Verdi Forum

Number 39 Article 6

1-1-2012

Review: "Verdi's 'Il trovatore': The Quintessential Italian Melodramma" by Martin Chusid

David Lawton
State University of New York, Stony Brook

Review: "Verdi's 'Il trovatore': The Quintessential Italian Melodramma" by Martin Chusid

Keywords
Giuseppe Verdi, Il trovatore, Martin Chusid

Reviews

edited by

Gregory W. Harwood

*****

Verdi's "Il trovatore": The Quintessential Italian Melodramma
by Martin Chusid
(Eastman Studies in Music;
Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2012)

David Lawton

During the last two years of his life, Martin Chusid enjoyed a period of remarkable scholarly productivity, in which he published two books: the first, the volume that is the subject of this review; and the second, a monograph *Schubert's Dances: For Family, Friends and Posterity* (Monographs in Musicology 16; Pendragon Press, 2013).

As the first book-length study of *Il trovatore*, *Verdi's "Il trovatore"* is an indispensable addition to the literature about the opera.[1] In his Preface (p. xi), Professor Chusid mentions the "unusually long genesis" of the book. In fact, the volume was originally planned for the Cambridge Opera Handbook series, and he was actively at work on it during the early 1990s. The book would have been more timely had it been published in that decade, for several substantial studies of various aspects of the opera have since appeared. Other major publications that Chusid either authored or edited intervened to delay the completion of the monograph, and the draft was still incomplete when the series was discontinued. The book still shows clearly its origins as a projected Cambridge Opera Handbook. The language of the General Preface to the series identifies the "three main concerns" of each volume: "the historical," "the analytical," and issues of "critical writing."[2] Table 1 (p. 54) indicates how the various chapters of *Verdi's "Il trovatore"* represent these three categories and their subdivisions.

Given the origins of *Verdi's "Il trovatore"* as a Cambridge Opera Handbook, it is not surprising that the book struggles with some of the same issues that have plagued the volumes in that series, especially with respect to addressing the conflicting needs of the intended audiences. The General Preface asserts that the books are "written for the serious opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar."[3] In that respect,

[1] Monographs such as Attila Csampai and Dieter Holland's *Der Troubadour: Texte, Materialen, Kommentare* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986) or *Le Trouvère: L'avant-scène opéra 60* (Paris: L'Avant-Scène, 1984) are both opera guides of a much more general character.

[2] The language of the General Preface remained fairly consistent across the volumes of the series; the quotations here are from the one by Arthur Groos and Roger Parker on Puccini's *La bohème* (1986), v.

[3] Ibid.

the most problematic chapters of each handbook are the analytical ones. While the "full synopsis" makes good sense for the general audience, it is frankly unnecessary for the

Table 1

Cambridge topics	Cambridge subtopics	Chusid chapters
1. "Historical"		
	a. "The genesis of the work, its sources"	1. The Spanish Background and the Play *El Trovador*[4]
	b. "The collaboration between librettist and composer"	2. Cammarano's Role in Shaping the Libretto and Verdi's Emendations Interlude: The Versification of *Il trovatore* and the Cast
	c. "The first performance and subsequent stage history"	5. The Reception and Diffusion of *Il trovatore*[5]
2. "Analytical"		
	a. "Full synopsis, which considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects"	3. New Wine in Old Bottles: The Drama and the Music
	b. "Musical analysis of a section of the score, showing how the music serves or makes the drama"	4. The Scene of the "Miserere"
3. "Critical writing"		Epilogue[6]
4. "Select bibliography, a discography, & guides to other sources"		Discography Videography Bibliography

[4] In his Preface, Chusid states that Chapter 1 is based upon an earlier draft by John Alexander Coleman (1935–2003), a Professor in Spanish at New York University, to whose memory the volume is dedicated. Portions of the chapter are also drawn from Chusid's earlier article "A New Source for *El trovador* and Its Implications for the Tonal Organization of *Il trovatore*," in *Verdi's Middle Period (1849–1859): Source Studies, Analysis, and Performance Practice*, ed. Martin Chusid, 207–25 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[5] The first part of this chapter uses material that Chusid published earlier, with Thomas Kaufman, in "The First Three Years of *Trovatore*: A Listing of Stagings from 19 January 1853 to 18 January 1856," *Verdi Newsletter* 15 (1987): 30–49. Some of the material in the section "From *Il trovatore* to *Le trouvère*" previously appeared in his "Towards a Better Understanding of Verdi's Revisions: The Female Leads in *Le trouvère*," in *Scritti in memoria di Claudio Sartori*, ed. Mariangela Donà and François Lesure, 127–32 (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 1997).

