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Roberta Montemorra Marvin  
*University of Iowa*

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# The "Introduction" to The Great Operas (1899): A Verdian Manifesto?

## **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi

## The “Introduction” to *The Great Operas* (1899): A Verdian Manifesto?<sup>1</sup>

Roberta Montemorra Marvin

A book titled *The Great Operas: The Romantic Legends upon which the Masters of Song have Founded their Famous Lyrical Compositions*, edited by James W. Buel, was published in the late 1890s by The Société Universelle Lyrique and issued in Philadelphia, London, Paris, and Berlin as a testimonial to Verdi.<sup>2</sup> The volume bears a dedication that reads:

To Giuseppe Verdi This Edition of The Great Operas is Dedicated as a fitting memorial of the loving regard and lofty appreciation of the whole civilized world, not only for His Masterly Contributions to Musical Art, but also for his Philanthropic spirit manifested by the Founding and Munificent Endowment of two Splendid Homes, in Milan and Villa Nuova [*sic*], Italy, for aged and indigent musicians. The Publishers.

Of greater importance, on its title page this publication boasts “introduced by Giuseppe Verdi.” In the volume consulted for this study (issued in London), this introduction consists of a typeset Italian text and English translation, and a facsimile endorsement and signature in what appears clearly to be Verdi’s hand.<sup>3</sup> (See Figures 1 and 2, p. 33 below.)

The introduction is included below in the published English translation (column 1), my literal translation (column 2, except for the excerpt from Milton), and the original Italian (column 3).

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<sup>1</sup> A different version of this essay was published as Appendix D in my *Verdi the Student – Verdi the Teacher* (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2010). There I neglected to mention that *The Great Operas*, and Verdi’s connection to it, was first noticed and discussed by Marcello Conati in “Bibliografia verdiana: Aspetti, problemi, criteri per la sistemazione della letteratura verdiana,” *Atti del III° congresso internazionale di studi verdiani, Milano, 1972* (Parma: Istituto di Studi Verdiani, 1974): 546-550; I thank Prof. Conati for bringing his work to my attention.

<sup>2</sup> The verso of the title page of the exemplar consulted for the present study (GB-Lbl L.R.409.ff.4, published in London) contains the following information: “Copyrighted, Washington, U.S.A. by James W. Buel[,] 1899[.] Entered at Stationers’ Hall, London, England[.] All rights reserved[.]” The book contains only English text beyond the Italian and English introduction discussed below. The edition discussed by Conati (“Bibliografia,” 546) was listed in the *Jahrbuch für die Musikbibliothek Peters* (published 1900, dated 1899): he believes it was published no later than 1897, based on a notice he located in the Leipzig *Signale für die musikalische Welt*, 19 October 1897, p. 745 (*ibid.*, 547) and a letter from the composer Pietro Mascagni, dated 16 June 1897, and published in the Leipzig journal (*ibid.*). Conati’s exemplar contains an introduction in English, French, and Italian (*ibid.*).

Beyond these two different editions, the publication was issued at various times in different limited “editions,” e.g., “Verdi,” “Superba” “Educational,” with varying numbers of volumes but the same substantive content, although with varying numbers of illustrative plates. Several editions were consulted for the present study: the main GB-Lbl copy is a five-volume “Educational Edition,” which contains an inscription page that reads: “This copy of *The Great Operas* was manufactured expressly for Mrs. James H. Clark, Jr. and attests her honorary membership in the Societe [*sic*] Universelle Lyrique as one of the original signers of America’s testimonial to the Immortal Master Giuseppe Verdi for Presentation to Italy in Grateful acknowledgement [*sic*] of his services and influence in promoting the permanent recognition of the higher culture and Lyric Drama in this Country.” Another copy of the “Educational Edition,” consulted in The University of Iowa Special Collections contains a tipped-in page with the same text, except for the name of the purchaser, who was Martha W. Ranney.

