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**Keywords**
Giuseppe Verdi, Les Vêpres siciliennes, libretto studies

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Poetic Prosody and Melodic Rhythm in
Les Vêpres siciliennes*

Jeffrey Langford, Manhattan School of Music

In Verdi’s day opera librettos were works of poetry. As such, they followed specific rules of prosody which governed all poetry. These rules prescribed various patterns of stress (accent and unaccent) which in a musical setting had to be coordinated by the composer with the stress patterns of any chosen musical meter. This process of aligning textual accents with musical accents is partially responsible for the creation of melodic rhythms. It therefore seems probable that since the characteristics of poetic prosody vary from one language to another, melodic rhythms based on different languages will reflect these prosodic differences. In the case of a composer like Verdi, because he worked in more than one language, we have the opportunity to test this hypothesis through comparative analysis.

The question to be addressed here is the extent to which French poetic prosody influenced the creation of melodic rhythms and phrase structures in one particular opera, Les Vêpres siciliennes, Verdi’s first opera on an original French libretto. Our goal is to discover the compositional principles that governed Verdi’s setting of French texts in this opera, and to compare them with the more familiar procedures he used in setting Italian texts. In this manner we should be able to isolate and evaluate the influence of the French language on Verdi’s melodic rhythms.1

I.

A brief survey of the principles governing Verdi’s setting of Italian texts will be helpful before investigating how he deals with French texts.

In Italian poetry, prosody is determined by the number of syllables in each line of poetry.2 Every different line length is characterized by one or more different metric patterns. Lines of even syllable count have fairly fixed and consistent metric patterns, while those of uneven syllable count show a greater variety in this regard. For example, a line of ottonario (8-syllable) poetry will nearly always have a primary accent on the penultimate syllable and secondary accents on the third and sometimes also the fifth syllable, as in example 1 from “Caro nome” in Rigoletto.3

Example 1.

Rigoletto, Act I, Gilda

In lines of uneven length such as settennario (7-syllable) the primary accent still falls on the penultimate syllable, but a greater prosodic irregularity results from the fact that the secondary accents are much more mobile within the first four syllables of a line (e.g., 1, 3; 1, 4; 2, 4). Further heightening the irregularity of verses with uneven syllable count is the fact that the location of the secondary accent can and often does change from line to line within a stanza. This can be seen in example 2 from Rigoletto.

Example 2.

Rigoletto, Act II, the Duke

To determine the compositional principles that govern Verdi’s setting of Italian texts, we need to examine musical examples drawn from his middle-period operas—those closest to Les Vêpres. I have organized these examples according to four possible combinations of poetic type and musical setting as follows:

Poetic type I — Even syllable count
Musical setting A — Regular (all textual accents are congruent with the musical meter.)
Musical setting B — Irregular (some textual accents are not congruent with the musical meter.)

Poetic type II — Uneven syllable count
Musical setting A — Uneven
Musical setting B — Irregular

Poetic type IA: Even count; regular setting

When a stress pattern repeats itself line after line, as in “Caro nome,” Verdi has the option of setting each line to the same musical rhythm. He thereby creates a completely symmetrical melody in which each line of poetry is normally set as a two-measure phrase with both the primary and secondary accents placed on strong beats and the unaccented syllables falling on the weaker beats of the meter (ex. 3). This kind of setting is Verdi’s most regular, with none of the poetic stresses out of place in terms of the musical meter and with a high degree of motivic repetition prominent in the melodic line.

Poetic type IB: Even count; irregular setting

To the best of my knowledge there are no instances of Verdi setting regular even syllable poetry with any of the textual accents out of alignment with the musical meter.

Poetic type IIA: Uneven count; regular setting

While most poetry of uneven syllable count has the kind of irregular metric structure seen in example 2, there are occasions when it will mimic the regularity of even-syllable poetry. This we can see in the Duke’s cabaletta “Possente amor” from Rigoletto. (Cabalettas, by the way, are nearly always very regular in their poetic prosody whether they contain lines of even or uneven length.) The poetry here places the secondary accents on the second and fourth syllables (ex. 4a), and Verdi’s melodic setting reflects this regularity (ex. 4b) with a repeating twomeasure rhythm of \(\overrightarrow{J} J J J J J\) where the poetic accents coincide with the first and third beats of the measure, just as they did in “Caro nome.”