[6] The Epilogue (p. 111) considers two cases in which the opera's influence "has been felt both on the society for which it was written and on later artworks created in that society": 1) reflections on Susan Rutherford's article "'Il grido dell'anima' or 'Un modo di sentire': Verdi's Masculinity and the Risorgimento," *Studi Verdiani* 19 (2005): 107–21; and 2) the relationship between *Il trovatore* and Sardou's *Tosca*.

serious student or scholar, for whom a complete libretto in the original language, with the correct lineation and a facing literal translation in English, would be far more useful. Invariably, the more detailed analyses of sections of the score, welcome for the scholar, are challenging for the general reader.

Not surprisingly, then, the weakest chapter of Chusid's book is the full synopsis in Chapter 3. A central concern of the book is to show ways in which *Il trovatore*—until relatively recently regarded as a throwback to an earlier style because of librettist Salvadore Cammarano's conservatism—is actually quite novel both musically and theatrically. Chusid emphasizes such innovations in his synopsis. Another virtue of the chapter is its attention to poetic versification and musical form, with short, clear definitions of basic terminology. For the most part, the discussion of poetic and musical issues is helpful and accurate. I would take issue with a few details, however; for example, in his determination to show how Azucena's *racconto* in Act II is derived from the normative aria form, Chusid describes the section that includes the orchestral reprise of "Stride la vampa" as a *tempo di mezzo* (p. 49). In spite of the musical development at this point, there is absolutely no change in the poetic form, which continues with the rhymed couplets of *settenario doppio* meter. He also calls attention, in passing, to certain aspects of Verdi's associative use of particular keys in the score. Regretfully, however, Chapter 3 bogs down under the weight of lengthy plot summaries, which one wishes had been written more concisely and vividly.

Overall, the close analysis of the "Miserere" scene in Act IV (Chapter 4) is much more satisfying. This scene is a particularly appropriate choice for such treatment because, as Chusid notes, it was "recognized from the first performance as the most remarkable and successful number in the opera" (p. 69). In this chapter, Chusid is able to consider aspects of versification in much greater detail and to investigate in some depth several important tonal issues in the scene (see below).

While the chapter as a whole is insightful and illuminating, it could have been even more so had he begun it by examining the complex evolution of the scene's poetic form and dramatic structure. The definitive text took shape only after an exchange of numerous letters between the two collaborators and did not assume its final form until after Cammarano's death. Although Chusid either quotes or mentions most of the pertinent documents, the reader will have difficulty in piecing together a coherent account of the libretto's genesis because it is spread across two separate chapters and not always in a logical sequence. Chapter 2 contains Verdi's important letter of 9 April 1851, written in response to Cammarano's scenario ("*programma*"). The two passages in the letter that refer directly to the "Miserere" scene (on pp. 15 and 17) make no sense in context because Chusid has not yet quoted Cammarano's *programma*. For that, the reader must turn to Chapter 4 (p. 69), where the pertinent passage is given, but without the title that the librettist wrote in the margin next to it: "Romanza di Alfo[n]so – Duetto Leonora Di Luna" (Cammarano for a time considered calling Manrico Alfonso).[7] In his 9 April letter to Cammarano, then, Verdi's objection to the proposed plan was that his librettist had conceived the scene as a Romanza for Manrico, rather than as a Grand Aria for Leonora. Although Chusid also includes Cammarano's fascinating comments about the

[7] The complete Italian text, including the title, is in *Carteggio Verdi-Cammarano* (1843–1852), ed. Carlo Matteo Mossa (Parma, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2002), 187.

