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Marcello Conati
Centro Internazionale per La Ricerca Sui Periodici Musicali

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Verdi [...] never knew Wagner, not even by sight. Wagner, this great individual, now departed, was never afflicted by the little itch of vanity, but was devoured by an incandescent, boundless, pride, like Satan or Lucifer, the most beautiful of the angels fallen from heaven!1

Thus wrote Giuseppina Strepponi Verdi to Cesare Vigna at the time of the death of the creator of Parsifal. That the two composers had neither met nor manifested a desire to do so has always been assumed, perhaps even taken for granted. But to learn that directly from Verdi’s wife certainly helps to dispel any possible residual doubts.

Yet the two great masters had on at least one occasion, so to speak, nearly touched. It had happened in Vienna in the spring of 1875, when their fame was at its peak. Wagner had arrived there in May to conduct three symphonic concerts at the Hofoperntheater. In June, after Wagner’s departure, Verdi was to take over conducting his Messa da Requiem, new to Vienna, and Aida, with an all-star cast that included Teresa Stolz, Maria Waldmann, Angelo Masini and Paolo Medini. This coincidence did not escape a correspondent of the Monthly Musical Record, who noted the following August:

Wagner and Verdi conducting almost at the same moment in the same town, and both filling the house to the top! Who would have believed it ten years ago? And this time Verdi has even out-run the former, as the third concert of Wagner (and that was still in the first days of May) was already beginning to show empty seats, whereas Verdi, in the very heat of June, and in defiance of enhanced entrées, was strong enough to fill the great Opera House six times.2

In October of the same year the Verdi Requiem was performed again under the direction of Hans Richter, the newly named director of the Viennese orchestra. Present at one of these performances, “tired and suffering from a cold,”3 was Richard Wagner, in the company of his wife Cosima, who noted the event in her diary on 2 November, but without any comment, or rather, observing that it was best not to talk about it.4 However, that Verdi’s Requiem had made some impression (at least from a financial standpoint) on Wagner, always in search of money, is indirectly witnessed by his response of a few months later (Bayreuth, 8 February 1876) to Theodore Thomas, who had requested, also on behalf of a few American admirers, a large-scale composition to celebrate the centennial of the United States’ independence5:

Mr. Verdi has received from his publisher, Ricordi, for the unlimited rights over the performance of his Requiem approximately a half million francs: therefore I will be allowed to deduct from it the value of a by-now famous composer.”6

Here Wagner referred the word “value” first and foremost to himself... * * *

News of a certain composer named Richard Wagner had already begun to leak out in the Italian press in the early 1840s, following the first performance of Rienzi in Dresden. The Gazzetta musicale di Milano, published by Ricordi, reported on it in 1842 (the first year of its existence, and the year of Nabucco) through a dispatch from a Viennese music journal.7 It is possible that Verdi cast a distracted glance at this and other fragmentary news that later appeared in the same journal about the composer of Rienzi and the premiere of Lohengrin in Weimar, under Liszt’s direction. He was perhaps less distracted when he read an article, again in the Gazzetta, about the treatise Oper und Drama,8 and a series of letters “to dramatic composers” signed by Fétis (given in Italian translation in L’Italia musicale, February-August 1854), in which the Belgian critic took the Wagnerian “reform” into consideration.9 At that time Verdi was already in Paris for the composition of Les Vêpres siciliennes; and he must have obtained more precise news—especially through Hector Berlioz—regarding Wagner, his most recent operas, Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, and especially his ideas of reform. The news became more frequent in the spring of 1855, when—while Verdi was preparing for the premiere of his Vêpres at the Opéra—on the other side of the Channel, in London, Wagner conducted a series of symphonic concerts including his own compositions. Still, this news was often indirect and crammed with conflicting observations and comments, destined more to disorient that to inform.

A fundamental rule of competition, even in the arts, is that one should not underestimate one’s opponent, but know him and study him carefully. In his artistic struggles to obtain supremacy in Italy in the 1840s, and in Europe in the following decade, Verdi had never ignored his competitors, especially those who had come before him—

I am old and reactionary... that is: old, yes, but reactionary, not so much.
(to Ricordi, 6 November, 1891)
in particular Mercadante, Donizetti, and Meyerbeer. He had studied them in depth, not reading their scores, but evaluating them in the theater, in accordance with the habit manifested many times in his letters (to Opprandino Arrivabene: "I don't understand music through my eyes"; to Filippo Filippi: "I keep up to date with some of the best contemporary operas, never studying them, but hearing them a few times in the theater"; to Giulio Ricordi: "according to my old habit I want to see and hear with my eyes and my ears when it comes to theatrical matters"). But how would he know Wagner? His work? His ideas about reform? There was no direct source from which to draw knowledge, except for seeing his operas in the theater, or at least reading one of his writings. Wagner's operas had not circulated outside of Germany, and his writings had not yet been translated. To Abramo Basevi, who, discussing the Wagnerian reform, supported tolerance and the free circulation of ideas, Wagner, in a letter of March 1856, found nothing better to write than to recommend that the Florentine scholar read especially the first part of his book *Oper und Drama*. But to find an Italian translation of this fundamental writing one would have to wait almost a half-century. In the meantime, one would hear the echo, ever more pressing, of the performances of *Rienzi*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* at several German theaters, and particularly in Vienna: *Lohengrin* in 1858 and *Tannhäuser* in 1860. In March 1861, for the first time an opera by Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, landed in Paris, preceded in previous months by a few concerts of his own music given by Wagner at the Conservatoire and at the Théâtre Italien. The failure of *Tannhäuser* at the Opéra (only three performances) had been the cause of endless discussions. Verdi, kept in Italy by political obligations, was informed of it not only by the press (particularly the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, which gave ample room to the event), but also by his publisher, Escudier. It was in fact Giuseppina Strepponi who pressed for "the most exact" news. We do not know how seriously Verdi took Escudier's report, which dwelled on superficial observations filled with anecdotes, such as the one of an officer on duty at the theater: "Sir, I fought in the Crimean War, I fought in the Italian war, I was at Solferino, and I never trembled; well, sir, this music frightens me, and I am leaving."15

In the summer of 1863 Verdi was in Paris for the revival of *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, an occasion that allowed him to avenge Wagner posthumously, if unintentionally, by instigating the dismissal of the orchestra manager Pierre Dietzsch, who had been identified as the person responsible for the bad performance of *Tannhäuser*, and therefore for Wagner's fall. Did Verdi deepen his acquaintance with Wagner during this brief sojourn, maybe even reading a few of his scores? Upon his return to Italy, Verdi ventured the following sentence to Clarina Maiefi, who had asked his opinion about two young composers, Arrigo Boito and Franco Faccio:

These two young people are accused of being red-hot admirers of Wagner. There is nothing wrong with that, provided that admiration doesn't degenerate into imitation. Wagner is done and it is useless to redo him. Wagner is not a ferocious beast, as the purists believe, nor is he a prophet as his apostles would want. He is a man of much talent who is fond of the rugged path, because he does not know how to find the easier and more direct one.

But it was only two years later that Verdi, having returned to Paris, had the opportunity for direct contact with Wagner's music: the overture to *Tannhäuser*, performed at the Popular Concerts. He wrote to his friend Opprandino Arrivabene on 31 December 1865:

[... ] I have been to the Opéra four times!!! And once or twice to every opera house, and everywhere I have been thoroughly bored. *L'Africaine* is certainly not Meyerbeer's best opera. I have also heard the overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. He is a madman!!!