Example 5. “Parmi veder,” Rigoletto, Act II, the Duke

Poetic type IIB: Uneven count; irregular setting

Completely regular settings of uneven syllable-count poetry seem to occur only when the poetry has a consistent metric pattern as in “Possente amor.” Whenever the poetic meter is irregular, Verdi’s usual procedure is to allow certain kinds of deviation from the implied rhythm of the poetry usually for the sake of creating the kind of melodic-rhythmic symmetry we have seen in examples thus far. In “La donna è mobile” (Rigoletto) for instance, the text is made of five-syllable lines (quinario) with the metric pattern indicated below in example 6.
But in his setting of this text Verdi allows what appear to be unstressed syllables at the beginning of lines 1 and 2 to assume a musically accented position on the downbeat, thus displacing the poetic accent to a relatively weaker position on beat 2 as seen in example 7. So “la DONna” becomes “LA donna” and “qual PIuma” becomes “QUAL piuma.”

Example 7.
“La donna è mobile,” Rigoletto, Act III, the Duke

![Example 7]

Most often this kind of deliberate misalignment of poetic and musical meters results, as I have already hinted, from Verdi’s desire to maintain a particular rhythmic-melodic symmetry from phrase to phrase even in the face of shifting poetic accents. In some instances, Verdi even goes so far as to completely disregard the accent pattern of his text when deciding upon a particular melodic rhythm. The most famous example of this procedure is Violetta’s “Ah fors’e lui” from La Traviata where the seven-syllable poetry consistently produces secondary accents on the second and fourth syllables of every line (see ex. 8).

Example 8.
La Traviata, Act I, Violetta

Yet Verdi insists on setting this pattern to the rhythm of either $\bullet$ $\bullet$ $\bullet$ $\bullet$ $\bullet$ $\bullet$ or $\bullet$ $\bullet$ $\bullet$ $\bullet$ both of which displace the first poetic accent to a weak metric position (see ex. 9).³

Example 9. “Ah fors’e lui,” La Traviata, Act I, Violetta

![Example 9]
The greater variety of accent patterns in French poetry (its unpredictability) would seem to imply that composers setting French texts to music would be propelled to create asymmetrical melodic rhythms to accommodate the shifting accents from one line of poetry to the next. But prior to Don Carlos this kind of rhythmic suppleness is almost as rare in Verdi’s French operas as in his Italian. To determine the reason for this apparent disregard for the unique rhythmic structure of the French language, we need to look first at some representative samples of the poetry from the libretto for Les Vêpres by Scribe and Duveyrier and then at Verdi’s settings of those texts.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of French libretto texts has the irregular rhythmic structure just described, there are instances when French poetry duplicates the regularity of even-syllable Italian poetry. Verdi counted on this correlation when he set about transcribing some of his earlier Italian operas into French. Scribe’s and Duveyrier’s libretto for Les Vêpres, however, presented Verdi with only a few such instances. Among the five major arias in this opera, only one, that for Henri in Act IV, has this kind of perfect regularity. (See ex. 11.)

Example 11. Les Vêpres, Act IV, Henri

Verdi’s setting of this text (ex. 12) takes advantage of the prosodic regularity to create an unusually repetitive melodic pattern in which each line becomes a four-measure phrase with the rhythmic structure a + a, a + b, a + a, c + c.


The rest of the Vêpres libretto features poetry of greater metric variety. One of the most irregular texts in this respect is that for Hélène’s cavatina “Courage du courage” in Act I. Here the secondary accent moves in no discernible pattern between the first, second, third, and fourth syllables of the opening eight-line stanza as shown in example 13.

Example 13. Les Vêpres, Act I, Hélene

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line Text</th>
<th>Accented sylls.</th>
<th>Phrase struct. (2 m. level)</th>
<th>Phrase struct. (4 m. level)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Courage!</td>
<td>2, 6</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 À la tour­rave!</td>
<td>1, 6</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 À la tour­rave!</td>
<td>3, 6</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Le ciel­guide!</td>
<td>2, 6</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Oui­vaillant équipage,</td>
<td>1, 6</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Ne perdez pas­cour­age!</td>
<td>4, 6</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Veuillez­être­sauvés,</td>
<td>3, 6</td>
<td>A’</td>
<td>A’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Et Dieu­vous­sauve!</td>
<td>2, 6</td>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the extreme irregularity of the text, Verdi’s setting is surprisingly congruent and symmetrical (ex. 14 - next page), suggesting a conflict between the rhythm of text and music.