versification of the scene, from his letter to Verdi of 9 August 1851 (pp. 21–22), he does not mention that at this stage the text lacked the lines that would eventually be used for the *cantabile*: "D'amor sull'ali rosee." Instead, Chusid tells us that "The *cantabile* of the aria in part [act] 4 ("D'amor sull'ali rosee") [...] was Verdi's idea [...], even if Cammarano claimed that it was in an earlier, discarded draft of the synopsis" (p. 18). The latter point is misleading and is a misunderstanding of Cammarano's letter of 25 November 1851 (quoted on p. 25): "If desired, an Adagio can be added to [Leonora's] aria, while the lines I sent can serve for the cabaletta." As Carlo Matteo Mossa has noted, that letter refers not to Leonora's Aria in Act IV, but rather to the Count's in Act II.[8] Mossa also confirms that Cammarano's 9 August letter makes it clear that the librettist originally envisioned the lines "Quel suon, quelle preci" as the text for the *cantabile* of the aria, with "Ah! che la morte ognora" for Manrico's *romanza* and the "Miserere" for the offstage chant.[9] When, after Cammarano's death, Verdi asked Leone Emmanuele Bardare to provide a different text for the *cantabile*, the reason, as the composer wrote to Cesare De Sanctis, was that "The very beautiful words 'Quel suon, quelle preci,' etc., only lend themselves to a slow declamation; it would be necessary, then, to add eight or ten passionate, very beautiful lines after the recitative 'Arreca i miei sospiri'."[10] Verdi wanted a text that would lend itself to a more lyrical setting. At the same time, by moving Cammarano's original lines to the *tempo di mezzo*, the composer was able to intensify the opposition envisioned by the librettist between Manrico and the off-stage chorus by adding a third voice: that of Leonora.

While Chusid's analysis of the versification of the scene is clear and useful, I'd quibble with one small detail. In this *tempo di mezzo* he insightfully reveals the close relationship between the poetic form of Manrico's *romanza* "Ah, che la morte ognora" (sung from within the tower where he is imprisoned) and that of his *romanza* "Deserto sulla terra" at the end of Act I: both pieces are strophic and display an unusual mixture of poetic meters, as Chusid puts it: "The first three lines of each quatrain are *settenario* with the final line *quinario*" (p. 82). Although here in the "Miserere" the final line indeed comprises five syllables, they actually constitute the first segment of an eleven-syllable line that Leonora then completes (a classic example of *stychomithia*[11]):

Manrico:	Ad-dio, Leo-no- ra!	
	1 2 3 4 5 /	
Leonora:		Oh ciel! sen-to man-car-mi!
		(5)[12] 6 7 8 9 10 11

[8] Ibid., 232, n4.

[9] Ibid., 211, n1.

[10] As translated in *Verdi's "Il trovatore,"* 30. Chusid dismisses Bardare's text for the *cantabile* "D'amor sull'ali rosee" as "little more than a well-written gloss on the ending of Cammarano's scena" (74), but Dana Dalton, in her excellent Brandeis University dissertation, "Internal Conflict as Action: Aria Structure in *Il trovatore*" (2014), argues that this *cantabile* "belongs to a category of arias, in the tradition of Cesare's 'Aure, deh, per pietà' from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, that invoke breezes or sighs to send a message to a distant beloved" (159).

[11] *Stychomithia* refers to dialogue of heightened emotion delivered by two characters in alternating lines and taking up one another's words (and music).

[12] In poetic terms, the syllable "-ra" elides with "Oh," as the fifth syllable of the line, but in the musical setting, Verdi ignores the elision.

In the musical analysis of the scene, Chusid offers some cogent observations on matters of tonal structure, particularly in his discussion of the opening of the number (on pp. 71–72), as well as in his observations on the significance of the tolling bell on E-flat in the "Miserere" section (pp. 78–79). These remarks build on ideas about the importance of vocal sonority in Verdi that he and Pierluigi Petrobelli developed independently during the 1980s, ideas that have been influential in subsequent analytical studies by other authors as well.[13]

In the opinion of this reviewer, the best chapters in the book are Chapter 1, "The Spanish Background and the Play *El trovador*," which provides valuable background about the Spanish theatrical context of the play and its operatic origins in Scribe's libretto for Halévy's opera *La juive*; and Chapter 5, "The Reception and Diffusion of *Il trovatore*." Although the first part of the latter is drawn primarily from an article by Chusid and Kaufman (mentioned in note 5 above), the remainder of the chapter is all new and traces the international performance history and reception of the opera from 1856 (the cutoff date of the earlier article) to the present day. Chusid quotes extensively from letters, manuscript records, librettos, and reviews in music periodicals (preserved on microfilm in the archive of the American Institute for Verdi Studies). His wide-ranging account makes for engaging and entertaining reading, although he does not consistently provide footnotes for the reviews he cites.

