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The Works of Giuseppe Verdi: A Consideration of Its Impact

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«THE WORKS OF GIUSEPPE VERDI»

A CONSIDERATION OF ITS IMPACT¹

The rationale for preparing a critical edition of Verdi's works is by now well known. The unavailability of printed orchestral scores for some operas, disagreements among performing materials for others, and a proliferation of new scholarship illuminating the complex Verdian source situation all point to the need for a scholarly edition of the complete works of this extremely popular composer. In 1983 the University of Chicago Press and Casa Ricordi began jointly producing scores and other performing materials in a series entitled «The Works of Giuseppe Verdi» («WGV»). *Rigoletto* was the first volume to appear, followed by *Ernani*, *Nabucco*, the *Messa da Requiem*, *Luisa Miller*, *Il trovatore*, *Alzira*, *La traviata*, *Il corsaro*, *I masnadieri* and *Stiffelio*; additional titles are in various stages of preparation.

As we gather to observe the 100th anniversary of Verdi's death, we can also look back on nearly eighteen years of performances using the resources of «WGV»: a database maintained by Ricordi since 1986 has logged over 175 productions in sixteen countries. According to General Editor Philip Gossett, no one involved with «WGV» expects that the changes that it introduces will revolutionize our knowledge of most of Verdi's operas.² At the

¹ Thanks are due to Gabriele Dotto and Cristiano Ostinelli of BMG-Ricordi, Kathleen Hansell of The University of Chicago Press, and especially Philip Gossett, General Editor of «The Works of Giuseppe Verdi», for their valued assistance. I am also grateful to Martin Bernheimer, Victor De Renzi, Fabrizio Della Seta, Claudio Gallico, Jeffrey Kallberg, David Lawton, Sir Charles Mackerras, David Rosen, and Michel Singher, each of whom contributed observations and experiences to this study.

² P. GOSSETT, *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi*, in *Nuove prospettive nella ricerca verdiana: atti del convegno internazionale in occasione della prima del "Rigoletto" in edizione critica, Vienna, 12-13 marzo 1983*, ed. by M. Casati and M. Pavarani, Parma-Milano, Istituto nazionale di Studi verdiani - Ricordi, 1987, p. 7.

same time, it is indisputable that the Verdi edition has influenced what is being offered in the world's opera houses. This paper presents a brief consideration of some of the ways in which performers use, and the public perceives, the ongoing critical edition of Verdi's works.

A fair measure of the impact of any enterprise begins by considering its goals. The «WGV»'s editorial guidelines, originally drafted in the mid-1970s, represent an effort to occupy the middle ground between simply transcribing Verdi's notation on the one hand and standardizing it on the other. The resulting edition is a single source that both informs users of an opera's textual history and offers them the means to choose effectively from among variant readings. Although «WGV»'s reliance on autograph sources means that well-known operas will sometimes reveal unfamiliar features, Gossett predicted that such novelties would be relatively few in number. Instead, he emphasized the cumulative result of confronting notational ambiguities and stripping away layers of non-authoritative detail, leaving what he termed a «coherent orchestral and ensemble fabric» that allows «reasonable freedom for soloists to use Verdi's notation as the basis for personal interpretations».³

Editors of individual volumes in the series are an important source of information about how «WGV» materials are used in the theater. Jeffrey Kallberg, the editor of *Luisa Miller*, attended rehearsals for that score's premiere in Cincinnati in 1988 and found himself answering performers' questions about the Verdi edition's overall purpose, as well as about specific problems of phrasing and ensemble. Kallberg observed that while some singers adopted a business-as-usual approach, others were eager to consider alternatives to the score as they had previously learned it. Claudio Gallico, the editor of *Ernani*, also found a constructive curiosity among the singers, and especially the chorus, that premiered his edition in Modena in 1984. Perhaps because *Luisa Miller* and *Ernani* are less familiar works, neither of these scholars encountered the resistance reported by the editor of one of Verdi's more popular operas, who witnessed a celebrated singer's refusal to perform certain alternate musical passages because they were unknown to the audience.