Although expressed in the confines of an epistolary confidence, this judgment—so cut-and-dried and without comment—leaves one perplexed. Exactly what might have constituted for Verdi the "madness" of Wagner is truly unimaginable in an overture that does not seem to present marked revolutionary traits, except perhaps in the innovative treatment of the orchestra. (Unless Verdi, who we know was extremely hypersensitive in matters of musical execution, had been to some extent influenced by an unacceptable performance: one thinks, for example, of the "thunderous string scales" over the pilgrims' song, a very risky passage even for today's orchestras. Nevertheless, Verdi probably could not imagine that a few months earlier there had appeared in the *Niederhreinische Musikzeitung* an article entitled "Verdi and Wagner"—perhaps the first in a long series of articles that pairs the names of the two composers—which reproduced in its entirety a Viennese journal's lengthy review of *La forza del destino* as recently performed in the Austrian capital (obviously still in the St. Petersburg version) by an Italian company. This review reported a confirmation of the tendency, already present in *Ballo in maschera*, to predilect situatnsusik and to transform the traditional structure of Italian opera into *opera-drama*, a tendency that the critic judged similar to that of his colleague Wagner, with the difference, however, that the latter pursued it with greater awareness and presumption. The opinion of the Viennese critic was not at all isolated. Two years later, for instance, with regard to *Don Carlos*, the young Bizet observed in a letter to a friend: "Verdi is no longer Italian—he wants to do like Wagner. He no longer has his defects. But he also lost all his qualities.

And this opinion of *Don Carlos* was expressed by a good number of French critics; Verdi protested in vain, writing to Escudier:

At last I am a nearly perfect Wagnerian. But if the critics had paid a bit more attention they would have seen that
the same intentions are in the Ernani trio, in the sleepwalking scene in Macbeth, and in so many other pieces, etc. etc.23

That Verdi, with Don Carlos, had “Germanized” himself in order to follow in Wagner’s footsteps was also the opinion of some Neapolitan critics; the composer replied:

You are such old fogeys!!!. You speak to me about melody, about harmony! Wagner; don’t even dream of it!!!... On the contrary, if someone wanted to listen and understand well, it would be the opposite... totally the opposite...24

He could still rejoice in the great success reported for Aida in Naples under his direction, and he wrote about it with satisfaction to the Countess Maffei:

The success of Aida [...] was straightforward, definite, not poisoned with ifs and buts... and with the old sentences about Wagnerism, the Future, melopea, etc. etc. The public abandoned themselves to their own impressions and applauded. That’s all! They applauded, and they also abandoned themselves to transports of which I don’t approve; but they finally manifested what they felt without restraint and without hidden motives! And do you know why?...Because here there are no critics that act like apostles; no crowd of Maestri who only know the music that they study in the models of Mendelssohn, Schumann, Wagner, etc...25

But there remained the annoying fact that his two previous operas could be interpreted as written under the influence of Wagner. He wrote to Giulio Ricordi two years later:

After Aida, endless nonsense!: that it is no longer Verdi of Un ballo [...] and finally that he was an imitator of Wagner!!! Beautiful result, after a 35-year career, to end up an Imitator!!! 26

And each exhortation to take up the pen again and write more operas received a disconsolate reply:

The result would not be very good. I would hear them tell me again that I don’t know how to write and that I have become a follower of Wagner. Beautiful glory! After an almost forty-year career, to end up an imitator!27

* * *

I do not know if there is a study of the first concert performances of Wagner’s music in Italy during the nineteenth century. I have learned, by consulting a few music periodicals, that perhaps the first performances were of the march from Tannhäuser at the Popular Concerts in Florence and, a few days later, the Tannhäuser overture at the Società Filarmonica in Turin, both in June 1867, followed once again, in March 1869, by the Tannhäuser overture at the Fenice in Venice; then, in the same year, the overture to Der fliegende Holländer in Milan, performed in May by the Società del Quartetto and in August at the Conservatory, and the overture to Tannhäuser by the Società del Quartetto. Not much, compared to the growing fortunes of the transalpine master. While in Italy they still spoke of Tannhäuser and Lohengrin and lingered over their so-called “futuristic” character, Wagner had in the meantime gone beyond, with Munich performances of Tristan (1865), Die Meistersinger (1868), and Das Rheingold and Die Walküre (1869). Verdi felt that a powerful adversary was about to appear on his own turf, in Italy, where until now he had reigned virtually uncontested. And Wagner no longer seemed to him “a madman.” Rather, Verdi saw in Wagner a well-versed composer who, after the death of Meyerbeer, was in every way emerging as his most direct rival in the struggle to achieve supremacy over the European operatic scene. Little by little his attitude was taken over by a sense of cautious respect. Right away he thought about having the composer of Tannhäuser write a piece for the Piave Album;28 in fact, he wrote to Ricordi on 29 March 1869:

We need to do this album for Piave. It is almost certain that Auber and Thomas will contribute two pieces. It lacks a sixth [piece]! By whom? Couldn’t Signora Piave or someone else beg Giovannina Luca to have it done by Wagner?29

And meanwhile, rejecting Escudier’s sneers towards the German musician, he made Giuseppina write in truly prophetic words:

Speak no more to me of Wagner with this contempt and this aversion. Listen well, my dear friend. I predict that in a few years the Parisians will play nothing but Wagner.30

Increasingly curious, but also disoriented, Verdi tried, in the absence of an actual performance, at least to study Wagner’s aesthetic thought. He did so in order to have direct contact with Wagner’s ideas of reform and with other aspects of his thought, perhaps even the embarrassing and shameful libel, Das Judenthum in der Musik, which had recently been reprinted with its author’s name, and which had been the subject of an article of remonstrance and disapproval in the Gazzetta Musicale di Milano.31 In January 1870, during the composition of Aida, Verdi wrote to his collaborator Camille Du Locle:

Villainous Du Locle! You forgot to send me Wagner’s literary writings. You know that I also want to know him from this angle, and still I beg you to do what you have not done.32
We know Du Locle's answer:

Do not accuse me of forgetting. The writings of Wagner that you want to read have never been translated into French [...] The only thing by Wagner that can be procured is the famous preface to his opera librettos (I believe you have this volume with you); [...] I ended up writing to Wagner himself — without telling him, it is understood who wants these translations.33

We do not know what result Du Locle obtained by writing to Wagner; but it is surprising to learn that Verdi already possessed one of the German master's writings, still preserved in the Villa Verdi library at S. Agata. It is the Quatre poèmes d’opéras traduits en prose française, précédés d'une lettre sur la musique (Paris, 1861), in which the letter is nothing other than the important writing on the "Zukunftsmusik" (hardly a negligible detail: about half of the pages of the copy possessed by Verdi remained uncut...).34

That knowledge of Wagner's ideas became a little less vague in Verdi's mind is demonstrated in one of his letters to Ricordi, in which, in view of the upcoming Scala performance of Aida, he asked to make certain important modifications that would guarantee the work "a truly artistic performance" ("una vera esecuzione artistica"); among these was the disposition of the orchestra:

This placement of the orchestra is of much greater importance that is commonly believed, for the instrumental blend, for sonorities, and for the effect. These small improvements will open the way to other innovations that will certainly come one day, among them the removal of the boxes from the stage, bringing the curtain to the stage apron; the other, to render the orchestra invisible. This idea is not mine, it is Wagner's: it is excellent [...].35