Chapter 2, "Cammarano's Role in Shaping the Libretto and Verdi's Emendations," and the following Interlude, "The Versification of *Il trovatore* and the Cast," are both comprehensive and detailed; many passages from Verdi's and Cammarano's letters are translated into English here for the first time. Had Chusid published this book during the early 1990s, as he first intended, these two chapters would have broken important new ground. Since that time, however, Mossa's masterly article "La genesi del libretto del *Trovatore*" appeared in *Studi Verdiani* (in 1992), and his superb edition of the *Carteggio Verdi-Cammarano* was published (in 2002).[14] Mossa's

[13] Pierluigi Petrobelli, "Towards an Explanation of the Dramatic Structure of *Il trovatore*," trans. William Drabkin, *Music Analysis* 1 (1982): 129–41; Martin Chusid, "The Tonality of *Rigoletto*," in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, 241–61 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Chusid's most complete and comprehensive study on the tonal structure of *Il trovatore* is in "A New Source for *El trovador*," cited in note 4 above, which includes detailed charts on the overall structure of the opera (Table 1, pp. 211–12), as well as "keys and sonorities primarily associated with the tragedy of the ill-fated lovers" and "keys and sonorities primarily associated with the story of the stolen child" (Appendices 1 and 2, pp. 222–25). William Drabkin's "Characters, Key Relations, and Tonal Structure in *Il trovatore*" (*Music Analysis* 1 [1982]: 143–53) builds on Petrobelli's findings. For a perceptive critique of all three articles, see Scott Balthazar, "Plot and Tonal Design as Compositional Constraints," *Current Musicology* 60–61 (1996): 51–78. Other important studies inspired by Petrobelli's and Chusid's pioneering work are Harold Powers, "Il 'do del baritono' nel 'gioco delle parti' verdiano," in *Opera & Libretto II*, ed. Gianfranco Folena and Maria Teresa Muraro, 267–81, Studi di musica veneta (Florence, Olschki, 1993); and, most recently, William Rothstein, "Common-Tone Tonality in Italian Romantic Opera: An Introduction," *Music Theory Online* 14/1 (March 2008).

[14] After hearing Mossa's paper about the genesis of the libretto of *Il trovatore* at a conference held in conjunction with the Festival Verdiano in Parma in 1990, I commissioned him to write an article about this topic for the historical introduction in the critical edition of *Il trovatore*, but in the end it was far too long to be published complete. An abridged version, translated into English ("The Genesis of the Libretto"), is on xiii–xxii of the score: *Giuseppe Verdi: Il trovatore*, ed. David Lawton, The Works of Giuseppe Verdi, series I, vol. 18A (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Milan: Ricordi, 1993). The full-length Italian version appears in *Studi Verdiani* 8 (1992): 52–103.

discussion of the genesis of the libretto is organized more logically than Chusid's, is based on a greater knowledge of the sources, and offers more perceptive commentary and analysis. While Chusid was first working on the book, he had access to preliminary drafts both of my critical edition and of Mossa's two publications. That may explain why he mentions only in passing, and quotes but two sentences from, what is arguably the single most important letter in the entire correspondence: Cammarano to Verdi, 26 April 1851—a lengthy, impassioned, and closely reasoned defense of the librettist's treatment of the original Spanish play.[15] Perhaps Chusid did not want to anticipate Mossa's publication (the first) of this letter. No other document, however, reveals more powerfully than this letter, Cammarano's influence on the final shape of the opera, and it would have been worth having a complete translation of it in this book.

In summary, if the book has some limitations that stem both from its original conception as a Cambridge Opera Handbook and from the untimely delay in its completion and publication, it remains an essential introductory study of the opera. General readers, including opera-goers and record collectors, will find it a wonderful source of valuable background information about the opera, and scholars will be able to build on it as a starting point for further research and investigation.

[15] See *Verdi's "Il trovatore,"* 14; the complete letter is published in *Carteggio Verdi-Cammarano*, 195–98. Several extended excerpts are translated into English in Mossa's "The Genesis of the Libretto," xviii–xix.