser [sic]. This phenomenal opera was presented at the Opéra yesterday evening. Everything I could tell you would be less than the truth. Throughout the performance, which the Emperor attended, the entire theater, except for a few Prussian and Austrian bootmakers, roared with laughter, then cried “hush.” and finally boooed. There was a quite curious scene. The wife of the ambassador from Austria, who brought to us in Paris the performance of Tannhäuser, was in her box with her husband, her secretaries, etc. She called notice to herself through the offensiveness of her applause. In the middle of a piece that seemed never to end, the entire audience turned toward the Austrian box and unanimously brought down both the ridiculous patron of Mr. Wagner and at the same time his music, which is a true hoax; this musical machine called Tannhäuser, has caused those who have had the misfortune of seeing it to suffer fits of hysteria and attacks of deafness.

Here is a story, which I tell you in truth, for it happened in front of my very eyes. In the third act they had been listening impassively to a series of recitatives in this “burlesque” opera and boredom had spread through the hall to
such a degree that they were feeling generally quite ill at ease. Then Mlle Sax, dressed all in white, appears; the recitatives cease; Mlle Sax performs the functions of an old telegraph for twenty-five minutes; she expresses with gestures what her soul feels. The orchestra accompanies this unending psalmody, making them feel even more ill at ease than before; for it seems to drip into the ears like small drops of molten lead. Suddenly the officer on duty, who had been listening from his box beside me, without flinching at this ferruginous intoning arises and says to me: «SIR, I FOUGHT IN THE CRIMEAN WAR, I FOUGHT IN THE ITALIAN WAR, I WAS AT SOLFERINO, AND I NEVER TREMBLED; WELL, SIR, THIS MUSIC FRIGHTENS ME, AND I AM LEAVING.»

He leaves in fact, and for sure he will not return on those days when they perform Tannhauser, if they continue to play it, which seems quite unlikely.

My god, what a German purgative they wanted the audience to swallow! Fortunately it was too bitter and digestion was realized by hisses.

Consequently we are rid of a madman, who fancied that music could be made with impunity without even the semblance of melody: he had made enough noise: we really gave it back to him at yesterday's performance.

I know, my dear master, that you are very busy with the Chamber and you do not need to be asked to write to me, but I would be pleased to receive a few lines from Madame Verdi. My wife was quite moved by the lovely letter [your wife] wrote to her and she charges me to thank her.

The Director of the Opéra Comique keeps after me to ask you if you would like to compose a three-act work on a good poem for next winter. I am hereby acquitting myself of my commission.

Everything proceeds well, I believe, for Italy, and I hope that soon the wishes of all the friends of freedom will be realized.

A good drama has played here — L‘ange de la nuit, which would make a magnificent opera. If you don't have it in Turin, I will send it to you.

I beseech you to give my best wishes to your lovely wife and to permit me to shake your hand from afar, until I have the pleasure of doing so in person. ....

Verdi's response to Escudier

Dear Léon,

Turin, 22 March 1861

Very true what you tell me about Wagner's fiasco and about the business with the lady ambassador from Austria, but the little story of the official who did not tremble in the Crimean War or at Solferino but was afraid of Wagner's music you made up, right? Besides that story is graceful and witty as yours always are, and I laughed for half an hour. — I am moreover displeased that Tannhauser [sic] was not liked, for otherwise I would have come to hear it and to learn how to write music of the future. What big beautiful words and what pretentious nonsense! But without making a fuss and sermonizing on the present, the future, the past, isn't it better to write music as it comes from the mind and the heart, and to let the public judge it as it will? The puffing and the hoaxes of these grand apostles of art are so disgusting that almost — just almost — it would become odious, if the audience did not give them their due from time to time. I have never seen a note of Wagner's [music], but I have read his drama. By God, I have never come across such a silly thing! When my grandmother was three years old, she told me fables, which were a thousand times more interesting —

You invite me to write for the Opéra Comique! — My dear Léon, I have no wish to compose, and in the event I did wish to write for Paris, I would prefer the Opéra; but I would want the Opéra to be managed my way, and I would want to write as I feel. Given the way that institution is organized, we will never come to an agreement; and that is probably better both for me and for the Opéra. Besides, it is not necessary to promise anything; — if a year ago, anyone had predicted that now I would be a Deputy I would have bet them my entire fortune... You see!! Let's not swear to anything then, and let's see.