Nevertheless, in the matter of the invisible orchestra, Verdi considered ideas that were even more radical than Wagner's, at least judging from what he wrote to Lorenzo Mascheroni over twenty years later:

The orchestra, which belongs in an ideal and poetic world, etc., and plays in the midst of an audience that applauds or hisses, is the most ridiculous thing in the world. With the great advantages of the invisible orchestra, one could even tolerate the inevitable lack of power and of sonority, the nasal and infantile sound that the orchestra would acquire if placed, so I will say, with mutes. But if the completely invisible orchestra is impossible, as they demonstrate not only at the Opéra, [but] at most theaters in Germany, and even at Munich and Bayreuth (I repeat, completely), all of the modifications that you will do are childish, and have nothing to do with art.36

Shortly before the premiere of Aida, on 19 November 1871, Lohengrin was finally given for the first time in Italy, at Bologna's Teatro Comunale, more than twenty years after its world premiere. Verdi did not miss the chance to see and hear a complete Wagner opera in the theater; he got himself to Bologna, armed with Lucca's edition of the piano-vocal score, in which he noted his impressions. These concern, above all, the performance—for Verdi, almost always unsatisfactory—but they also include synthetic judgments about the opera's merits. These notes are by now well known, at least in the version given by Alessandro Luzio; it will suffice here to quote the conclusion:

Mediocre impression. Beautiful music; when it is clear, there is thought. The action moves as slowly as the words. Therefore, boredom. Beautiful instrumental effects. Excess of held notes, with heavy result. Mediocre performance. Much verve, but without poetry and refinement. At the difficult points, always bad.37

That dissatisfaction with a mediocre performance, weighed heavily on a negative judgment of the opera's intrinsic merits is confirmed in a letter to Giulio Ricordi dated 22 November 1871:

[...] I went to Bologna and I found the performance of Lohengrin totally different from what I had imagined after the reports I had received. Therefore I was right to see and hear it for myself.38

This does not mean that Verdi did not find in Lohengrin an aspect he so cordially detested in the theater: boredom. The following year it was the turn of the Italian premiere of Tannhäuser, again at the Comunale in Bologna; occupied by other business (Don Carlos and Aida in Naples), Verdi did not run to see it. But he found the opportunity to see this opera during his visit to Vienna in June 1875: based on what he confidentially told Italo Pizzi years later, however, we learn that he had been very bored.39 In the course of this visit a Viennese journalist questioned him about Wagner:

When our conversation fell to Wagner, Verdi observed that that great genius has rendered incalculable service to the melodramatic art, since he has had the courage to get rid of the traditional baroque forms; "I, too, have tried to fuse music with drama," he said, "and precisely in Macbeth, but I could not write the libretti myself the way Wagner does. Wagner surpasses all composers in the variety of his instrumental colors, only he advanced as much in form as in style. In the beginning he successfully fought realism; much later, however, he distanced himself with exaggeration from the poetic
ideal and committed the same error that he had initially made it his duty to correct. The monotony, therefore, that he victoriously fought threatened, after some time, to dominate him. "[...] I have found the Tannhäuser performance that I attended to be excellent; above all the orchestra, but also the chorus and the staging have stirred his admiration..."

***

Lohengrin and Tannhäuser in Bologna; Lohengrin again in Florence and at La Scala; Rienzi in Venice. The "big northern clouds" had finally found a passage to cross the Alps and penetrate the peninsula. Exactly those "big clouds" that threatened Italian art, according to the opinion now shared by a plethora of commentators, and expressed by Tito Ricordi (we are in May 1865, at the height of the Scapigliati's activity) to a Verdi who seemed to have halted his own artistic way after the uncertain outcome of La forza del destino. The composer replied:

Are you complaining about the big clouds that come here from the North?! You are wrong: I take my hat off to them, and let them come, since they are so welcome. I have always loved and desired progress, and if the coterie (permit me this expression, which I employ in the most benevolent sense) established in Milan, in which your Giulio takes part, and of which you yourself, perhaps without wanting to, are an accomplice, will be able to raise our music once again, I will shout Hosanna! I, too, want the music of the future, that is to say, I believe in a music yet to come, and if I have not known how to make it, the fault is not mine. If I, too, have soiled the altar, like Boito says, he cleans it, and I will be the first to come and light a candle for him. Hurray, then, for the coterie; hurray for the North if it brings light and the Sun."

And concerning music "of the future" he poured out to Arrivabene:

What beautiful novelty! I, too, know that there is a Music of the future, but at this moment I think, and will also think next year, that to make a shoe you need some leather!!! Doesn't it seem to you that this stupid comparison means that to make an opera you must first of all have some music in your body?! I declare that I am and will be an enthusiastic admirer of the futurists, on the condition that they make music for me... any kind, any system, etc., but music! Enough, enough! I wouldn't want to speak too much of the disease, for fear that I might catch it. Stay calm. I may very well lack the strength to arrive where I want to go, but I know what I want."

It is in the course of the 1860s that Verdi's attitude toward the state of music in his time begins to become clearer. And not by chance. It is the first decade of Italian political unification. Finally leaving behind his "galley years," Verdi seemed like the artist (aside from Manzoni) most representative of the new Italy and, in a more general sense, one of the leading men in the national culture. At the same time he himself also represented the last living chapter in the phase of Italian melodrama that appeared a half century earlier with Rossini, a phase that the new generation (Boito and Faccio at its head) meant to close in order to open new paths, to try out new experiences under the influence of the most modern cultural streams that manifested themselves beyond the Alps. In the course of the 1860s one was present at the breaking of old balances: on the one side, an internal market opening in ever greater measure to the importation of foreign operas, and therefore to the entrance of new concepts of musical theater; on the other, the younger generation's discomfort expressed in repeated attempts to renew Italian musical life, at the end to amplify interests beyond the traditional confines of melodrama, particularly toward instrumental music. The most meaningful dates of the changes that took place in the first decade of Italian political unity could be concentrated in the founding of the Società del Quartetto of Florence (1861) and of Milan (1864), the first performance of Boito's Mefistofele at La Scala (1868), and the Italian premiere of Wagner's Lohengrin in Bologna (1871).

In the face of changes in course, especially the advance of "nordic" sinfonismo, Verdi's attitude began to define itself more and more through an obstinate defense of the Italian vocal tradition, a tradition that for Verdi was linked directly to the great polyphonists of the Renaissance, Palestrina "in primis et ante omnia."43 (1862 saw the publication of the first volume of Palestrina's Opera omnia).44 Such a defense—Verdi's defense—came to be woven together with the reform of conservatories and of musical study, finally flowing into that all-too-famous exhortation, "Return to the old ways: that will be progress" ("Tornate all'antico: sarà un progresso"),45 expressed in a letter of 5 January 1871 to Francesco Florimo,46 to whom the composer, in refusing the post of Director of the Naples Conservatory left vacant after Mercadante's death, offered some advice for the education of its pupils.