Overall the phrase structure of Verdi’s setting can be diagrammed as A B A C D D A’ E. In an attempt to create some rhythmic-melodic unity in this aria, Verdi began the A, B and C phrases all with an anacrusis of two sixteenth notes leading to a downbeat of longer value. This figure allows him to set lines in which the secondary accent falls on either the second or third syllable as seen in example 15.

Example 15.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>line 1</th>
<th>line 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cou-ra-ge</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A l'ou-vra-ge</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But why did Verdi use this same rhythm to set line 2 (of ex. 13) in which the secondary accent falls on the first syllable rather than the second or third? Two possible explanations might be suggested, both probably operative here: 1) Verdi felt the unity provided by the rhythm in question was a more important consideration than the proper
Poetic Prosody and Melodic Rhythm in Les Vêpres siciliennes

Example 14.
“Courage! du courage!” L’Épège, Act I, Hélène

---

prosody of the text; and/or 2) his interpretation of the prosody of line 2 is different from mine, deliberately ignoring the grammatical break after the first syllable and setting the line as though the poetic meter were “et POUR braVER l’oRaGe.” (Accents on the 2nd, 4th and 6th syllables.) This, interestingly enough, is one of the possible metric patterns that a line of this length could have if it were Italian rather than French poetry, leading one to wonder if Verdi might have occasionally reverted to more familiar and regular patterns of Italian prosody to justify his melodic choices whenever the actual prosody of his French poetry contradicted his melodic needs.

Another section of this aria that reveals something of interest about Verdi’s setting of French texts is the phrase pair DD (lines 5 & 6 of ex 13). With this phrase the poetry repeats the accent pattern just seen in line 2, but now Verdi chooses a more appropriate setting, placing the accent first syllable on the downbeat of the measure. His desire to repeat the music of this D phrase to the next line of poetry, however, presents new text-setting problems because line 6 has no grammatical punctuation that would cause an obvious cesura and an accent. In such cases Verdi found himself having to make his own divisions of the poetic line into its constituent grammatical parts. As mentioned earlier, this is no easy task. Some lines (like this one) seem to have no clear break points, forming themselves instead into a single indivisible sense-group. Others are open to different interpretations of the grammatical structure—a situation that, while confusing, actually offers the composer greater flexibility in his musical setting. Example 13 suggests with the use of a dotted line what I see as the only possible division one might make in line 6—“Ne perdez pas ; courage”—separating the negative construction from the adjective. Verdi’s setting of this line seems to confirm this division, at least to the extent that the word “pas” (the secondary accent) falls on a strong beat of the measure. But Verdi also places the first word, “ne,” on a strong beat despite the fact that it carries no poetic accent. This technical “missetting” duplicates his common Italian practice of allowing unaccented syllables to fall on strong beats of the measure. Often this practice has little effect on the poetic meter because the actual secondary accents may still fall on strong beats as well—which is the case in this example. However, in the setting of this particular French verse, the long duration given the first word “ne” compounds the stress created by its placement on the downbeat, and gives to the French poetry a sense of pause after the first word that contradicts both the grammar of the language and the natural rhythm of the poetry.

Equally problematic because of its lack of an obvious secondary accent is line 7. Here Verdi’s setting (see ex. 14) implies the pattern “veuilLEZ être sauVES,” placing the grammatical break, or cesura, in what seems to me to be an unlikely position between the imperative and infinitive parts of the verb. This cesura is then reinforced by Verdi’s insertion of a rest after “veuillez” which disrupts the natural elision found between these two words in spoken French (veuillez être). Finally the cesura is further exaggerated by the lengthening of the accent syllable of veuillez to 2 1/2 beats. Taken together, the effect of metric position, rhythmic duration (i.e., agogic accent), and melodic pause results in a musical reading of the poetry that would probably strike a native Frenchman as forced and arbitrary. An alternate and perhaps more natural division of the line might be between the verb “être” and the adjective “sauves”—thus collecting the verbs into one sense group and isolating them from the adjective. But in searching for reasons to justify Verdi’s avoidance of this “obvious” reading of the grammatical structure, one might argue that his placement of the cesura after “veuillez” was nothing short of a brilliant musical-dramatic stroke, because the pause effectively isolates and emphasizes the imperative “want”—“want to be saved, and God will save you.” This is one of those instances where the ambiguity of French prosody works to the advantage of the composer, allowing multiple readings of a verse. But one could argue for yet another interpretation of this setting. Consider the possibility that Verdi’s choice of one scansion over the other—i.e., his placing of the accent on the second syllable of “veuillez”—was determined not by any logical analysis of the sense-
groups of the verse, or by any desire to strengthen the imperative verb, but rather was motivated by purely musical considerations. With the music of line 7 Verdi returns to a variation of the opening A phrase, undoubtedly for reasons having to do with the creation of melodic symmetry and closure at the four-measure level (see ex. 13 last column). By using the A phrase at this point he constructs the melodic pattern AABA. Were he to have written a new melody to capture what seems to me to be the more logical division between “étre” and “sauves,” Verdi’s phrase shape would have taken on the pattern AABC, which he may have felt was not as satisfying a musical period as AABA.