<sup>3</sup> The English text appears on pp. 1-2 of the book, the Italian on pp. 3-4. The English text bears only Verdi’s signature (on p. 2), while the Italian is followed by the facsimile endorsement and signature (p. 4).

The pursuit of education may not be confined to the acquisition of book-knowledge, for in its true and higher sense education is elevation of the moral and intellectual perceptions, instigating to those lofty aims that lead to all the pleasurable attainments imagination pictures. Babbling brooks and hedge choristers have voices that teach scarcely less effectively receptive and contemplative minds than does the most learned preceptor, for song is the universal language of aspiration, which begets the master artisan who builds the splendid castles of our dreams.

The first invocation was the ejaculation, "Oh God!" The human ear, however, was quick to catch the sweet harmonies that welled from warblers of the woods, and by these our primitive progenitors were taught to chant their orisons:

*"With heavenly touch of  
instrumental sound  
In full harmonic number  
joined, their songs  
Divide the night, and lift our  
thoughts to heaven."*

Music and poetry are arts that appeal to heart and soul, stirring the savage to manifestations of ecstasy [sic], as well as moving with feelings of delight the most cultured and refined. In this respect music is the art of arts, the alphabet and the science, the incentive and the crown of that education which is the surest promotive of good

Education is not only the culture acquired from books, but in its truest sense it is the elevation of moral and intellectual perceptions, the incitement to a higher goal leading to those pleasurable acquisitions that entice the imagination. The babbling brooks and the hedge choruses have voices that teach receptive and contemplative minds and the most gifted tutor equally effectively, since song is the universal language of aspiration, which generates the most splendid castles of our dreams.

The first invocation was the cry "Oh God!" The human ear, however, was quick to seize the sweet harmonies that came from the warblers of the woods, and by way of these came to teach our ancestors to sing their orations:

*"With heavenly touch of  
instrumental sound  
In full harmonic number  
joined, their songs  
Divide the night, and lift our  
thoughts to heaven."*

Music and poetry are arts that appeal to the heart, stirring the savage to ecstatic displays, just as they evoke feelings of delight in the most refined. In this respect, music is the art of all arts, the alphabet and the science, the incentive and the crown of that education that promotes patriotism and pleasure in mankind.

L'educazione non è soltanto una coltura acquisita dai libri, ma è nel senso più vero l'elevazione delle percezioni morali ed intellettuali, l'istigazione a una meta più elevata conducente a quelle acquisizioni piacevoli con ch  viene lusingata l'immaginazione. I ruscelli romorosi ed i canti delle siepi hanno voci che insegnano con altrettanta efficacia alle menti ricettive e contemplative, quanto il pi  dotto precettore, perch  il canto   la lingua universale, dell'aspirazione, che genera i splendidi castelli dei nostri sogni.

La prima invocazione   stato il grido di "O Dio!" L'orecchio umano si affrett  per  di afferrare le dolci armonie che venivano dai cantori dei boschi, e per mezzo di questi venne insegnato ai nostri progenitori di cantare le loro orazioni:

*"Coll'espandersi di divini  
suoni musicali  
Uniti in ritmo armonico, I loro  
canti  
Dividono la notte ed innalzano  
le nostre menti al ciel."*

La musica e la poesia sono arti che fanno appello al cuore, movendo il selvaggio a manifestazioni estatiche, come muovano i pi  colti a sentimenti di delizia. Da questo lato, la musica   l'arte di tutte le arti, l'alfabeto e la scienza, l'incentivo e la corona di quell'educazione che promuove il patriottismo ed il diletto dell'uomo.

citizenship, as well as of enjoyment.

The story-writer has been the greatest contributor to the world's entertainment, but the song-writer has added most to the world's pleasure; the two conjoining their talents have had immeasurable influence in elevating and refining all peoples, and hence all nations. National hymns have powerfully re-enforced national armies, for they may be said to be not merely stimulative, but creators of patriotism. Religion is not less benefited by psalmody, and the domestic hearth is made dearer to us by songs in the family circle.