This exhortation, to tell the truth, is preceded, in the context of a series of suggestions for music students, by a revealing phrase: "The licenses and the errors of counterpoint could be admitted, and are sometimes beautiful in the theater; in the conservatory, no." ("Le licenze e gli errori di contrappunto si possono ammettere e son belli talvolta in teatro: in Conservatorio, no."). And it could be correctly interpreted in light of an affirmation contained in the same letter: "I would have wanted, so to speak, to set one foot in the past and the other in the present and in the future; [...] since the music of the future does not
escape the impression of a clear, even preconceived hostility considered responsible for the disorientation of young composers and for the pollution from the conservatories; imitator of Wagner: Richard Strauss. But there is no doubt not perhaps unique in the musical history of a continuous, "futurism" of musical culture; they stand, however, to demonstrate the regression of Italian music at the turn of the century. One cannot deny that the obstinate defense of the national character of the Italian nation could have assumed in perspective the aspect of a battle of the rear guard in the face of the advance of sinfonismo and of the pressing transformations of the musical language. If anything, one is amazed in reading Verdi's correspondence, by the particular "nationalistic" accentuation inserted into this battle on the part of those who, like Verdi, took such an active part in the Italian Risorgimento. The Risorgimento—it will be remembered—unlike the national liberation movements of other countries, was characterized by the European aspirations of its advocates, which reflected the secular, cosmopolitan vocation of Italian culture, but also reflected and above all overwhelmed delays and lapses in the social, political, economic, and cultural fields, however communal these aspirations, as well in the radical difference of instruments and political finality, whether to the revolutionaries such as Mazzini, for example (to whose ideals Verdi himself had adhered in the 1840s), or to the moderates led by Cavour (to whose actions the composer definitively approached in the course of the 1850s).

Nationalistic accentuation expressed in words, that is in letters to friends and collaborators, and in occasional interviews; not in the facts, since we know what vigilant attention the composer, for his part, paid to the new ferment of musical culture; they stand, however, to demonstrate the operas of his maturity and old age, that rarest example, if not perhaps unique in the musical history of a continuous, endless renewal, in the face of which will bow even an imitator of Wagner: Richard Strauss. But there is no doubt that in the reading of his correspondence there does not escape the impression of a clear, even preconceived hostility toward the experiences from beyond the Alps—toward the "quartettismo," the "sinfonismo," the "Germanism," the "futurismo" (to use a term that recurs in Verdi's letters), considered responsible for the disorientation of young composers and for the pollution from the conservatories; hostility, moreover, attenuated by a sense of tolerance unknown to most zealous supporters of musical nationalism. In a letter of 26 December 1883, almost to justify and to reconfigure the exhortation revealed to Florimo twelve years earlier, Verdi wrote to Ricordi:

You know, like me, that there are those who have good eyesight, and love straightforward colors, definite and sincere. There are others who have a bit of a cataract, and they love faded and dirty colors. I am fashionable (because one needs to be of his time), but I would like fashion always to be accompanied by some criterion and to be sensible! And it is true that I have said "Return to the old way," but I mean the old way that is the basis, foundation, solidity; I mean that old way that has been set aside by modern exuberance, and to which one must inevitably return, sooner or later. For now, let the stream overflow. The banks will grow later. This letter confirms that the return to old way preached to the young conservatory students meant for Verdi, substantially, the acquisition of the technical tools of composition, indispensable equipment to advance toward progress.

In this attitude of Verdi's, in his words no less that in his actions, is demonstrated an absolute faith in the value of song as expressed by the human voice, that is, in the sung word; this faith is accompanied by an awareness that the defense of Italian song is equivalent to the struggle for the survival of a cultural tradition of European value: precisely in the measure in which it inspired the genuine character of the national spirit, Italian music could avoid confining itself in a flat provincialism determined by the imitation of a foreign fashion and engage such a voice from the power to be listened to and appreciated beyond confines. In March 1879, when Verdi considered his career as an opera composer to be finished, he blurted out in a letter to Arrivabene:

We all, composers, critics, audiences, we have done everything possible to renounce our musical nationality. Now we have reached a safe harbor; one more step and we are Germanized in this as in so many other things. It is a consolation to see that everywhere they are founding quartet societies, orchestral societies, and then quartets and orchestras, orchestras and quartets, etc., etc. To educate the Public in Great Art, as Filippi says. And then sometimes a wretched little thought comes to me and I tell myself in a quiet voice: "But if we in Italy instead formed a quartet of voices to perform Palestrina, his contemporaries, Marcello, etc., etc., would this not be Great Art? And it would be Italian art... the other, no! But I remain silent so that nobody might hear me."
Verdi vs. Wagner

A few months before the letter to Giulio Ricordi quoted above, Verdi had confided to a German visitor:

[Music] must be completely national. I appreciate and admire German music a great deal and I am much in its debt; your great Giovanni Sebastiano Bach [as he pronounced the name of Bach] is still my teacher; but notwithstanding this I will compose German music as much as a German composer will compose Italian music. If the genius of a nation is not clearly articulated in its music, then the result is without charm and value.\(^{51}\)

This last affirmation integrates itself with another made by the composer in a letter from the same time to the Neapolitan painter Domenico Morelli: “The artist that represents his country and his epoch becomes necessarily universal, of the present and of the future.”\(^{52}\)

Many years later Antonio Gramsci echoed this affirmation, as he wrote in his notebooks:

[A] work of art is more “artistically” popular when its moral, cultural, and sentimental content adheres to morality, to culture, to national feelings, and not meant as something static, but as an activity in continuous development.\(^{53}\)

Verdi, however, recognized the European value of the German musical tradition because it was a reflection of a genuine national character. Again in 1883, he wrote to his friend Giuseppe Piroli:

Today one no longer finds teachers or students who have not been affected by Germanism; nor could one form a jury devoid of such illness. An illness which, like any other illness, has to run its course […] Europe, the World, one day will have two musical schools: the Italian and the German (the others have derived from those). We, charmed by foreign beauties, have denied our own, and Chaos has arisen!\(^{54}\)

These concepts were not unlike those that Verdi expressed nine years later in a famous reply to Hans von Bülow:

If artists of the North and of the South have different tendencies, it is right that they be different! All should preserve the characters typical of their own nation, as Wagner said very well. Lucky you who are still the sons of Bach! And us? We, too, children of Palestrina, had one day a great school… and our own! Now it has become bastardized, and it threatens to be ruined! If we could return to the beginnings?!\(^{55}\)

These and other statements about schools, melody, harmony, and much more, expressed in the years of greatest ferment in Italian musical life, may perhaps appear as an escape from the changes that were occurring. See, for example, the following letter to Arrivabene of 16 July 1875: Some want to be melodic like Bellini, some want to be harmonic like Meyerbeer. I would want neither, and I would like that a youth, when he begins to compose, never thought of being a melodist, or a harmonicist, or a realist, or an idealist, or a “futurist,” or any of those devils that come with all these pedantries. Melody and harmony shouldn’t be more than means in the artist’s hand to make Music, and if a day comes when one shall speak no more of melody, or of harmony, or of German schools, or Italian, or of past or of future etc. etc. etc., then perhaps the reign of art shall begin.\(^{56}\)

And seven years later, on 17 March 1883, he insisted:

As far as musical opinions are concerned, one must be generous, and for myself I am very tolerant. I accept melodists, harmonicists, those who are a pain in the a… and those who want at all costs to bother you for bon ton. I admit the past, the present, and I would admit the future if I knew it and I found it good. In one word, melody, harmony, declamation, flourished song, orchestral effects, couleur locale (words that are used a great deal, and most of the time are used only to hide the lack of thinking) are nothing more than means. Use these means to make good music, and I will admit everything, and every genre. For example in the Barbiere [di Siviglia] the phrase Signor, giudizio, per carità This is neither melody nor harmony: it is word declaimed, right, true; and it is music… Amen…\(^{57}\)

However, if read and interpreted correctly in the light of concrete behavior, that is, on the plane of the composer’s activity, these statements hide, in fact, a growing awareness of the changes that were taking place, which would very soon lead to the last masterworks, from the newly found Simon Boccanegra to the Pezzi sacri.