In the final analysis this aria demonstrates the problems that extremely irregular French poetry could cause a composer whose vocal melodies were usually unified by the repetition of rhythmical motives or whole melodic phrases. Fortunately for Verdi, poetry of this irregularity is nearly as rare in Les Vêpres as is the poetry of perfect regularity. Most of the rest of Scribe’s and Duveyrier’s verses, while irregular, are not so random in their prosody.

When setting texts of more moderate irregularity, Verdi’s goal of rhythmic-melodic symmetry became easier to achieve. He discovered ways of making irregular French poetry fit more regular melodic patterns without apparent distortion of natural word stresses. An example of his common practice in the respect can be found in Hélène’s opening cantabile “Viens à nous.” My scansion appears in ex. 16.

Example 16. Les Vêpres, Act I, Hélène

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Accented sylls.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viens à nous, Dieu tutelaire!</td>
<td>3, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come to us, God of guidance!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apaise enfin ton courroux!</td>
<td>4, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleviate finally your anger!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exauce notre prière!</td>
<td>2, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant our prayer!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sauve-nous? protège-nous!</td>
<td>3, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save us? Protect us!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The metric scheme of the poetry can be diagramed A B C A, but a corresponding melodic scheme of that type is, I think, fairly rare among Verdi’s arias. Instead, he writes a melody whose rhythmic pattern is A A A’ B. Verdi distorts slightly the prosody of his first line with the by-now-familiar technique of placing the opening unaccented syllable on the downbeat of the measure (ex. 18). But the secondary accent on the word “nous” still falls on a strong beat, so the general effect is at least acceptable if not exactly elegant. In order to keep this phrase shape for the next line of poetry, however, Verdi had to add an anacrusis to the melody, as illustrated in example 17.

Example 17.

But if Verdi were going to retain his basically syllabic style of text setting, the new anacrusis at the beginning of the second phrase would cause the whole line of poetry to fall one syllable short at the end of the phrase. Compounding this problem is the fact that this second line of poetry actually has one syllable less than the first (like the Italian tronco ending, without the final weak syllable), effectively making Verdi’s hypothetical setting two syllables short. The only way he could stretch out the text of line 2 to cover all the notes of his melody was either to rely on melismas or to repeat some text. He chose the latter (as seen in ex. 18) managing thereby to maintain both the rhythmic symmetry and an accurate placement of textual accents.10 Example 18.


Summary

Confronted with the irregularities of French poetic prosody, Verdi did all he could to force his texts to accommodate his Italianate style of melody. In fact, so many of the characteristics of his French text setting remind us of his Italian operas, that we are led to conclude that Verdi’s approach to the Vêpres libretto was generally to treat his French text as though it were Italian. Specifically this means that:

1. Whenever it served his melodic needs he ignored the punctuation that would normally indicate stress points in French poetry, and relied instead on more familiar Italian prosodies.

2. Generally each line of poetry is set as a two-measure melodic phrase in a basically syllabic style.

3. Melodic-rhythmic symmetry of some kind is always present.

Of these characteristics the reliance on melodic-rhythmic symmetry is probably most important in determining the style of Verdi’s French text setting in Les Vêpres. To achieve this symmetry he usually either modifies slightly the details of rhythmic patterning between parallel phrases, resorts to
short melismas to accommodate new stress patterns, or repeats words until he can realign the textual accents with the musical accents of his melody. Despite his best efforts however, there are instances, as we have seen, where the imposition of rhythm-melodic-symmetry on irregular French texts results in some rather awkward correlations of poetry and music. Nowhere in Les Vêpres is there evidence of any serious attempt on Verdi’s part to duplicate in music the actual metric irregularity of his French poetry.