Fabrizio Della Seta's experience with the 1999 premiere of his edition of *La traviata* exemplifies two issues that often arise when critical editions are debated. Della Seta recalls discussing with the conductor an unusual clarinet phrase in the opera's final act.⁴ Although the phrase, as it appears in the autograph score, seems to contain a transposition error, the conductor chose to

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6 f.

⁴ The passage occurs in No. 10, Duetto [Violetta e Alfredo], mm. 97-99.

perform it as notated by Verdi, and Della Seta discovered that the resulting dissonance is actually nearly inaudible. The fact that few, if any, audience members could even hear this variant might cause some to question the conductor's decision to perform it. But his acceptance of the autograph notation, despite its potential to seem "wrong" or inaudible, illustrates a positive consequence of critical editions like «WGV», namely, the sense of personal involvement that a performer gains from weighing the evidence himself and choosing the alternative that he believes expresses the composer's wishes.

During the same performance, Della Seta notes, although the conductor carefully observed Verdi's dynamics and phrasing, he, nonetheless, made traditional cuts in two cabalettas. While this observation illustrates the conventional reality that even authoritative sources are not always followed to the letter, this particular juxtaposition of choices suggests that a conductor might avoid some of a critical edition's more conspicuous revelations if he believes that they might detract, for whatever reason, from a scene's overall impact.

Today many conductors are sensitive to the scholarly issues raised by critical editions. Victor De Renzi, musical director of Florida's Sarasota Opera, studies multiple sources for every work that he conducts, and as a result, his use of the Verdi edition is grounded in an understanding of the ambiguities of nineteenth-century music notation. For De Renzi, «WGV» serves as a reminder that details in older printed scores often depend on the vagaries of orthography. One of his favorite examples is the tempo indication *allargando*, which Verdi himself sometimes abbreviated either «*alla.*» or the less precise «*all.*» Early printed scores sometimes mistook Verdi's «*all.*» for *Allegro*, and «WGV»'s documentation exposes this misunderstanding. De Renzi maintains that seeing what Verdi actually wrote, in addition to what copyists and engravers thought he intended, enables performers to make informed decisions about tempo, phrasing, and other matters.

On the subject of what Verdi did not write, De Renzi's approach differs markedly from that of another avid supporter of the Verdi edition, Riccardo Muti. In his 1988 recording of *Rigoletto*, Muti used «WGV» to achieve a strict adherence to Verdi's autograph score; a year later De Renzi conducted the same opera, from the same critical edition, with singers who added embellishments to every cabaletta. Of course, any musical source can be employed to a variety of ends. But it is fascinating to observe that two conductors – one espousing a *come scritto* approach and the other pursuing the unwritten performance traditions of Verdi's time – can achieve such dramatically different results in the atmosphere of authorial intention that inevitably surrounds the use of a critical edition.

David Lawton, the editor of *Il trovatore* and the forthcoming *Le Trouvère*

and *Macbeth*, is also active as a conductor. Like De Renzi, he believes it is a performer's responsibility to interpret Verdi's operas in a stylistically appropriate manner. At the same time, he occasionally encounters singers who resist working from a critical edition because they feel they are being asked to re-learn a familiar role for the sake of seemingly insignificant details. But Lawton and De Renzi agree that it is precisely the experience of working from an authoritative text that gives both singers and instrumentalists a consistent foundation – in fact, the composer's own – upon which to build their interpretations.

Although Lawton is both a musicologist and a conductor, he is careful to separate the responsibilities of editor and performer. In his own thoughtful considerations of the Verdi edition, published when «WGV» scores first appeared on the scene, Lawton reminded editors not to attempt to influence the sound of a musical passage, which should naturally vary with each conductor's interpretation of the composer's notation.⁵ «Because so many more options will be available [in the critical edition]», he predicted, «performances of Verdi's operas will differ from each other much more than they do now».⁶

From the vantage point of 2001, can we say that Lawton's forecast has come true? A comparison of Muti's and De Renzi's performances of *Rigoletto* reveals highly dissimilar readings of the same score. Ideally, performance reviews would report a variety of interpretations obtained from the Verdi edition. In fact, few reviews of Verdi's operas address performance practice in a meaningful way, and fewer still indicate when «WGV» has been used, even though Ricordi requires theaters to print this information in their house programs. By contrast, reviews of performances based on the critical edition of Rossini's works often identify the edition and editor, and also list departures from the conventional score. A likely reason for this discrepancy is the fact that the innovations of the Verdi edition tend to be less evident than those of its *bel canto* counterparts, which have had to confront a long buildup of disfiguring performance traditions.