But there is one last and perhaps more pertinent consideration to be made about Verdi’s musical nationalism and his appeal for a return to the past. Earlier we observed that the stubborn defense of Italian vocality in the name of an ethnic-cultural national character assumed in practice the aspect of a battle of the rear guard in which—behind the exaltation of Palestrina, the overvaluation of Marcello, the call to the tradition and the rules of the Neapolitan school—hid, in fact, the composer’s intention to preserve not only his operatic activity and the international prestige he had achieved, but also the prestige of his colleagues from the past, from Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini backwards. In his letter to Piroli cited above, Verdi frankly declared:

Our music, unlike German music, which can live in concert halls with Symphonies, in apartments with Quartets; ours, I say, has its seat principally in the theaters.\(^{58}\)
Beyond his objective aesthetic and theoretical preoccupations and his nationalistic affirmations about the supremacy of singing and of the Italian vocal tradition, in Verdi's considerations there is a latent but constant substantial preoccupation of an ideological nature that was innate in his formation and experience as a man of culture. Such formation and experience made of Verdi's art one of the unifying phenomena of Italian culture, rather, perhaps, the most unifying phenomenon of Italian cultural history after the Renaissance. With his exceptional sensitivity towards current socio-cultural changes, Verdi had the neat intuition that "sinfonismo" and "quartettismo" were to introduce into Italian musical life a wedge destined to divide society and separate the audience. Hence his innate predilection for the theater intended as collective meeting place (an attitude also shared by Wagner), and his strong diffidence towards the concert hall intended as selective meeting place. Hence his absolute faith in singing, and in the sung word intended as a socializing and unifying factor. In this sense, what we defined as a battle for a greater and broader circulation of the products of musical art, and of its cultural messages. This serves to explain Verdi's irreducible awareness of the supremacy of singing as an instrument for the socialization of culture.

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Wagner's death (1883) struck Verdi deeply:

Sad! Sad! Sad! Wagner is dead!!! Reading the news yesterday, I was, so to speak, terrified! Let us not discuss it. It is a great individual who has passed away! A name that leaves a very powerful footstep in the history of Art!!

The event surprises him at the very moment in which, after years of apparent silence, he is about to resume his compositional activity; the obituary quoted above—so often reported isolated, often in facsimile, but deprived of its context—is in reality the postscript of a short letter that Verdi sent to Ricordi to order some music paper, specifying the type. It is the beginning of the revision of Don Carlo, and perhaps even of the composition of Otello... That signifies Verdi's return, after years of absence, to the theater. The romantic image by Werfel, who in his Verdi: Roman der Oper makes Wagner's death coincide with Verdi's rebirth, does not seem to be unfounded...

Until that time, Verdi's knowledge of Wagner's operas was based in all likelihood on hearing Lohengrin and Tannhäuser in the theater (two operas that in Italy were perceived as an advanced and reformed model of Meyerbeer's grand opera), and perhaps on a few instrumental pieces heard in concert. But what did Verdi know of the following operas, from Tristan und Isolde to the Ring, in which Wagner's dramaturgical conception is developed and substantiated? These, with the exception of the Ring tour in the year of Wagner's death, reached Italy with great delay—Tristan in Bologna in 1888, Die Meistersinger in Milan in 1890, Die Walküre in Turin in 1892, Göttterdammerung in Turin in 1896. What did Verdi know—he, who, as we have seen, judged operas not based on the score, but in the theater? According to an opinion expressed by Hanslick in 1888 about the performance of Otello at Vienna, Verdi knew nothing of late Wagner. I conducted a quick investigation to verify the possible presence of the composer at Wagnerian performances in Italy after 1890, without positive result, except for a few vague hypotheses about performances at La Scala (for example Der fliegende Holländer given in the winter of 1893 near Falstaff) and conversations with Franco Faccio, who conducted Tristan in Bologna and Die Meistersinger in Milan.

However, what seems evident is that, as years went by, Verdi's attitude towards Wagner does not seem to change substantially: there was a growing respect for the artist—bordering on admiration, but a very detached respect. And this was not so much an instinctive defense of his own activity as an "Italian" musician as, instead, because in Wagner's operas he saw "the opposite... totally the opposite" (they are his own words, as we have seen) of his own conception of theater and of music. The distance makes itself evident in an interview with von Winterfeld from the spring of 1881 or 1882:

About Wagner, who was still alive at the time, Verdi expressed himself with some reservation, which is understandable if one thinks of the judgments pronounced by the former on Italian music. Verdi only said that in Tannhäuser and Lohengrin he admired some things, but that it seemed to him that Wagner in his most recent creations had overstepped the boundaries of expressive possibilities and that for him—Verdi—"philosophical music was incomprehensible."

We find the same reservation—albeit united to a sentiment of authentic respect, which, however, does not go beyond the esteem for Lohengrin—in an interview released to the French journalist Paul Fresnay in Paris in March 1886:

As for my opinion of Wagner, many anecdotes have been related on this subject, most of which are false. I have great admiration for him. He has been himself and has had new ideas. Whatever one says about it, there is some melody in Wagner, but one has to know how to find it. I confess, for the rest, that I prefer his first operas to his late manner, and that I place nothing above Lohengrin.
And if in 1890, to a French journalist, Étienne Destranges, who was curious to know his opinion of the author of Parsifal, the old musician only replied “with two words: ‘Oh! that one!’, pronounced with the tone one has when talking about such giants as Bach or Beethoven,”65 with others who had the opportunity to question him about “Wagner,” he kept a constant critical reservation. To Arnaldo Bonaventura in 1895:

Art and system...are two opposites: and they are wrong who sacrifice their fantasy and their genius to a systematic preconception. Therefore, the influence of the colossal, the almighty Wagner has been damaging. Let us follow with sincerity our impulses, our tendencies, without becoming subject to systems-Art and system are two opposites. The almighty Wagner has produced much evil.66

To Gino Monaldi, around the same time:

Wagner has the right to be numbered among the Greatest. His music, although far removed from our sentiment, is true music, in which there is life, blood, and nerve; it is music, then, that has the right to live. He demonstrates how to feel the patriotic quality of art in an exceptional way. He pushed his fetishism to the point of writing music with a pre-established artistic program. This preconception, however, damaged him... After all, the evil hasn't come from him, but from his imitators.67

And this is what he recounted to Italo Pizzi on an unknown date, but certainly in the late 1890s:

About Wagner and his music, which gave way to many lively and stormy disputes, here is what I could learn about what Verdi thought; like all wise persons, Verdi approved of the Wagnerian principle of adapting music to the drama, but did not approve of the method, because Wagner, and with him even more his imitators, often went deliberately beyond measure. He justly admitted that music must suit the genius and the particular character of the nation in which the composer was born and for which he composes, but he could not approve and did not approve that an Italian, like many most unhappy modern masters, should want to make German music at all costs... Nor did he approve of that absolute silence observed by the Germans in the theater, even more that ecstatic silence that, as they say, Wagner imposed on his spectators. And he said he liked it better (with certain limits, and banned, it is understood, every trivial and indiscreet interruption) all the spectators, all united by one sentiment, take part to the action that unfolds before their eyes, and accompanying it throbbing, shivering, even crying.68