The supreme type of music is the opera, because it represents the marriage of story and song, a union of those twin arts which approach so nearly the divine, a veritable apostrophe of that poetic sentiment which we feel in the stillness of isolation, and which burns with fiercer glow under the thrilling serenade of the grand concert. Opera is quite as dependent upon story as upon music, and while the ear is always pleased with sweet sounds, a proper appreciation of opera is not possible without a knowledge of the tale which it unfolds by song. It has, therefore, been a matter of much surprise that the music-loving people of all countries have given so little study to the tales of the operas which have pleased them. True, it is, librettos are always on sale, but as a rule they are so little regarded that it is

The short-story writer has contributed more than any other to the public's amusement, but the composer has rendered the greatest pleasures; the genius of both together exerted an immeasurable impact on elevating and refining the People. National hymns have powerfully reinforced armies, for they are not only stimulants but also creators of patriotism. Religion has benefitted no less from psalmody, and in the home song renders the domestic hearth dearer to us.

The supreme type of music is opera, because it represents the union of story and song, the union of two arts that most approach the divine, a veritable apostrophe of that poetic sentiment that we feel in the stillness of solitude. Opera depends on the story as much as on the music, and although the ear may be entertained by sweet sounds, a true appreciation of opera is not possible without knowledge of the subject revealed by the song. It is surprising, therefore, that until this point music lovers of all nations have devoted so little study to the subjects of their favorite operas. Although opera librettos can be purchased, so little attention is paid to them that it is no exaggeration to say only one in ten individuals knows the subjects of the most famous operas.

Lo scrittore di novelle ha contribuito più d'ogni altro alle distrazioni del pubblico, ma il musicista ha reso i maggiori piaceri; i loro due genii uniti hanno avuto una smisurata influenza nell'elevare ed ingentilire i popoli. Gli inni nazionali hanno potentemente rinforzato gli eserciti, perchè non sono soltanto dei stimolanti, ma creatori di patriottismo. La religione non è meno avvantaggiata dalle psalmodie, ed il canto in famiglia ci rende più caro il focolare domestico.

Il tipo supremo della musica è l'opera, perchè rappresentata l'unione del romanzo e del canto, unione di due arti che più si accostano alla divinità, vera apostrofe di quel sentimento poetico che risentiamo nella quiete dell'isolamento. L'opera dipende dal romanzo quanto dalla musica, e quantunque l'orecchio sia accarezzato dai dolci suoni, un vero apprezzamento dell'opera non riesce possibile senza la conoscenza del soggetto rivelato dal canto. È sorprendente perciò che amatori di musica di tutte le nazioni si sieno sin'ora dedicati tanto poco allo studio dei soggetti della *[sic]* opera da essi predilette. Quantunque i libretti delle opere si trovano in vendita, essi sono però tanto poco considerati, che non è esagerazione il dire che un solo individuo in dieci conosca

hardly exaggerating the facts to say scarcely one person in ten is familiar with the stories of the most famous operas.

With much gratification do I therefore hail the publication of THE GREAT OPERAS as a work that supplies an imperative need to cultured persons. I believe this excellent book will be of real value to the whole musical world. The tales herein will be of infinite value by way of cultivating an interest in opera among the masses, for readers thereof will be afforded such pleasure that desire will be created to hear the operatic dramatizations, and thus the holy influence of song and story will be graciously diffused, to the pleasure and benefit of all peoples.

Translation from the Italian.

[*signed*] G Verdi

It is then with true pleasure that I welcome the publication of *The Stories of the Great Operas* as a work that satisfies a pressing need for cultured people. I believe that this excellent book will be of real value to the entire musical world. The tales it contains will have an incalculable value in cultivating in the masses an interest in musical works, for they will increase readers' desires to hear the tales told in music, in such a way that the sacred effect of song and of story will be spread to the pleasure and benefit of all.

I believe that this work will be of real value to the entire musical world. Genoa, 1 March [presumably 1899]

G. Verdi

il soggetto delle più famose opere.