It seems self-evident that performance reviews should play a role in the reception of a critical edition. The practice of critic Martin Bernheimer appears to be a model suited to any composer or style period: Bernheimer alerts his readers to the use of a critical edition whenever he feels that it offers sig-

⁵ See D. LAWTON, *Critical Performers and Critical Editions*, in *Nuove prospettive* cit., pp. 10-19, and ID., *Why Bother with the New Verdi Edition?*, in «Opera Quarterly», II, Winter 1984-1985, pp. 43-54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

nificant revelations of general interest, such as changes to a climactic note, a restored passage, or a revised cadenza.⁷ This approach offers the advantage of presenting a critical edition in easily understood terms. In the hands of a less assiduous writer, however, it might also run the risk of characterizing the edition as little more than a grab bag of surprises.

Even when a critic does not identify the use of «WGV» materials, it is sometimes possible to detect the edition's influence. Noël Goodwin's review of a 1997 Covent Garden *Rigoletto*, for example, notes that «the performance soon acquired expressive momentum and the orchestral playing became an increasing virtue in music so often over-familiar. The conducting invited us to listen afresh, as it were, although tempos and phrasing were sometimes a shade exaggerated».⁸ Goodwin's praise of Ramon Vargas's Duke of Mantua includes his opinion that the repeated cabaletta «Possente amor» sounded «entirely right in its context». Might it be that the orchestra's sensitive playing, Vargas's effective double cabaletta, and even conductor Daniele Gatti's attention to perhaps unfamiliar details of tempo and phrasing are related in some measure to the use of Martin Chusid's critical edition of the opera? Similar evaluations – again noting logical, if sometimes unconventional tempos, clean, expressive orchestral playing, and dramatically effective cabalettas – appear in reviews of other performances that, according to Ricordi, used «WGV» materials.⁹

This is not to suggest that every performance using the Verdi edition is received with equal enthusiasm. In fact, Enrico Tellini's review of the aforementioned premiere of *La traviata* called the conducting «routine and sometimes inaccurate».¹⁰ The success of individual performances ultimately depends on the ability and the imagination of the participants. But a talented and motivated performer is stimulated more by accurate and informative performing materials than by those that are inauthentic, error-prone, and illogical.

Finally, it is instructive to explore how the Verdi edition is perceived by the last link in the chain, the audience. It is unlikely that many casual opera-goers understand the conceptual basis of a critical edition. But an informal

⁷ Private e-mail communication with the author, 17 April 2000.

⁸ N. GOODWIN, "Rigoletto", in «Opera», XLVIII, September 1997, p. 1032.

⁹ Examples of such reviews include Rodney Milnes's assessment of a *Nabucco* in London (R. MILNES, *Less is More When Stars Shine*, in «Times» [London], 11 April 1996) and Manfred Blumauer's discussion of a *Rigoletto* in Graz (M. BLUMAUER, *Hofschanzen hinter Designer-Möbeln*, in «Der Standard», 11 May 1998).

¹⁰ E. TELLINI, *Naples*, in «Opera», L, September 1999, p. 1084.

survey of six avid opera fans – not a scholar or professional musician among them – reveals a rather sophisticated grasp of the issues. While only two of the survey participants recalled attending a performance that relied on «WGV» materials, all were familiar with the scholarly editions of at least one composer, and all had opinions about critical editions of Italian opera.

Each of the survey respondents defined a critical edition in terms of establishing an authoritative text based on sources linked directly to the composer. Asked how such an edition should be used in performance, the respondents raised interesting points. One suggested that different types of performances might appeal to different segments of the audience, with operatic novices preferring a traditional reading and those with more experience welcoming variants or alternative versions. Another warned that introducing non-standard readings into a well-known score sometimes proves more distracting than edifying. It is noteworthy, if unsurprising, that the respondents addressed only major differences between conventional and critical editions, since many smaller-scale modifications pass unnoticed even by discerning opera fans.