However, in the picture of opinions that Verdi expressed about Wagner, there is an unexpected step forward. It is an interview he granted at an advanced age, between 1898 and 1899, to Felix Philippi, who made it public only in July 1913, in the Berliner Tageblatt. The passage that interests us concerns his judgment of Tristan. That Verdi had more than a superficial knowledge of this opera at this late age we can learn indirectly from a previous interview released to Heinrich Ehrlich in 1892, concerning Mascagni and his recent Amico Fritz. To his interviewer, who pointed out how in this opera “in the same page one goes from 3/4 to 4/4, to 2/4, to 3/8, ad infinitum; almost as in the very tragic Tristan und Isolde by Wagner,” Verdi replied:

I would say even more than that. In Tristan there is an emphasis on the alternation of the most lively and terribly violent (poignantes) passions. Instead in Amico Fritz, in this provincial tale (vie de paysage), I cannot conceive of anything similar... 69

But here is the passage from the interview with Philippi:

[Wagner] is one of the greatest geniuses. He has made human beings happy, and has given them treasures of immeasurable and unalterable value. You will understand if I, as an Italian, don't yet understand everything. This derives from our ignorance of German myth, from the heterogeneity of Wagner's materials, from the mysticism that predominates [in it], from the pagan world with its gods and its Norns, its giants and its gnomes... The opera that has always caused my greatest admiration is Tristan. Before this titanic construction I always remain with immense wonder: one cannot believe that it was conceived and written by a human being. I think that the second act is one of the most sublime creations of the human spirit in the area of musical invention, in particular for the tenderness and sensuality of musical expression, and for the genial orchestration. This second act is marvelous... Marvelous... Simply marvelous...170

The disparity with previous judgments appears quite strong. Keeping into account that the interview was made public only a few years after it had been released, when Verdi was already dead, the suspicion that some expressions may have been, so to speak, emphasized, seems legitimate—even more so when considering Verdi's declaration that Tristan was the opera that had always stirred his greatest admiration. That always gives way to some doubts. But there is no reason to doubt the substance of these final declarations by Verdi, whose greatness as a man and as an artist consists also of his capacity to acknowledge the greatness of others.
1. "Verdi [...] non conobbe mai Wagner, neppure di vista. Wagner, questa grande individualità ora scomparsa, non fu mai afflitto dalla piccola prurigine della vanità, ma divorato da un orgoglio incandescente, smisurato, come Satana o Lucifero il più bello degli angeli caduti dal cielo." Giuseppina Strepponi Verdi, manuscript letter draft, preserved at the Verdi estate at Sant'Agata. A copy on microfilm is available at the American Institute for Verdi Studies at New York University.


4. "Abends das 'Requiem' von Verdi, worüber nicht zu sprechen entschieden das beste ist." Cosima Wagner, Die Tagebücher I, 1869-1877 (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1976), 946. The attitude of the Wagners towards Verdi (and in general towards Italian and Jewish musicians) around that time is documented in a passage of Cosima's Tagebücher dated 13 February 1871: "in the evening Richter brings the conversation around to Gounod, and that sets us off on a dreadful musical tour, Faust, Le Prophète, Les Huguenots, Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Verdi, one after another, I feel physically sick, I pick up and seek refuge in a volume of Goethe (Paralimpenonia zu Faust)." But nothing helps. I suffer and suffer. It is too much for R. as well, and he begs Richter to stop after the latter sought to prove to him that Verdi was no worse than Donizetti. At last, God knows how, we come back to Bach's organ fugues! Richter had to play two of them, and then we found ourselves back on a plane where we could contemplate and wonder to the full. I told R. that, as far as my own feelings were concerned, the difference between Bach and Beethoven lay in the fact that the former called on all my powers, to follow him was a sort of intelligence and character, whereas I could give myself over to Beethoven without any effort of will. R. says "Bach's music is certainly a conception of the world, its figurations, devoid of feeling, are like unfeeling Nature itself—birth and death, winds, storms, sunshine—all these things take place just like such a figuration; the idea of the individual, in Bach always extraordinarily beautiful and full of feeling, is the same which asserts itself in all this to-ing and fro-ing, as steadfast as the Protestant faith itself. Mozart gives us a picture of this juxtaposition of the two things in Die Zauberflöte, where the two guides sing to Tamino about eternal wandering and toiling; this is Bachian in feeling. And it belongs to the organ, which is as devoid of feeling as the universal soul, yet at the same time so powerful. In the themes dance motives alternate with hymns. Thus R. continues for a long time to speak, and the Italian and Jewish ghosts are dispersed—but the feeling of nausea remained!" Cosima Wagner, Cosima Wagner's Diaries, ed. and annotated by Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack; tr. and with an intro. by Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1978-80), I, 335-36.

5. This was the Großer Festmarsch zur Eröffnung der hundertjährigen Gedenkfeier der Unabhängigkeitserklärung der Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika G-Dur (Wagner Werk-Verzeichnis, 110), composed between February and March of 1876, and performed for the first time on 10 May 1876 in Philadelphia, under the direction of Theodore Thomas, for the inauguration of the World Exposition.


7. Gazzetta musicale di Milano (18 December 1842): 221. See also the section "Notizie varie" in the issues of 6 and 13 November 1842, pp. 196 and 200.


9. L'Italia musicale, various issues from February to August 1854. See in particular the issues of 10 May, 27 May, and 9 August.


15. "Monseur, j'ai fait la guerre de Crimée, j'ai fait la guerre d'Italie, j'ai été à Solferino, je n'ai jamais tremblé, et bien, Monsieur, cette musique me fait peur et je m'en vais." Luzio, Carteggi verdiiani II, 191.


17. "...Sono stato quattro volte all'Opera!!! Una o due volte in tutti i teatri di musica e mi sono annoiato dappertutto. L'Africa ne è certamente la miglior opera di Meyerbeer. Ho sentito anche la sinfonia del Tannhäuser di Wagner. È narrato!!!" Alberti, Verdi intimo, 61.

18. "Scroscianti scale degli archi." The expression is taken from Filippo Filuzzi, Musica e musicisti (Milan: Brigola, 1876), 270.

19. A comparison between Verdi and Wagner, or, better, between Italian and German music in the mid nineteenth century, cannot take place without an examination of the technical and artistic advancement of German orchestras compared to the Italian ones. It would be sufficient to mention as an example a "difficult" passage for violas and cellos in the Introduzione of the first version of Simon Boccanegra (1857), which Verdi was forced to simplify because, as he himself explained to Ricordi, "these instruments in our orchestras are almost always sorts of dogs" ("questi istromenti sono quasi sempre nelle nostre orchestre razze di cani"). See Marcello Conati, Il Simon Boccanegra di Verdi a Reggio Emilia (1857) (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni del Teatro municipale "Romolo Vaili", 1984, 41-43.


21. The performance took place on 2 May 1865, with Isabella Galletti Gianoli, Lodovico Graziani and Francesco Pandolfini as principal singers.
Verdi vs. Wagner


24. “Gran parrucche che siete!!!... Cosa mi parlate di melodia, di armonia! Wagner, nemmeno per sogno!!!... Al contrario, se si volesse ascoltare e capire bene si trovarebbe l'opposto... totalmente l'opposto...” (17 April 1872). Luzio, *Carteggi verdianni I*, 149.

