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# 166 Years of Verdi Biography

## **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi

## 166 Years of Verdi Biography<sup>1</sup>

Gregory W. Harwood

The long and rich tradition of Verdi biography began in 1846 with the publication of Benedetto Bermani's *Schizzi sulla vita e sulle opere del maestro Giuseppe Verdi*, issued as a supplement (22 Feb.) to the 1846 volume of the publisher Ricordi's house journal, *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*. The composer, who was only thirty-two years old, had already staged eight operas, the last two being *Giovanna d'Arco* (at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 15 Feb. 1845) and *Alzira*, his first opera for Naples (Teatro San Carlo, 12 Aug. 1845); his newest opera, *Attila*, would premiere in Venice in less than a month (Teatro la Fenice, 17 March 1846). Bermani recounts Verdi's early life, emphasizing the composer's familial and cultural background enshrouded in poverty, the providential support of Antonio Barezzi, his patron and future father-in-law; a brief period of uncertain direction working in his hometown; and the composition of his first four operas. The remainder of the *Schizzi* analyzes the young composer's musical style and operas. At this early stage, Bermani does not present Verdi as an innovator or a reformer, but rather as a great talent whose music demonstrated taste, elegance, and an unusually keen instinct for musical-dramatic effect.

From this first publication, Verdi biography developed in several distinct phases, each uniquely shaped by the cultural viewpoints and scholarly methodologies of its time, as well as by the continuously evolving reception history of his works. A strong influence during the earliest phase (which lasted until the composer's death in 1901) was the concept of the artist-hero that was firmly entrenched as an ideological tenet of the Romantic movement. It is therefore not surprising that as Verdi's career developed, early biographies began to portray him as a larger-than-life figure who achieved fame and fortune through the propitious interaction of genius with resolute self-will and dogged perseverance. Verdi's first biographers were naturally inclined to create a sympathetic portrayal since most were relatives, compatriots, or associates of his principal publisher, the Ricordi firm. But most notably, by the 1860s, the composer himself promoted this viewpoint of the artist-hero, actively shaping his public image through direct intervention in several important biographies. Therefore, although nineteenth-century biographical accounts are invaluable for the light they shed on the unfolding of Verdi's career as perceived by himself and by his own contemporaries, they must be approached with an understanding that many statements and anecdotes in them contain elements of bias, hyperbole, and inaccuracy, often purposely crafted for effect.

Giuseppe Demaldè's *Cenni biografici del maestro di musica Giuseppe Verdi*, drafted during the 1840s through the mid-1850s, is roughly contemporary with Bermani, but it was never published until 1976. Demaldè provides details and anecdotes about the

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<sup>1</sup> This is an expanded version of the entry on Verdi biographies, which is forthcoming in *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

composer's early life from the perspective of an older compatriot and personal friend—as the brother-in-law of Antonio Barezzi, he was also Verdi's distant relative through marriage to his patron's daughter, Margherita. Ercole Cavalli's *Cenni biografici del celebre maestro Giuseppe Verdi* provides the perspective of a younger contemporary and friend from the composer's hometown. First issued in Montevideo in 1866 and then in a Spanish translation in Madrid the following year, it bears witness to the composer's growing international reputation in the mid-nineteenth century. Emilio Seletti, a historian of the Busseto area, offers a third survey of the composer's life and career from the perspective of a family friend. In the second volume of *La città di Busseto* (1883), Seletti portrays Verdi as an imposing figure, and his essay transforms the longing expressed by Giuseppe Mazzini's *Filosofia della musica* (1836) into a prophecy fulfilled by Verdi: that a then unknown Italian youth, through genius and inspiration, would create a powerful new pan-European music by successfully synthesizing the Italian school of melody with the Germanic school of harmony.

Abramo Basevi's *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi* was originally issued as a series of articles written for the Florentine music journal *L'armonia*. Compiled as a monograph in 1859, the volume followed the format of Bermani's earlier *Schizzi*, starting with a short biographical section that led to a discussion of the operas, which now numbered twenty-two. Basevi's volume became influential for its discussion of stylistic and formal issues and for its division of Verdi's compositional career into four stylistic periods beginning with *Oberto*, *Luisa Miller*, *La traviata*, and *Simon Boccanegra*, respectively. As Verdi continued to compose the final ten operas that filled out his operatic corpus, later biographers continued dividing his career into stylistic periods; most followed Basevi in using *Luisa Miller* as the first dividing point but they often differed as to where they placed later divisions.