On the subject of singers and the preparation of roles, survey participants agreed that studying multiple musical sources – beyond the “standard” piano-vocal score – increases the likelihood of an effective interpretation. At the same time, they felt that many singers lack the training or inclination to engage in what is still often viewed as musicologists’ work. The majority of respondents expressed a passionate belief in the importance of unwritten performing traditions, which, as one person noted, need to be understood in relation to the composer’s own aesthetic preferences.

When asked for their thoughts about the critical edition of Verdi’s works, survey participants answered supportively, if cautiously. Only one reiterated the intractable belief that conventional performing materials are good enough, but fully half of the respondents expressed the concern that the critical edition might impose a single performance model on the composer’s works. Taking into account the editorial philosophy of «WGV», this apprehension is, of course, unfounded. But the misperception that a critical edition exists to enforce one specific, “authentic” interpretation is still widespread. It is high time to retire this fallacy.

In conclusion, after eighteen years it is apparent that «WGV» has become a significant presence in the opera world. As more and more performers adopt it as their principal Verdian source, audiences have the opportunity to experience recognizable innovations, such as the original versions of five numbers in *La traviata* and the uncensored text of *Rigoletto*’s final act. At the same time, the edition’s clarifications of Verdi’s instrumental and vocal textures produce many performances of notable clarity and power. Critics

and music journalists, however, could do more to educate the opera-going public about how performers make use of the often thought-provoking information conveyed in «WGV». More writers should – if they are able – follow the example of Andrew Porter, whose knowledgeable considerations of textual and performance issues enlighten readers of newspapers and music magazines alike. A new generation of performers is learning from the discoveries of the Verdi edition. It would be wonderful if a new generation of opera-goers could follow suit.

RIASSUNTO – Nel 1984 il musicologo e direttore David Lawton si chiedeva: «Perché disturbarsi per la nuova edizione di Verdi?» (*Why Bother with the New Verdi Edition?*, in «Opera Quarterly» II, inverno 1984-1985, p. 43 sg.). La domanda di Lawton, cui egli rispondeva con entusiastica approvazione, nasceva da un convegno internazionale che celebrava la prima esecuzione della prima opera nella nuova edizione critica delle opere di Verdi. A quell'epoca, la produzione di materiali d'esecuzione per le opere verdiane basati sulle fonti originali era sentito come qualcosa d'indesiderato, anche se gli studiosi e un numero crescente di direttori erano convinti della sua necessità.

Oggi, dopo diciotto anni e nove opere, è il momento di chiedersi se «The Works of Giuseppe Verdi» viene usato e percepito nei modi che i suoi fondatori si erano proposti. Il mio saggio prende in considerazione, da punti di vista molteplici, l'esecuzione di opere di Verdi basate sull'edizione critica. Dopo aver riassunto i criteri editoriali della serie, discuto le esperienze di alcuni dei curatori che hanno attivamente collaborato con gli interpreti. Le opinioni dei direttori che hanno adottato l'edizione come fonte verdiana principale offrono prospettive aggiuntive sulla sua collocazione nel mondo operistico di oggi.

La consapevolezza del pubblico nei confronti dell'edizione critica di Verdi resta indietro rispetto all'accoglienza degli esecutori. Le recensioni pubblicate evitano di solito di menzionare quando l'edizione è stata usata, e quelle che lo fanno affrontano l'argomento discutendo, prevedibilmente, solo gli scarti più ovvi dalle partiture correnti. Sebbene alcuni critici considerino molti aspetti delle esecuzioni basate sull'edizione critica, al di là delle possibilità di comprensione dello spettatore medio, un'indagine frettolosa suggerisce che tra i melomani vi è un genuino entusiasmo per i valori artistici rappresentati da «The Works of Giuseppe Verdi». Purtroppo, per il pubblico generico il termine 'edizione critica' richiama alla mente esecuzioni storicamente accurate ma musicalmente sbiadite, l'ultima cosa che l'edizione di Verdi si proponeva di incoraggiare.