III

In saying this I make no condemnation of Verdi’s French text setting, for on the whole it is accurate in its alignment of poetic and musical accents. But despite this technical accuracy, a reading of Les Vêpres leaves one with the feeling that Verdi’s handling of his text is somehow not completely typical of French grand opera in general. But why? If we take the operas of Meyerbeer as a benchmark for comparison, we may note in these works a generally greater rhythm-melodic asymmetry and incongruence in sections of solo song. I hasten to clarify that this is not the result of the composer’s attempt to capture the fluidity of the French language in his music. Meyerbeer was no more careful in this respect than was Verdi. No, the irregularity of much French melodic writing results rather from two principal factors: one concerning the structure of the libretto itself, the other concerning the compositional procedures applied to that libretto.

The first significant difference between French and Italian librettos is that in France the texts upon which solo singing is made are not always constructed completely of lines of equal length. Unlike Italian librettos in which a strophe of ottonario poetry will consist entirely of eight-syllable lines, Scribe’s librettos for Meyerbeer occasionally mix lines of unequal lengths in aria texts, as example 19 from Act V of Le Prophète will demonstrate.

### Example 19. Le Prophète, Act V, Fides’s cavatine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>No. of syllables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comme un éclair, ô vérité</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like a flash of lightning, o truth</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que ta flamme</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let thy flame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du fils ingrat, du révolté</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the ungrateful son, the rebel</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frappe l’âme!</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strike the soul</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qu’il soit dompté soudain</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let him be suddenly tamed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comme l’airain</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like the bronze</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par le feu!</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By the fire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et toi, mon Dieu</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And you, my God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De ta céleste grâce enfin touche son âme!</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your heavenly grace, finally touch his soul!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sainte phalange,</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy host</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rends-lui son ange!</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give back his angel!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Such variations in the syllable count from one line of poetry to another practically guarantee that the composer will have to create melodic rhythms of corresponding asymmetry.

The libretto for Les Vêpres is unusual in this regard because only two aria texts contain a mixture of line lengths, and in each of these cases the alteration of line length is confined to one strophe of poetry only. Thus, Monfort’s aria “Au sein de la puissance” in Act III begins with eight lines of six-syllable poetry:

Au sein de la puissance,
Au sein de la grandeur.

Etc.

then switches to a four-line strophe of eight-syllable poetry:

La haine égara sa jeunesse,
Mai près de moi, dans ce palais,

Etc.

before returning to a repetition of the opening strophe of six-syllable poetry. Since the poetic irregularity is limited to one complete strophe in the middle of the text, Verdi is able to create a simple ABA musical form to accommodate this variety of line length. Here an aspect of poetic form can be seen to bear directly on musical form, but not on the level that influences the regularity of phrase structures and melodic rhythms.

Of even greater importance as a factor determining the rhythmic irregularities of Meyerbeer’s operas is the astonishing freedom with which he treated his printed libretto, often subjecting it to extensive revisions of its poetic structure. These alterations include everything from the simple repetition of words in a line of poetry to more radical additions and deletions of text. In many instances such changes create further irregularities in the line lengths, even where the librettist might have written something quite simple and regular.

Before considering the impact of Meyerbeer’s alterations of his librettos on the musical form of his operas, we must first admit that this practice of altering librettos was not unique to Meyerbeer or to French opera in general. Indeed, composers of vocal music rarely set texts exactly as they appear in print. More often they take it upon themselves to repeat words or phrases as needed in the music. In terms of nineteenth-century opera librettos, the composer’s repetition of a word or phrase in a line of poetry technically increases the syllable count of that line and upsets the uniformity of line lengths. Similarly,
the repetition of a line alters the stanzaic form of the poetry. But composers, including Verdi, seem not to have been bothered by these technical infractions of the rules of poetic form and prosody.

In Verdi's case the poetry of nearly every aria features some text repetition in its musical setting. The opening four lines of "Ah fors'e lui" (La Traviata), for example, actually become six lines in Verdi's setting.

**Example 20. La Traviata, Act I, Violetta**

Piave's Libretto:  
As set by Verdi:  
Ah fors'e lui che l'anima  
Solinga ne' tumulti  
Godea sovente pingere  
De' suoi colori occulti...  
De' suoi colori occulti!