About politics, you know as much as I. May Heaven be willing that the Emperor pull his troops from Rome quickly, and before affairs in Naples become troubled. If we can go to Rome soon, everything will be done, and then it will be possible truly to sing "Hosanna."

Goodbye my dear Léon, and wish me well. Peppina salutes you, your wife, and your children, and again I say goodbye. 

Notes
2. Franco Abbiati, Giuseppe Verdi (Milan: Ricordi, 1959), 3:625; the letter bears the date "Petersburg, 11-23 December 1860."
4. Paris, 14 mars 1861
Cher maître et ami
Je veux être le premier à vous annoncer le four, style français, four colossal que vient de faire M'. Wagner avec son Tannhauser [sic]. C'est hier soir qu'il a représenté ce phénoménal opéra. Tout ce que je pourrais vous dire serait au dessous de la vérité. Pendant toute la représentation à laquelle assistait l'Empereur la salle entière, à part quelques bottiers
prussiens et autrichiens, a ri aux éclats, puis chuté, puis enfin sifflé. Il y a eu une scène assez curieuse. Mme l'ambassadrice d'Autriche, qui nous a valu l'exécution du Tannhäuser [sic] à Paris était dans sa loge avec M. l'ambassadeur, ses secrétaires etc. Elle se faisait distinguer par l'importu-
tence de ses applaudissements. Au milieu d'un morceau qui n'en finissait pas, tout le public s'est tourné vers la loge autrichienne et a chuté unanimement et la protectrice ridicule de Mr. Wagner et à la fois sa musique qui est une véritable mystification, cette machine musicale, qui a nom Tannhäuser [sic], et a exposés ceux qui auraient eu le malheur de la voir fonctionner à des crises nerveuses et à des accès de surdité.

Voici une anecdote, que je vous donne pour vraie, car c'est sous mes yeux qu'elle s'est passée. On avait écouté impas-siblement au 3ème acte une série de récitatifs dans ce burlesque opéra et l'ennui s'était repandu dans la salle à un tel degré qu'on se sentait généralement très mal à l'aise. Enfin Mlle Sax, toute de blanc vêtue apparaiti, les récitatifs cessent, Mlle Sax remplit pendant vingt-cinq minutes les fonctions d'un vieux télégaphiste; elle exprime par des gestes ce qui son âme ressent. L'orchestre accompagne cette interminable psalmodie: on se sent plus mal à l'aise que jamais, il semble qu'on vous infiltrer par petites gouttes du plomb fondu dans les oreilles. Tout à coup l'officier de service, qui avait écouté à côté de moi dans sa stalles et sans sourciller cette psalmodie ferrugineuse se leve et me dit: «MONSIEUR, J'AI FAIT LA GUERRE DE CRIMÉE, J'AI FAIT LA GUERRE D'ITALIE, J'AI ÉTÉ À SOLLERINO, JE N'AI JAMAIS TREMBLÉ, ET BIEN, MONSIEUR, CETTE MUSIQUE ME FAIT PEUR ET JE M'EN VAIS ».

Il partit en effet, et à coup sûr il ne reviendra pas les jours où on jouera Tannhäuser [sic], si on continue à le jouer, ce qui me semble très douteux.

Quelle purge allemande, mon dieu, on a voulu faire avaler au public! Heureusement elle a été trop amère et la digestion s'est traduite par des sifflets.