Michele Lessona's *Volere è potere* (1869), a collection of inspirational stories written for the youth of the newly formed Italian nation, firmly associated the composer with the archetype of the Romantic artist-hero. Verdi himself shaped the content and tone of this biography by granting an interview to Lessona in September 1868. Lessona portrays the composer not only as the musical voice of the new nation, but also as one of its leading intellectual figures: a lover of Classical Italian literature by Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso; of Italian art, especially Correggio; and of earlier Italian music by Palestrina and Pergolesi. But above all, Lessona characterizes Verdi as a self-made man who achieved greatness and serenity through sheer force of will, a model for success that the rising generation of young Italians could imitate.

This same Romantic tone prevails in French music critic Arthur Pougin's *Verdi: Histoire anecdotique*. Pougin collected stories to use in his biography from acquaintances of the composer such as Giulio Ricordi, Emanuele Muzio, and Alberto Mazzucato. Although many of the anecdotes contain exaggerations and misinformation, Pougin's approach proved enormously popular, and his biography became the first to achieve wide international circulation. The *Histoire* first appeared in serial form in the Parisian journal *Le ménestrel* (1878), and other serializations soon followed in Germany (*Neue Berliner Musikzeitung*) and Spain (*Cronica de la música*). In 1881, Pougin published the articles as an Italian monograph with substantial new material in footnotes by Jacopo Caponi,

writing under the pen name Folchetto. Verdi placed his imprimatur on this Caponi-Pougin publication by dictating an autobiographical sketch of his early years to Giulio Ricordi in 1876 for inclusion in the volume; this sketch continued to appear in subsequent versions of the biography. For his 1886 publication of the *Histoire anecdotique* as a French monograph, Pougin assimilated Caponi's notes into his main text, and translations of it appeared the following year in England and Germany.

To celebrate the premiere of Verdi's long anticipated *Otello* in 1887, Eugenio Checchi produced *Giuseppe Verdi: Il genio e le opera* (1887), interweaving biographical narrative with discussions of the compositions, a format that became a model for many subsequent biographies. Checchi's volume became particularly influential through its longevity: an expanded edition was issued in 1901 and reissued in the centenary year 1913, and another new edition appeared in 1926.

Spurred by the composer's death in 1901 and the general waning of musical Romanticism, a second phase in Verdi biography began at the start of the twentieth century and lasted through the 1960s. During this time, biographers took on the tasks of critically assessing the recently deceased composer's life and works as a whole and posturing a historical position for him. The beginning of this trend can be seen in two significant biographies published between 1901 and the centenary of Verdi's birth in 1913. In his *Giuseppe Verdi: L'uomo, le opere, l'artista* (1901), Oreste Boni compares the composer to the towering figures of Rossini, Beethoven, and Wagner. He attributes Verdi's greatness to his ability to portray the voice of the living people, transporting their own passions to the stage and returning these passions to their hearts, sublimated by genius. This volume departs from earlier accounts, especially those fostered by the composer himself, by singling out *I Lombardi alla Prima crociata* and *Attila*, rather than *Nabucco*, as the locus of patriotic sentiment during the 1840s, an idea to which several modern scholars have recently returned. The second of these biographies, Giovanni Bragagnolo and Enrico Bettazzi's *La vita di Giuseppe Verdi narrata al popolo* (1905), invokes the composer as a national icon with its very title. Bragagnolo and Bettazzi assert that Verdi advanced Italian opera beyond its previous state as simple entertainment centered on the qualities of grace and beauty by discarding or transforming older stylistic conventions and through his uncanny ability to represent human emotion.

Biographies during this period also began to change due to increased interest in primary source materials during the early decades of the twentieth century. This trend is exemplified by Alessandro Luzio's transcription and publication of the composer's *copialettere* (as *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, with Gaetano Cesari, 1913) and his later publication of letters and other documents in *Carteggi verdiani* (4 vols., 1935–47). Although flawed by errors and faulty readings, these volumes inspired biographers writing during the middle third of the twentieth century to pursue a stronger foundation in primary source documents. Aldo Oberdorfer, for example, explored the format of the documentary biography in his *Verdi: Autobiografia dalle lettere* (1941). Telling the composer's story through his own voice proved enormously popular, and a new edition appeared in 1951 restoring letters that had been excised by Fascist censors and the author's true name (originally listed as Carlo Graziani to disguise his Jewish ancestry). Oberdorfer's approach laid the groundwork for other significant documentary

biographies later in the century.