While this change may seem to threaten the symmetry of Verdi's usual 8-measure opening period, we can see from his setting that the change was in fact made to guarantee that symmetry. (Refer back to ex. 9.) Note that the opening period of this aria is a 16-measure (rather than 8-measure) unit beginning with a phrase that sets only one line of poetry to four measures of music (rather than the usual two), thus establishing a 1:4 ratio of poetry to music. But this pattern is immediately broken with the next phrase because the musical rhythm of the B phrase (also four measures) is of such greater density than that of the A phrase, that Verdi is forced to repeat the second line of poetry in order to have enough text to fill up the music.

Verdi's repetition of single words or short phrases usually serves the same purpose of maintaining melodic balance while providing needed variety in the melodic rhythm. A typical use of word repetition appears in "De' miei bollenti spiriti" (La Traviata, Act II). The seven-syllable poetry of the libretto is altered in line 4 where Verdi repeats the words "dell' amor."

**Example 21. Text as set by Verdi**

De' miei bollenti spiriti  
Of my impetuous spirits  
Il giovanile ardore  
The youthful ardor  
Ella temprò col placido  
She tempered with the peaceful  
Sorriso dell' amor [dell' amor]!  
Smile of love.

As before, this repeat is necessitated by the greater rhythmic density of one of the musical phrases (here the fourth phrase in the opening AAAB period, ex. 22), and also by the fact that line 4 is one (or sometimes two) syllables shorter than the other lines (i.e., tronco rather than piano or sdrucciolo).

**Example 22.**

"De' miei bollenti spiriti," Traviata, Act II, Alfredo

![Example 22 Diagram](image)

The subject of text repetition in Verdi's arias and its relationship to poetic form is too complex to pursue further in this paper. For our present purposes, suffice it to say that in general Verdi will repeat words when he wants to increase the rhythmic drive to a cadence (often the fourth and final phrase in an opening 8- or 16-measure period), or when a contrasting phrase (B in ABAC, for example) has a greater rhythmic density than the initial melodic phrase. The repetition of words and whole lines also often signals the approach to the "full-stop" cadenza at the end of a cavatina. Most important is the fact that in Verdi's music, the repetition of words and lines from the libretto usually occurs only after the full text has been presented in its entirety in unaltered form. Such repetitions then produce isolated deviations within the regular poetic structure of the libretto, and these compositionally generated deviations are easily perceived as musically motivated variations or amplifications of the librettist's poetry, rather than as irregularities in the poetry itself.

Such is not the case with the work of Meyerbeer, as example 23 from the Act IV duet between Berthe and Fides in Le Prophète will show.

**Example 23. Le Prophète, Act IV, Fides**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text as printed</th>
<th>Text as set by Meyerbeer</th>
<th>No. of sylls.</th>
<th>Phrase structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dieu me guidera!</td>
<td>1 Dieu me guidera!</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2m., A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God will guide me!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dieu m'inspira!</td>
<td>2 Dieu m'inspira!</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2m., A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God will inspire me!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sa voix immortelle</td>
<td>3 Sa voix, sa voix immortelle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2m., B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His voice, his immortal voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M'anime et m'appelle!</td>
<td>4 Sa voix m'anime et m'appelle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2m., B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His voice animates and calls me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma seule espérance</td>
<td>5 Sainte espérance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1m., C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy hope</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Est dans la vengeance</td>
<td>6 De la vengeance,</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1m., C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of vengeance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**

Poetic Prosody and Melodic Rhythm in Les Vêpres siciliennes

The left column shows the text as printed in Scribe's libretto. It consists of eight 5-syllable lines. In the second column we can see the same text as altered and set by Meyerbeer. This version comprises an unusual collection of lines of different lengths, ranging from four to seven syllables. With alterations that go far beyond Verdi's simple word and line repetitions, Meyerbeer has boldly added words not in the original poetry (line 4 of his setting), has substituted words (lines 5 & 6), has conflated two lines into one (line 9), and has even created a completely new line (7). The effect of such far-reaching textual revision is a libretto in which the regularity of the original is no longer discernible and the composer's alterations are not perceived, as with Verdi, as embellishments of a regular original form. Instead, the original poetry has been so heavily emended that one can fairly say that it has been supplanted or superseded by the composer's version—in spots an entirely new and different libretto. In effect, Meyerbeer has become his own librettist, and in so doing has created a poetry of unusual irregularity. When this poetry is set to music, its irregularity is manifested in asymmetrical phrase lengths and/or remarkable variations in the level of rhythmic activity between phrases (what we have already referred to as the rhythmic density of the melodic writing, i.e., the number of notes occupying any given phrase length). Example 23 (far right column) and example 24 show how Meyerbeer was forced by the different line lengths of his revised libretto to create a completely new melodic phrase to accommodate every alteration of the original poetry.