Nous voilà donc debarrassés d'un fou, qui s'imaginait qu'on pouvait impunément faire de la musique sans même l'apparence de mélodie: il avait fait assez de bruit: on le lui a bien rendu à la représentation d' hier.

Je sais, mon cher maître, que vous êtes très occupé à la Chambre et qu'il ne faut pas vous demander de m'écrire, mais je voudrais bien recevoir quelques lignes de Mme Verdi. Ma femme a été très sensible à la bonne lettre qu'elle lui a écrite et me charge de l'en remettre.

Le directeur de l'Opéra Comique me tourment pour que je vous demande si vous voudriez écrire pour l'hiver prochain un ouvrage en trois actes sur un beau poème. Je m'acquitterai de ma commission.

Tout marche bien, je crois, pour l'Italie, et nous verrons, j'espère, bientôt, les vœux de tous les amis de la liberté réalisés.

On a joué ici un beau drame Lange de la nuit, qui ferait un magnifique opéra. Si vous ne l'avez pas à Turin, je vous l'enverrai.

Je vous prie de faire bien nes amities à cette excellente Mme Verdi et permettez-vous de vous servir la main à distance, en attendant que j'ait le bonheur de le faire de près.

4. The letter is in the William McFarlane Collection, on deposit at the Pierpont Morgan Library. It is published here with the permission of J. Rigbie Turner from the library. The editors are grateful to J. Rigbie Turner for providing a reproduction of the first page of the letter and granting permission to publish it on the front cover of this issue.

Caro Leon

Torino 22 Marzo 1861

Verissimo quanto mi dite intorno al fiasco di Wagner: verissimo dell'affare dell'ambasciatrice d'Austria, ma la storiella dell'uffiziale che non ha tremato né in Crimea, né a Sollerino e che ha avuto paura della musica di Wagner è di vostra invenzione: non è vero? Del resto la storiella è graziosa e spiritosa come le dite sempre, ed ho riso per mezz'ora. — Sono per altro dispiacente che il Tannhäuser [sic] non abbia piacciono, perchè altrimenti sarei venuto a sentirlo, ed imparare come si fa a far musica dell'avvenire. Che belle parolone! e quanta blague! Ma senza far tanto fraccaso e predicare il presente, l'avvenire, il passato, non è meglio scrive musica come viene dalla mente e dal cuore, e lasciare che il pubblico la giudichi come vuole? Sono tanto schifose le reclames, e le blagues di questi grandi apostoli dell'arte, che quasi quasi la farebbero divertar odiosa, se non si vedesse di tratto in tratto dal pubblico fatta qualche grande giustizia. Non ho mai visto una nota di Wagner, ma ho letto il suo dramma. Per Dio non mi è mai capitata una bambocciatina simile! Quando aveva tre anni mia nonna mi raccontava delle fole, che avevano mille volte più interesse.

Voi mi invitaste a scrivere per l'Opera Comique! — Mio caro Leon non ho voglia di scrivere, e qualora volessi scrivere per Parigi, amerei meglio l'Opéra; ma vorrei l'Opéra retta in modo mio, e vorrei scrivere come sento io. Come quello stabilimento è organizzato, non c'interesseremo mai; ed è meglio forse per me, e per l'Opéra. Del resto non bisogna giurare di nulla: — se un'anno mi avessero predetto che ora sarei Deputato avrei promessa tutta la mia fortuna... Voi lo vedete!! Non giuriamo dunque [sic] di nulla e vediamo.

Di politica ne saprete quanto me. Voglia il cielo che l'imperatore ritiri presto le truppe da Roma, e prima che si sotterbino le cose di Napoli. Se noi possiamo andare a Roma presto, tutto è finito, ed allora si potrà veramente cantare Osvana.

Addio mio caro Leon, e vogliatemi bene. La Peppina saluta voi, e vostra moglie ed i figli, ed io vi dico ancora addio.

Translated by ROBERTA M. MARVIN