Two towering figures in Verdi biography at mid-century, Carlo Gatti and Franco Abbiati, held privileged access to archival materials at Verdi's home at Sant'Agata, lending a rich new authoritative tone to their writings. Gatti's *Verdi* (2 vols., 1931) is now often considered to be the first "modern" biography of the composer. At over 1100 pages, it was far longer and more detailed than any previous biography, and it boasted extensive citations from Verdi's letters and other documents, beautiful illustrations, and facsimile reproductions. Gatti later published *Verdi nelle immagini* (1941), an important pictorial biography that includes a profuse variety of illustrative material, including facsimile reproductions of autograph manuscripts. Abbiati's *Giuseppe Verdi* (4 vols, 1959) offers a frustrating paradox. Nearly triple the size of Gatti's biography in number of pages, it was the largest, most imposing, and most authoritative biography to date, and it included an unprecedented amount of quoted material from letters and other documents at Sant'Agata and in other private collections that had not been generally available to scholars. Indeed, today, it remains the only available source for some of these documents. Nevertheless, scholars soon realized that Abbiati's study was flawed in significant ways. Many transcriptions of primary documents proved to be faulty, either through errors in transcription or by presenting edited or partial documents as complete. Abbiati was also not beyond embroidering details, facts, and stories to substantiate his conclusions. Nonetheless, it still remains a significant biography when used with caution.

In addition to these seminal works by Gatti and Abbiati, significant biographies appeared in Germany and England during the middle third of the twentieth century. These included Franz Werfel's *Verdi: Roman der Oper* (1924), not a biography proper but historical fiction that became enormously popular and influential through a series of reprintings and translations, and Herbert Gerigk's *Giuseppe Verdi* (1932), in which biography plays a secondary role to analysis of individual works. Francis Toye's *Giuseppe Verdi: His Life and Works* (1930) offered the most scholarly and reliable biography of the composer to date in English; it was soon followed by Dyneley Hussey's *Verdi* (1940), which lavished the preponderance of attention on the later period of Verdi's life and creative activity.

Starting in the 1960s, a growing ebullience about Verdi's life and music, coupled with increased scholarly rigor, marked the beginning of a new distinctive phase in Verdi studies, which exerted a strong influence on biographies. Major developments included a series of International Verdi Congresses and the establishment of Verdi institutes in Parma (Istituto [Nazionale] di Studi Verdiani) and New York (American Institute for Verdi Studies). Among other activities, both institutes began to create archives, which contained an unprecedented number of primary and secondary sources, and made them readily available. At the same time, scholarly interest grew in Italian opera generally, and a larger number of both young and established international scholars undertook and published research about Verdi. A wealth of new data, points of view, and syntheses of ideas soon emerged that significantly influenced the scope, content, thrust, and quality of subsequent biographies.

The first biography to show this new direction was Frank Walker's *The Man Verdi* (1962). Walker took on the task of verifying facts and details and of discrediting

misinformation found in earlier biographies, taking most immediate aim at Abbiati and Gatti. His methodology, which gave unprecedented attention to meticulous research and accuracy, marks a shift toward the careful scholarship that would characterize Verdi studies during the final third of the twentieth century. *The Man Verdi* first examines the composer's early years, attempting to clarify the substantial confusion between fact and myth created by earlier biographies. Walker then presents the composer's mature life through a series of essays focused on individuals with whom Verdi had significant relationships including Giuseppina Strepponi, Emanuele Muzio, Angelo Mariani, Arrigo Boito, and Teresa Stolz. A different Verdi emerges in this volume: less monumental and more true to life in both accomplishments and foibles.

Some scholars turned toward more thorough examination of topics related to Verdi's social, cultural, and political milieu, such as the nineteenth-century theatrical system, publishing practices in Italy (including issues of copyright), and the Risorgimento movement. Two biographies that exemplify these trends are George Martin's *Verdi: His Music, Life and Times* (1963), directed toward a generalist readership, and David R. B. Kimbell's *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (1981), directed to readers with a more specialized interest in the composer and his music. Julian Budden's *Verdi* (1985) provided a solid new biography for general readers, informed not only by recent scholarship but also by its author's command of nineteenth-century Italian opera amassed while writing his magisterial three-volume study, *The Operas of Verdi* (1973-81). Similarly, John Rosselli's *Life of Verdi* (2000) drew on the author's earlier research about the business aspects of opera to provide a new depth in its discussion of Verdi's relationship to the operatic and theatrical systems of his time. Rosselli also offered a more nuanced approach to dealing with challenging historiographical issues by asserting that many of the composer's own statements that had been shown to be exaggerated, misleading, or erroneous generally did contain a kernel of "larger truth" and therefore ought to be scrutinized carefully rather than dismissed out of hand.

