

1-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

Parker, Roger (1991) "Abstract: Revising the Revision: Some Thoughts on 'La forza del destino,'" *Verdi Forum*: No. 19, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss19/8>

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# Abstract: Revising the Revision: Some Thoughts on 'La forza del destino'

## **Abstract**

Abstract for a paper given at a joint meeting of the American Institute for Verdi Studies and the Greater New York Chapter of the American Musicological Society, Feb. 2, 1991.

## **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi, La forza del destino, compositional process

## Abstract\*: Revising the Revision: Some Thoughts on *La forza del destino*

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My paper concerns Verdi's *La forza del destino* (first performed in St. Petersburg in 1862), and specifically an aspect of that work that contributes interestingly to its already formidable "textuality": the revisions Verdi made to the opera during the later 1860's. The business of composers returning to already finished works in order to revise them seems at present a peculiarly interesting one, in that it

engages an intersection of two seemingly irreconcilable traditional tropes, in which are embedded two irreconcilable covert value judgments. The first is that a "great" composer is one who manages most completely to determine every aspect of his creation, to wed every detail to some *gestalt*. The second -- which is especially prevalent in writings on nineteenth-century Italian opera, a period

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\* Presented at joint meeting of AIVS and the Greater New York Chapter of AMS, Feb. 2, 1991

typically described as a painful climb up the muddy slope toward responsible musical drama -- is that composers tend to mature artistically as their careers unfold; that, to put it more modishly, the external narrative of the composer's life is governed by some hidden narrative of progress toward an aesthetic ideal. So what happens when a composer such as Verdi returns to a work later in life?

The nice dilemma that revisions pose is typically dealt with very easily. We tend to read earlier versions as in some way "defective", and consequently "improved" by the composer now grown wise with the passage of years; the strategy (well known to those who enjoy pouring over composers' sketches and rejected fragments) turns out to be the standard way of dealing with what we might call this surplus of

authorial signature. However, in the case of *La forza del destino*, I will argue that such attitudes nest uncomfortably with the musical evidence, and that the extent and nature of Verdi's revision may even cause us to revise some basic features of our interpretative models for an operatic work. Though departing from and returning to the changes Verdi made to the final scene, my journey through *La forza* will be circuitous, and even so will leave most of the opera gaping in its wake. But by pressing on the business of Verdi's revision, by stressing the opera's unnerving surplus, I hope to make room for conclusions that can reflect in critical terms on some of the changing attitudes that are at present crowding into musicological discourse.