25. “Il successo d'Aida... fu il suo trionfo, deciso, non avvenuto coi sei coi sei... ma... colle vecchie frasi di Wagnerismo di Avvenire; di melopea etc. etc. Il pubblico si è abbandonato alle sue impressioni ed ha applaudito. Ecco tutto! Ha applaudito, e si [e] abbandonato anche a trasporti che io non approvo; ma infine Egli ha manifestato quello che ha sentito senza restrizioni, e senza arrière pensee! e sapete perché?... Perché qui non vi sono i critici, che la fanno da apostoli; non la turba dei Maestri che sanno di musica soltanto quella che studiano sulla falsariga di Mendelssohn Schumann Wagner etc.” (9 April 1873). Verdi, *Autobiografia delle lettere*, 423-24.


28. Editors' note: For more about the Piave Album, see Roberta Marvin's *Edwart, “Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer e Wagner, a proposito...* 30.


30. [Editors' note: For more about the Piave Album, see Roberta Marvin's *Edwart, “Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer e Wagner, a proposito...* 30.


33. [Editors' note: For more about the Piave Album, see Roberta Marvin's *Edwart, “Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer e Wagner, a proposito...* 30.


38. Editors' note: For more about the Piave Album, see Roberta Marvin's *Edwart, “Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer e Wagner, a proposito...* 30.


dell’avvenire, vale a dire che credo ad una musica a venire, e se non l’ho saputa, come volete, fare, la colpa non è mia. Se anch’io ho sporcato l’altare, come dice Boito, Egli lo noti ed io sarò il primo a venire accendervi un moccolo. E’ un’idea che dovete fare; evviva dunque la cotterie; evviva il Nord se ci reca la luce, ed il Sole” (3 May 1865). Abbiati, Giuseppe Verdi III, 14.

42. “Che bella novità! sai anch’io che vi è una Musica dell’avvenire, ma io presentemente penso e penso così anche l’anno venturo che per fare una scarpia ci vuole del corame e delle pelli!!! Che ti pare di questo stupido paragon che vuol dire che per fare un’opera bisogna aver in corpo primieramente della musica?... Dichiari che io sono e sarò un ammiratore entusiasta degli avvenimenti a una condizione che mi facciano della musica... qualunque ne sia il genere, il sistema ecc. ma musica!... Basta, bastal che non vorrei che parlondone troppo mi si attaccasse il mule. Sta’ tranquillo. Mi possono benissimo mancare le forze per arrivare dove io voglio, ma io so quello che voglio” (6 March 1868). Alberti, Verdi intimo, 83-84.


44. Planned by Baini, the edition was edited by Witt and Haber for Breitkopf & Härtel.


46. Letter of 5 January 1871. Immediately divulged in Pungolo and in the Gazzetta musicale di Milano, it was inserted by Fiorrino (with a wrong date: 1 January) in his Riccardo Wagner ed i Wagneristi (Ancona: Morelli, 1983), 106-08.

47. See for example Claudio Sartori, “Giuseppe Verdi,” in La Musica. Enciclopedia storica, edited by Alberto Basso, vol. IV (Turin: UTET, 1960), 747: “Verdi was blamed, attributing to him the greatest responsibility, the obscurantism of nineteenth-century Italy towards instrumental chamber and symphonic music, which cost so much effort to those who tried to resist him and oppose his work and his denigration. And it is undoubtedly true. Verdi was sincerely and exclusively a musician of the theater; first spontaneously, responding to the call of his own natural dramaturgical sensibility, then out of necessity, since he lacked the necessary technical and cultural preparation, finally programmatically, to remain true to the ideals of his youth, almost obstinate to deny to the Italians, as they had been denied to himself, real creative possibilities outside of the melodramatic fields. And here the depth of his ignorance was enormous, in his absolute lack of knowledge of the past instrumental glories of his people.” (A Verdi si rimprovera, attribuendo glielo alla maggiore responsabilità, l’oscurantismo dell’Italia del secolo scorso per la musica strumentale, cameronistica e sinfonica, che costò tanta fatica e che dovette, prima di tutto resistendo e opponendosi a lui e alla sua opera e alla sua denigrazione, risalire la china. È indubbiamente vero. Verdi fu musicista di teatro, sinceramente ed esclusivamente: prima spontaneamente, rispondendo al richiamo della propria naturale sensibilità di drammaturgo nato, poi per necessità di cose, essendogli mancata la preparazione tecnica e culturale necessaria, infine programmaticamente per fedeltà agli ideali della propria giovenchina, quasi ostinandosi a negare agli italiani, come erano state negate a lui stesso, possibilità veramente creatrici al di fuori del campo melodrammatico. E qui il baratro della sua ignoranza si rivelò enorme, nella sconosciuta assoluta delle passate glorie strumentali della sua gente.”)

48. See the latter’s letter to Verdi (18 January 1895), containing words of great admiration for Falstaff. Abbiati, Giuseppe Verdi IV, 567.


50. “Noi tutti, Maestri, critici, Pubblico, abbiamo fatto il possibile per rinunciare alla nostra nazionalità musicale. Ora siamo a buon porto; ancora un passo e saremo germanizzati in questo come in tante altre cose. È una consolazione il vedere come dappertutto si istituiscano Societá dei Quartetti, Societá Orchestrali e poi ancora Quartetti e Orchestra: Quartetti ecc. ecc. Per educare il Pubblico alla Grande Arte come dice Filippi. Allora a me qualche volta viene un pensiero meschinosissimo, e mi dico sottovoce: ‘Ma se invece in Italia facessimo un quartetto di voci per eseguire Palestrina, i suoi contemporanei, Marcello ecc. ecc. non sarebbe questa arte Grande? E sarebbe arte italiana...’ Altra no!... Ma zitto che nessuno mi senta” (30 March 1879). Alberti, Verdi intimo, 227-33.

51. “[La musica] dev’essere completamente nazionale. Io apprezzo e ammiro assai la musica tedesca e le sono molto debitoro; il vostro grande Giovanni Sebastiano Bach [così pronunciava il nome di Bach] è tuttora il mio maestro; ma ciò non pertanto io comporrei musica tedesca come un compositore tedesco non comporrà di italiano. Se il genio della nazione non spicca chiaramente nella musica, allora essa non servirebbe se non a scalfire e correre.” A. von Winterfeld, “Unterhaltungen in Verdis Tuskuln,” Deutshe Revue XII (1887): 327-332; reprinted as “Persönliche Erinnerungen an Verdi,” Neue Musik-Zeitung XXII, no. 5 (1901). 57-58; the Italian translation is in Conati, Verdi: Interviste e incontri, 146-56.

52. “L’artista che rappresenta il suo paese e la sua epoca diventa necessariamente universale, del presente e del futuro.” Primo Levi, Domenico Morelli nella vita e nell’arte (Turin: Roux, 1906), 158.


54. “Oggi non si trovano più né Maestri, né Alunni, che non sieno attaccati di Germanismo; e neppure si potrebbe formare una Commissione esente da questa malattia. Malattia, che al pari d’ogni altra, bisogna che faccia il suo corso... L’Europa, il Mondo, avevano un giorno due Scuole Musicali: L’Italiana e la Tedesca (le altre sono derivazioni di quelle). Noi affascinati dalle bellezze forestiere, abbiamo rinngnate le nostre, e ne è sorto il Caos!” Luzzo, Carteggi Verdianni III, 162.

55. “Se gli attistri del Nord e del Sud hanno tendenze diverse, è bene sieno diverse! Tutti dovrebbero mantenere i caratteri propri della loro nazione, come dissi benissimo Wagner. Felici voi che siete ancora i figli di Bach! E noi? Noi pure, figli di Palestrina, avevamo un giorno una scuola grande... e nostra! Ora s’è fatta bastardina e minaccia rorina! Se potessimo tornare da capo!” (14 April 1892). Cesari, Copiatelettere, 376.