The growing trove of primary source materials led also to a group of impressive documentary biographies beginning with William Weaver's *Verdi: A Documentary Study* (1977), which circulated widely in several translations and reprints. The first portion of the volume presents a lavish pictorial biography through 287 plates, while the second part presents a documentary biography based on excerpts from letters and other documents, both familiar and little known. A later publication, Marzio Pieri's beautifully illustrated *Verdi: L'immaginario dell'Ottocento* (1981), places special emphasis on the composer's relationship to his cultural milieu and to visual imagery. One of the most prolific biographers is Gustavo Marchesi, who produced more than a half dozen volumes over the course of several decades, each with a different tone and directed toward a distinctive audience. His most significant contribution was *Verdi, merli, e cucù: Cronache bussetane fra il 1819 e il 1839* (1979), which provides a compilation of invaluable documentary evidence regarding the composer's early life. Francesco Cafasi's *Giuseppe Verdi: Fattore di St. Agata* (1994) offers an unusual study focusing on the later part of Verdi's life with an examination of his activities as a gentleman farmer. Finally, Marcello Conati's *Interviste e incontri con Verdi* (1980) presents an invaluable documentary study consisting of nearly 300 short articles selected from contemporary periodicals describing

interviews or meetings with the composer, many of them little known.

Mary Jane Phillips-Matz produced the most formidable recent biography with *Verdi: A Biography* (1993). This large tome is particularly rich in new details regarding Verdi's family background and early life, uncovered through privileged access to records at Sant'Agata and painstaking scouring of previously unexamined church and civil archives. Unlike most recent biographies, Phillips-Matz's study largely disregards Verdi's cultural and political milieu and his music, focusing instead on his personal life, although some of her conclusions have been considered controversial. A complex portrait of Verdi emerges: strongly self-willed, sometimes harsh and arrogant, but at the same time generous to a fault and strongly committed to civic responsibility. Phillips-Matz also issued the now relatively scarce volume *Verdi il grande gentleman del piacentino* (1992), which likewise focuses on Verdi's family and personal life during his early years and on his later domestic life at Sant'Agata. It reproduces many rare or previously unpublished documents, the most important of which is an Italian translation of the Spanish version of Ercole Cavalli's rare 1866 biography (discussed above).

The centennial of Verdi's death in 2001 marked the most recent stage in assessing the composer's historical significance, and the years clustered around this event produced a burst of new publications. Most notable among them were volumes in the complete critical editions of the composer's letter exchanges with publishers, librettists, and others and a rapidly growing number of iconographic studies, many dealing with visual aspects of the operas. The full impact of these new resources has yet to be realized in biographical studies. Among new biographies, the most distinctive was produced by Marisa Di Gregorio Casati, Marco Marica, and Olga Jesurum as *Per amore di Verdi (1813–1901): Vita, immagini, ritratti* (2001), a lavishly illustrated, oversize volume that features hundreds of pictures, many never previously published, accompanied by brief prose narrative. Di Gregorio Casati later adapted much of the rich illustrative material from this volume in her more traditional biography, *Verdi* (2008).

A better rounded picture of Verdi's early life also emerges from two recent publications by winners of the Premio Internazionale Rotary Club di Parma "Giuseppe Verdi." Dino Rizzo's *Verdi filarmonico e maestro dei filarmonici bussetani* (2005) investigates the little explored period of the composer's early twenties when he was the civic music master in Busseto. Roberta Montemorra Marvin's *Verdi the Student—Verdi the Teacher* (2010) examines the aspiring composer's formal musical education and exposure to music literature and performances in Roncole, Busseto, and Milan. Marvin reconstructs the budding composer's training with Vincenzo Lavigna, in part, through Verdi's own approach to teaching composition to his student, Emanuele Muzio. Her study also sheds important light on Verdi's later activities connected with the reform of music conservatories in the new nation of Italy.

Among the most debated topics in Verdi biography at the dawn of the twenty-first century is the relationship of Verdi and his music to the Italian Risorgimento. A revisionist approach first emerged in Birgit Pauls's 1996 dissertation, *Giuseppe Verdi und das Risorgimento*, which drew on sociological and anthropological methodology to challenge the traditional view of Verdi's prominence as a cultural leader in the movement. This reappraisal was subsequently continued by other scholars, most notably



Roger Parker in his 1997 study “*Arpa d’or dei fatidici vati*”: *The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s*. More recently, however, other scholars have argued for a more moderate and nuanced approach to this topic, one that also considers the perspective of Verdi himself as a product of Risorgimento values. Other issues will likely emerge as scholars begin to pose new sets of questions and respond to new documentation; this resulting research will certainly exert a significant impact on the next generation of Verdi biographies.

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