Example 24. "Dieu me guidera!" Le Prophète, Act IV, Berthe

```
7 Tu me soutiens!
You sustain me!
Jean... reveille-toi!
John! wake up.
9 Jean! marche avec moi!
John! march with me!
Viens!
Come, march with me!
10 Viens, marche avec moi!
Come, march with me!
11 Viens, marche avec moi!
Come, march with me!

The left column shows the text as printed in Scribe's libretto. It consists of eight 5-syllable lines. In the second column we can see the same text as altered and set by Meyerbeer. This version comprises an unusual collection of lines of different lengths, ranging from four to seven syllables. With alterations that go far beyond Verdi's simple word and line repetitions, Meyerbeer has boldly added words not in the original poetry (line 4 of his setting), has substituted words (lines 5 & 6), has conflated two lines into one (line 9), and has even created a completely new line (7). The effect of such far-reaching textual revision is a libretto in which the regularity of the original is no longer discernible and the composer's alterations are not perceived, as with Verdi, as embellishments of a regular original form. Instead, the original poetry has been so heavily emended that one can fairly say that it has been supplanted or superseded by the composer's version—in spots an entirely new and different libretto. In effect, Meyerbeer has become his own librettist, and in so doing has created a poetry of unusual irregularity. When this poetry is set to music, its irregularity is manifested in asymmetrical phrase lengths and/or remarkable variations in the level of rhythmic activity between phrases (what we have already referred to as the rhythmic density of the melodic writing, i.e., the number of notes occupying any given phrase length). Example 23 (far right column) and example 24 show how Meyerbeer was forced by the different line lengths of his revised libretto to create a completely new melodic phrase to accommodate every alteration of the original poetry.
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Although the A and B phrases are both two measures long, their rhythms are very different because of the increased syllabic density. As a result, the phrases have no common rhythmic element to unify them. The four-syllable lines that follow also demand a new rhythmic treatment, but their brevity now produces phrases of only one measure each (the C phrases in ex. 24). The fact that there are three of these short lines only compounds the irregularity by forcing Meyerbeer to write a three-measure phrase before returning to the original A phrase with the reappearance of several five-syllable lines to finish the strophe. Solo songs with a phrase structure of this pattern (A A B B C C) and with no rhythmic congruence between phrases are rare in Verdi's operas (including Les Vêpres) if they exist at all. Ultimately, the absence of such structures in Les Vêpres is the single greatest contributor to the Italianate sound of that score.

Only occasionally in Les Vêpres does Verdi write anything as irregular as these examples from Le Prophète, and even then he saves this irregularity—the five-measure phrases and the altered lines of poetry— for points in the aria well after the completion of the opening eight- or sixteen-measure period, which always comprises four equal lines of poetry set in a symmetrical pattern. Monfort's "Au sein de la puissance" in Act III of Les Vêpres is an example of an instance of exceptional irregularity in Verdi's setting of his text. (See exs. 27a & b.)

Example 27a. Les Vêpres, Act III, Monfort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Phrase structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | Au sein de la puissance  
At the heart of power | 2m., A |
| 2    | Au sein de la grandeur,  
At the heart of grandeur | 2m., B |
| 3    | Un vide affreux, immense,  
A frightful void, immense | 2m., A |
| 4    | Régnait seul dans mon cœur!  
Reigns alone in my heart | 2m., C |


Here, after the opening eight-measure period (ABAC set to the usual four lines of poetry), Verdi repeats line 3 again to the rhythm of the A phrase. But he follows this with a new three-measure phrase (D in ex. 27b) that conflates two lines of poetry into one irregular phrase—a procedure that brings Les Vêpres briefly close to the rhythmic suppleness of Verdian French models.