56. “Chi vuol essere melodico come Bellini, chi armonista come Meyerbeer. Io non vorrei né l’uno né l’altro, e vorrei che il giovane quando si mette a scrivere, non pensasse mai ad essere né melodista, né armonista, né realista, né idealista, né avvenirista, né tuti i diavoli che si portino queste pedanterie. La melodia e l’armonia non devono essere che mezzi nella mano dell’artista per fare della Musica, e se verrà un giorno in cui non si parlerà più né di melodia né di armonia né di scuole tedesche, italiane, né di passato né di avvenire etc. etc. etc. etc. allaora forse comincierà il regno dell’arte.” Cesari, Verdi intimo, 182.

57. “In fatto d’opinioni musicali bisogna esser larghi, e per parte mia sono tollerantissimo. Ammetto i melodisti, gli armonisti, i secca... e quelli che vogliono ad ogni costo seccarli per bon ton. ammetto il passato, il presente, ed ammetterei il futuro se lo conoscessi e lo
trovass buono. In una parola melodia, armonia, declamazione, canto fiorito, effetti d'orchestra, color locale (parole di cui si fa tante, e che il più delle volte non servono che a coprire la mancanza del pensiero) non sono che mezzi. Fate con questi mezzi della buona musica, ed ammetto tutto, e tutti i generi. Per es. nel Barbierie la frase Signor giudizio, per carità questa non è melodia né armonia: è la parola declamata giusta vera, ed è musica... Amen...” Ibid., 257.

58. See note 54 above.

59. “Triste! Triste! Triste! Wagner è morto!!! Legendendo jeri il dispaccio, ne l'ho, per dire, attirato! Non discutiamo. È una grande individualità che sparisce! Un nome che lasci un'impronta potenzissima nella storia dell'Arte!” (15 February 1883.) Cesari, Copiateletter, 323.

60. In June 1873, at the Collegio dei Nobili, Naples, there was a performance of Das Liebesmahl der Apostel after Verdi had already left. In Milan, between December 1880 and February 1881, on the eve of the composer's arrival for the new Simon Boccanegra, at the Società del Quartetto they performed the prelude to Tristan (already performed at Trieste in April 1879) and the “Ride of the Valkyries,” and at the Conservatory the Meistersinger overture and Siegfried Idyll (the latter also performed at Trieste in November 1879).


62. In substance, if, for Wagner, drama is the meter of music, for Verdi, music is the meter of drama. For Verdi, music must possess the drama. For Wagner, it is the opposite. In Verdi the conception of music as the meter of drama is so deeply rooted that he investigates, as deeply as he can, the peculiar prerogatives of musical language, exploiting all their possible dramaturgical values, beginning from the one that constitutes an absolute propriety of musical language: that is, the power of synthesis through the synchrony of parts, which allows him to verticalize the musical discourse, in particular the canto scenico, through the overlap of diverse and contrasting actions and sentiments. If we wanted to translate the two different constructive procedures of canto scenico into graphic format, Wagner's procedure would appear as a predominantly linear pattern, Verdi's as a predominantly vertical, or better, stratified one.

63. “Su Wagner, che allora era ancora vivente, Verdi si esprime con una certa riservatezza, del resto comprensibile se si pensa ai giudizi pronunciati dal primo sulla musica italiana. Verdi disse soltanto che in Tannhäuser e Lohengrin ammirava talune cose, ma che però gli sembrava che Wagner nelle sue più recenti creazioni avesse superato i confini delle possibilità espressive e che per lui—Verdi—la “musica filosofica” era incomprensibile.” Conati, Verdi: Interviste e incontri, 149.

64. “Quanto alla mia opinione su Wagner, si sono raccontati a questo proposito molti aneddoti, ben spesso falsi. Ho per lui una grande ammirazione. Egli è stato se stesso e ha avuto delle idee nuove. Cheché se ne dica, c'è della melodìa in Wagner; ma bisogna saperla trovare. Vi confesso, del resto, che preferisco le sue prime opere alla sua ultima maniera e che non pongo nulla al di sopra di Lohengrin.” Conati, Verdi: Interviste e incontri, 198.

65. Conati, Verdi: Interviste e incontri, 251.


67. “Wagner ha il diritto di essere ammesso fra i Grandissimi. La sua musica, per quanto lontana dal nostro sentimento è musica vera, dove c'è vita, sangue e nervi; e musica dunque che ha diritto di vivere. Egli mostra di sentire il patriottismo dell'arte in modo eccezionale. Spinsle il suo feticismo sino a scrivere musica con un programma d'arte prestabilito. Questo preconcetto però gli nocque... Del resto il male non è venuto da lui, ma da suoi imitatori.” Gino Monaldi, Verdi nella vita e nell'arte (Milan: Ricordi, 1913), 179-80.

68. “A proposito del Wagner e della musica sua che ha dato luogo a tante dispute vivaci e tempestose, ecco quanto ho potuto sapere del come il Verdi ne pensasse, il quale, come tutte le persone di senno, approvava il principio wagneriano dell'addattare la musica al dramma, ma non ne approvava il modo, perché il Wagner, e con lui più ancora i suoi imitatori, passarono spesso deliberatamente la misura. Egli ammetteva giustamente che la musica deve accordarsi al genio e all'indole particolare della nazione in cui è nato il maestro e per la quale egli compone, ma non poteva approvare e non approvava che un italiano, come tanti infelici assi maestri moderni, volesse fare a ogni costo musica tedesca. [...] Ne egli approvava quel silenzio assoluto che si serba dai Tedeschi in teatro, meno poi quel silenzio estatico che, come si dice, il Wagner imponeva agli spettatori suoi, e diceva di piacergli di più (serbata certa misura e bandita, s'intende, ogni interruzione triviale e indiscreta) quando gli spettatori tutti, compresi d'un solo sentimento, prendono parte all'azione che si svolge dinanzi ai loro occhi, e l'accompagnano palpando, fremendo, anche piangendo.” Conati, Verdi: Interviste e incontri, 383-85.

69. “Direi ancora più di questo. In Tristano viene sottolineato l'avvicendarsi delle passioni più acute e terrificamente violente (poignant). Invece in Amico Fritz, in questa vicenda di provincia (vie de paysage), non riesco a concepire nulla di simile... (or [...]”) Ibid., 259.

70. “[Wagner] è uno dei più grandi geni. Ha reso felici gli uomini e ha donato loro tesori di incommensurabile e inalterabile valore. Voi capirete se io come italiano non comprendo ancora tutto. Ciò deriva dalla nostra ignoranza della saga tedesca, dalla eterogeneità del materiale wagneriano, del misticismo che vi predomina, dal mondo materiale, del colossale, del grandissimo. [...] L'opera che ha sempre suscitato la mia più grande ammirazione e il Tristano. Di fronte a questa titana costruzione resto sempre con imenso stupore: non si riesce a credere che l'abbia concepita e scritta un essere umano. Penso che il secondo atto sia una delle creazioni più sublimi dello spirito umano nel campo dell'invenzione musicale, in particolare per la tenerezza e la sensualità dell'espresional, musicale e per la geniale strumentazione. Questo second'atto è meraviglioso [...] Meraviglioso... semplicemente meraviglioso...” Ibid., 367-68.

English translation by Francesco Izzo and Linda B. Fairtile