È con vero piacere quindi che accolgo la pubblicazione delle Storie delle Grandi Opere come un lavoro che soddisfa un bisogno imperioso per le persone colte. Io credo che questo libro eccellente abbia un vero valore per tutto il mondo musicale. I racconti che vi si conterranno avranno un valore incalcolabile nel coltivare nelle masse un interesse per le opere musicali, poichè i lettori saranno maggiormente spinti al desiderio di sentire tali racconti musicati, dimodochè la santa influenza del canto e del romanzo verrà estesa al piacere e beneficio di tutti.

[*facsimile endorsement in Verdi's hand*] Io credo che quest'opera abbia un vero valore pel mondo artistico. Genova, 1. Marzo<sup>4</sup>  
[*signed*] G Verdi<sup>5</sup>

It is highly unlikely (as Conati too noted<sup>6</sup>) that Verdi actually wrote the introduction. Its tone is unlike anything he had written during his career, although, if he did write it, he surely would have known before penning the text that it was intended for publication to a broad, general public and thus may have adopted a different "style." Nonetheless, it would have been very much out of character for him to have written something like this, since he routinely shied away from formally expressing ideas such as these in print. The poetry cited in the second paragraph is from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Book IV, ll. 686-688); Dante may well have been a more likely choice for Verdi. It is thus quite plausible that, as Conati suggested, whoever wrote the introduction simply based it on ideas Verdi may have expressed in a letter to Buel.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Conati ("Bibliografia," 550) wrote that the autograph date in the volume he consulted reads "1 Marzo 1896."

<sup>5</sup> The signature following the English translation appears to be an exact reproduction of the one that follows the Italian.

<sup>6</sup> Conati, "Bibliografia," 550.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: "the unknown author of the introduction (almost certainly an Italian) had reiterated a few ideas

Then, there is the autograph endorsement that appears at the end of the introduction. Several scenarios may account for the facsimile endorsement. It is possible Buel sent the introduction to Verdi who signed off on it. Or else, as Conati posited,<sup>8</sup> Buel reproduced the autograph endorsement from a letter he had received from Verdi (perhaps the same one Conati surmised contained ideas that made their way into the introduction). I would suggest as well that if that were the case, Buel certainly solicited the endorsement, and information for the introduction—either directly from Verdi or by way of Ricordi or another business acquaintance—before the book’s publication.

In any event, following the volume’s publication, Verdi thanked and congratulated Buel:

The Ricordi firm has delivered to me the copy of the first part of *The Great Operas*. It is a wonderful and magnificent work worthy of greatest admiration.

Il Comm[ercio] Ricordi m’ha consegnato la copia della 1<sup>a</sup> parte del *The Great Operas*. È un lavoro stupendo, magnifico, degno d’ogni maggiore ammirazione.

I therefore deeply feel the high honor bestowed upon me by the dedication to me of such a work.

Sento quindi maggiormente l’alto onore compartitomi dedicando a me tale opera.

I thank you, dear Mr. Buel, in a special way, and I hope that this marvelous work comes to be admired in the way and to the extent that it merits.

La ringrazio, egregio sig. Buel, in modo speciale ed auguro che questo stupendo lavoro venga ammirato come e quanto merita.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, the introduction aligns with Verdi’s frequently expressed ideas (in letters to colleagues and friends) about the glories of music, the importance of literature, and the noble purposes of combining music and drama. It thus sheds light on what may have been included in a treatise about opera, had Verdi written one.

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contained in a letter from the composer to the publisher of the book”; to my knowledge that letter has not surfaced.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Verdi to Buel (in Philadelphia), without date, in Alessandro Luzio and Giovanni Cesari, eds., *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: S. Ceretti, 1913), 417-418.



*Di*

**Giuseppe Verdi**

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*The Publishers*

Figure 1. Title page

*Io credo che quest' opera  
abbia un vero valore nel  
mondo artistico  
Genova 1. marzo  
G. Verdi*

Figure 2. Verdi's autograph endorsement