From this cursory overview of the principles governing Verdi's setting of French texts in Les Vêpres siciliennes, we can conclude that the difference between the natural prosodies of French and Italian poetry does not produce in Verdi's music correspondingly different melodic rhythms for each language. From a procedural point of view, Verdi's French text setting in Les Vêpres is similar to his setting of Italian texts. With a unifying rhythmic-melodic congruity as his primary goal, he finds ways of circumventing the irregularity of both French and Italian poetry, in effect allowing melodic structure to take precedence over proper poetic prosody whenever poetic meters become too irregular. Another important similarity between Les Vêpres and Verdi's contemporaneous Italian operas (one that contributes to the Italianate sound of Verdi's French melodic rhythms) is the fact that the libretto by Scribe and Duveyrier for Les Vêpres, like those by Italian librettists with whom Verdi was more familiar, contained poetry mostly of uniform line lengths in sections intended for solo song. This uniformity of syllable count from line to line partly enabled Verdi to avoid much of the rhythmic irregularity that one usually associates with traditional French grand opera (especially Meyerbeer's). Thus, in the setting of his first original French libretto, Verdi shows himself to be more an Italian than a Frenchman, and more a musician than a poet.
Footnotes

1 There is no doubt that Verdi's melodic style (in both French and Italian) changed in the course of his career. Any conclusions that can be drawn from this limited investigation are therefore applicable only to Verdi at mid-career.

2 This summary of the rules of Italian poetic prosody is extracted from Luciana Castelnuovo, La metrica italiana (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1979); Pier Enea Guarnerio, Manuale di versificazione italiana (Milan, 1913); and Theodor Elwert, Italienische Metrik (Munich: Max Hueber, 1968). On the related subject of Verdi's adaptation of the music of I Lombardi to the new French text of Jerusalem, see my article "Text Setting in Verdi's Jerusalem and Don Carlos," Verdi Newsletter 12 (1984): 19-31.

3 In the poetic examples throughout this paper, the heavy primary accent is indicated by =, weaker secondary accents by -. and an unstressed syllable by U. In Italian poetry the primary accent falls on the penultimate syllable because most Italian words have their accent on that syllable. Some Italian words, however, have their accents on the final syllable (these are known as tronco) or on their antepenultimate syllable (known as sdruccolo). In example 1 the primary accent does not fall on the penultimate syllable because each line has a tronco ending in which the usual final weak syllable is missing. The number of syllables in tronco lines is determined by including this final weak syllable in the count even though it is missing from the poetry. Similarly, a line with a sdruccolo ending will have a syllable count that excludes the "extra" weak syllable at the end (see the beginning of ex. 2). In all Italian examples the English translations are adapted by me from those given in William Weaver's Seven Verdi Librettos (New York: Norton, 1975).

4 The first of the two secondary accents is thus correctly placed in the musical meter, but Verdi allows the second accent in the first line to fall awkwardly in the middle of a triplet. This kind of text setting will be discussed later.

5 We know from Verdi's sketches for this work (printed in Carlo Gatti, ed., Verdi nelle immagini, Milan, 1941, pp. 64-65) that he had the melody for this aria fully in mind before receiving the text from his librettist. This unusual situation arose undoubtedly because Verdi was pressed for time in composing La Traviata—the premiere of which followed that of II Trovatore by only about six weeks—and was therefore forced to draft some of the music before seeing Piave's text. But it was ultimately his unwillingness to make major changes in that original melody that resulted in the missetting of the text noted above.


7 For a discussion of the new more rhythmically supple text setting in Don Carlos, see my earlier article "Text Setting in Verdi's Jerusalem and Don Carlos," Verdi Newsletter 12 (1984): 28ff.

8 In the following examples of French texts all translations are my own.

9 All musical examples for Les Vêpres are drawn from the vocal score published by Léon Escudier (Paris, 1855).

10 This subject of text repetition as it relates to melodic rhythm and poetic prosody is an important one to which we will return in the final section of this paper.

11 Such a comparison would have been unavoidable from Verdi's point of view. By 1850 Giacomo Meyerbeer was the undisputed king of French grand opera, and one of Verdi's librettists, Eugène Scribe, was also Meyerbeer's principal collaborator.

12 This and all following examples are drawn from the printed libretto by Eugène Scribe and Charles Duveyrier (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, [1849?]).

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Verdi Announcement...

To celebrate the 21st anniversary of the American Institute For Verdi Studies, founded April 1, 1976, there will be an all-day conference, "Verdi and Censorship," at New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Maramo on Saturday April 19, 1997. For the entire month of April 1997 there will also be an exhibit, in two parts, at the same location: "Verdi the Man," including the Institute's growing collection of autograph letters written by the composer, as well as the subject of the conference, "Verdi and Censorship."